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The Mechanics of Race:
The Discursive Production of Detroit's Landscape of Difference

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Rebecca J. Kinney

Committee in charge:

Professor Natalia Molina, Chair
Professor Lisa Sun-Hee Park, Co-Chair
Professor Luis Alvarez
Professor Yen Le Espiritu
Professor Adria Imada

2011

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Co-Chair

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

DEDICATION

The dissertation is dedicated to:

Darlene Hall, Amanda Guanco, André Guanco, and Archer Guanco. Thank you for your love and support throughout this journey.

And to John Williams—thank you for always believing.

I love you.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Mechanics of Race:

The Discursive Production of Detroit's Landscape of Difference

by

Rebecca J. Kinney

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Natalia Molina, Chair

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Positioning Detroit's "post-industrial" landscape as anything but "natural", this work seeks to understand and engage the *racialized* production of Detroit in the urban spatial imaginary through public policy and popular culture. A review of the literature on Detroit either naturalizes Detroit's late twentieth century production as a "chocolate city" and its population decline as functions of "white flight" and de-industrialization. I argue that the narrative of the post-industrial city is linked in many ways to the production of a post-racial national ideology—wherein the process of de-industrialization impacts *all* Detroiters, making invisible the long relationship between racial formation and spatial formation in the city of Detroit and its metropolitan area. This work reveals projects of the institutionalization of race in public policy as a way

to understand the contemporary narrative of Detroit as a continuation of its racialized past.

This project analyzes the simultaneous production of structural racism and the discursive production of race to reveal a material and ideological understanding of *how* race happens to make visible and explicit the process of racial spatialization. The dissertation approached these ideas in two distinct parts to answer the following question: “How do racial logics simultaneously produce spatial logics and then disappear?” Part I serves as a historical analysis of the national and local policies that shaped Detroit from the 1920s-1960s in regards to public and private housing and slum clearance and shows the ways the City of Detroit, through the simultaneous enforcement and willful ignorance of national and local housing policies created a City, that to this day is one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. These chapters examine more than a statistical analysis and reveal *how* race, space, and the spatial imaginary are co-constructed during this time through the enactment of racialized policies. Part II examines the contemporary rendering of Detroit in popular culture as a dead and dying city through the use of cultural texts like Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* (2008) and an analysis of a popular website, www.city-data.com/forum/detroit to reveal that many of the ideas produced about Detroit are based on what is imagined by those outside the city. Ultimately this work reveals the layered process of racial formation through the material as well as ideological in order to link the continued production and construction of race in the current moment despite attempts to render the United States as a post-racial nation.

Introduction: Tracing the Production of Race in Detroit

Prelude: “We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes”

Super Bowl XLV February 6, 2011
Third Quarter
“Born of Fire” by Chrysler

Opening scene:
Underpass, factory, sound of metal.

Narrator:
“I got a question for you.”

Screen shot: Interstate freeway sign for I-75 North Detroit.

Narrator:
“What does this city know about luxury? Hmm? What does a town that’s been to hell and back know about the finer things in life? I’ll tell you, more than most. 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.”

Cue the beginning of an instrumental version of Eminem’s “Lose Yourself”¹ which continues in the background for the remainder of the commercial.

Narrator continued:
“That’s who we are. That’s our story. Now it’s probably not the one you’ve been reading in the papers. The one being written by folks who have never even been here, and don’t know what we’re capable of. 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.”

Choir onstage performing an a cappella choral version of “Lose Yourself”

Eminem:
“This is the Motor City. And this is what we do.” Points and shift to picture of car.

¹ “Lose Yourself” was released in 2002 as part of the soundtrack to the film *8 Mile* that stars Eminem in a loosely autobiographical film about his life. The song won 2002 the Academy Award for “Best Original Song” and is one of Eminem’s most successful singles. “8 Mile” refers to the imaginary/real spatial border between the City of Detroit and its northern suburbs.

Text on Screen:
 “The Chrysler 200 Has Arrived”
 Fades

Text on Screen:
 “Imported from Detroit”
 Each word appears slowly—Imported (pause) from (pause) Detroit.

Chrysler’s Super Bowl XLV commercial “Born of Fire,” at 2 minutes, was the longest and most expensive in history.² It was well received by audiences and media alike and considered by many to be the best ad of the Super Bowl—high praise for the most important day of the year for advertisers. Local and national news and football and Facebook fans from around the country were drawn in by its visual imagery and the pulsing backbeat of Eminem’s “Lose Yourself.” In the 26 days since its debut it has been watched and circulated far beyond its moment in the Super Bowl, as over 9,018,000 people have viewed the commercial on Youtube alone.³ I include myself, a native Detroiter, among those who were mesmerized by the ad. Chrysler’s two minute mini-movie homage to Detroit entitled “Born of Fire,” harkened back to Detroit’s motto, written after fire destroyed much of the city in 1805: “We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.” While ostensibly the point of the commercial was to create buzz and sell the “Chrysler 200,” the star of the commercial was the City of Detroit, not the automobile or Eminem. The narrator of the commercial has a grizzled voice to match the imagery his voice is laying over. Filmed over four days in January

² The ad was 2 minutes long and took up four 30-second spots. Chrysler had to get special permission from the NFL as the typical commercial break is 1 minute and 30 seconds. The estimated cost of the ad was \$9 million.

³ As of 7:50am PST on March 4, 2011 the Youtube version of the full-length commercial had 9,018,848 views. This does not account for the commercial’s posting in other forms and formats on the web in addition to the shorter, 30-second version that Chrysler continues to run as an abridged version.

2011 in the midst of winter—the cold, frozen landscape served as backdrop to images of iconic Detroit monuments and juxtaposed images of factories billowing smoke with factories that have been closed, shuttered and abandoned. The commercial, much like the city motto its title evokes, speaks to the toughness of the city, to the phoenix-like narrative thread of the commercial and the most-talked about, least realized “comeback city” of the late twentieth century.

Right from the opening when the narrator asks: “*What does this city know about luxury?*” the idea that Detroit is already seen as outside of its U.S. counterparts is acknowledged and asserted. Detroit’s position as an aberration, as *outside* but *part* of the nation-state is a central point of both the commercial and the ways in which much of the production about Detroit in the media, in the cultural imaginary, and in scholarship has positioned Detroit as an aberration from the narrative of urban centers making a “comeback” in the 1990s. When the narrator later tells viewers, “*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,*” this acknowledgement of difference is embraced, and positions us, Detroiters, as outside the narrative of sophisticated global cities, with world class restaurants, and entertainment and filmic backdrops for romantic comedies or weekends of luxury and excess. Instead it positions the narrative of Detroit as a city left behind, as unique, gritty, grizzled, and positioned for a comeback from an already accepted death, despite all the odds.

While acknowledging on one-hand that Detroit is, “*a town that’s been to hell and back,*” the commercial seeks to talk back to and rewrite the common narrative

about Detroit. What that precise hell may be, is never stated—but the imagery of the landscape—the hauntingly beautiful silhouette of a gutted building and the American flag atop a pole in a vacant lot that used to be centerfield of old Tiger Stadium, before it was razed in 2008, serves as symbolic representation of what that hell has wrought on the city. The “hell” needn’t be named, as Chrysler is able to draw on the collective consciousness of the 111 million people that tuned into Super Bowl XLV, making it the “most watched TV show in American history.”⁴ The hell has already been produced and imagined for American consciousness in its productions of Detroit in the late twentieth century as criminal, depraved, dying, dead, and in light of the recent auto industry bailout, the prime example of the failure of industry and to some extent, its people. The ad draws on older, early and mid-twentieth century understanding and images of Detroit and its public art—the shots of the steel fist that is the “Monument to Joe Louis” in Hart Plaza, Diego Rivera’s “Industry of Detroit” Fresco—Detroit’s most celebrated and at its time of production, most controversial piece of art, and “The Spirit of Detroit” statue all appear onscreen as the narrator lays over a narrative of Detroit: *“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. That’s who we are. That’s our story.”*

In so doing, the past is represented as masculine, as industrial, and intimately linked to the embodiment of workers, of a time of Detroit’s prominence and to the

⁴ <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/07/133573780/super-ratings-for-super-bowl-111-million-a-record>

time when Detroit was one of the wealthiest cities in the nation.⁵ The “we” of Detroit is a working class man, a person with access to jobs in the plants, and a gritty determination to work those hard jobs in the heat, in the snow, in the furnaces and foundries, on the line. And it is this narrative—of a shared notion of past greatness that the ad relies upon, along with its ability to “talk back” to all the detractors who are collectively referenced as both the media and those who believe the media depictions. “*Now it’s probably not the one you’ve been reading in the papers,*” is the voiceover to shots of beautiful expensive homes with lawns blanketed in snow and a high school track team in matching blue sweatsuits and gloves, hardly enough clothing, as they run head-on into the blowing snow. “*The one being written by folks who have never even been here. And don’t know what we’re capable of,*” lays over the image of a young female figure skater in a performance costume executing spins at an outdoor ice rink downtown. This narrative of the commercial serves to talk back to the folks who write about Detroit, who imagine Detroit, who create Detroit, but who don’t know Detroit. And this dissertation is written to understand—to present new takes on old ideas, to analyze and form an understanding about *what* we “know” about race and space, and *how* we know it. This work takes what is considered to be “known” about the racialization of Detroit and reveal places and spaces of origin—from the fire that preceded the ashes.

⁵ This forms an increasingly incongruous relation to the present as this introduction was written amidst news reports that due to state and local budget crises the State has ordered Detroit Public Schools to close half its public schools increasing high school class size to estimated 60 students per class http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/22/headlines/detroit_to_close_half_of_public_schools_privatize_services

This commercial attempts to create a new narrative layer upon old narratives of Detroit. The commercial, much like productions of Detroit is almost entirely masculine in its actors and still shots and much like many academic and cultural renderings produce Detroit around the pivot of industrial productions and demise. However, Chrysler in its narrative attempts to rewrite the “new” Detroit, positions a more full picture of middle-class homes and figures, tempered by artistic renderings of workers, rather than workers themselves. And a by-product of the narrative is the white man who travels the landscape of middle-class Detroit—from stately homes to the finest hotels and a beautifully restored historic theater—from the comforts and confines of his luxury vehicle. On the one hand, this is at its most basic form a commercial to sell luxury cars, but it is also a representation of Detroit—its past, its present, and its future both symbolically and in its spatial renderings.

The particularized choice of Eminem to be the symbolic white man who drives the viewer around the post-industrial and middle-class imagining of Detroit deserves another layer of analysis. Eminem’s one line of dialogue, “*This is the Motor City. And this is what we do,*” links him to the City, both as a representative native-son and his actions to the “doing” of the city. As one of the most successful hip hop artists of the last decade, Eminem has also been seen as one of the most controversial for his misogyny, homosexuality, and his relationship within and between narratives of whiteness and blackness. While many have questioned Eminem’s ability to be “authentic” in his production of hip hop and have paralleled his “mastery” of the genre to past examples of white performers mimicking black cultural performers and rising

to fame because of their white performance of black cultural forms.⁶ When he was emerging as an artist on the national scale, one of the primary ways that Eminem was able to articulate his “authenticity” was by linking himself to “inner-city black subjectivity.”⁷ He does this by positioning himself within the post-industrial landscape of Detroit, deploying the idea of another un and underemployed young man, linking himself to the landscape of the hip hop genre in the depopulated and crime ridden urban core.⁸ The ways in which *8 Mile*, his loosely autobiographical film paralleled his own “rise” to success led many critics to uncritically herald the film (and Eminem’s life) as a populist narrative of success beyond all the odds, the ultimate and most American of bootstrap tales.⁹ As such, despite Detroit’s reality as a City with an over 80% black population,¹⁰ it is the successful, homophobic, misogynistic rapper that will drive the City’s “rise” from the fire, and the commercial positions Eminem as the symbolic phoenix. The narrative of rebirth then that the Chrysler ad relies upon is through capitalism and consumption, through a reliance and recommitment to an industry that partially contributed to and created the racial imaginary—the place of “rise” then is through the recuperation of the productive,

⁶ Kajikawa, Loren. (2009). “Eminem’s “My Name Is”: Signifying Whiteness, Rearticulating Race” *Journal of the Society for American Music* (2009) Volume 3, Number 3, pp. 341–363.

⁷ Kajikawa, 352.

⁸ Watts, Eric King. 2005. “Border Patrolling and “Passing” in Eminem's *8 Mile*”, *Critical Studies in Media*

Communication, 22: 3, 187-206 and Grealy, Liam. 2008. “Negotiating cultural authenticity in hip-hop: Mimicry, whiteness and Eminem”, *Continuum*, 22: 6, 851-865.

⁹ Watts, 188.

¹⁰ Per the 2000 census <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html>. The census data for the 2010 census will not be released for the State of Michigan until April 2011 <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>. Although census data is not an ideal measure of population due to the historic undercounting of people of color, renters, and working class people, it is meant to offer a demographic sense of the City. Having said that, this dissertation makes careful distinction later and throughout between the materiality of race vis-à-vis individual of bodies and the structural productions of race in the material and imaginary.

white, male subject. This commercial as symbol and cultural production provides a way into my project and my dissertation—encircling the ideas of both production of Detroit in the cultural imaginary and in its material form.

Detroit and Its Role in the National and Local Imaginary

Detroit and the automobile—the commodity that marks the city’s rise as a major industrial center and its urban identity—serve as symbols of American identity and nationalism. Yet, no other American city has been hit so hard by media and personal depictions of its depravity and violence *after* the 1970s decline of industry. While the Detroit of the early and mid twentieth century marked the rise of the United States as a global economic force—the arsenal of democracy¹¹—and the American (male) workers who powered that force, the Detroit of the late twentieth century serves as the reminder of the United States’ shift from a production to a consumptive and service oriented economy. Detroit marks these moments in the narratives of its rise, its fall, and the ways in which urban renewal and redevelopment policies shape the city in the twenty first century. Detroit is significant for the ways in which its rise to national prominence in the early to mid-twentieth century is a marker of the modern industrial moment of Fordism, Taylorism and a perfection of the growth of capitalism. Fordism and Taylorism, techniques that prioritize the fragmentation and disembodiment of work into particularized processes to increase profit through the automation of tasks, were perfected on Detroit’s automotive assembly lines. And Detroit’s early twentieth century history parallels the narratives of other U.S. and

¹¹ So named because of its role in producing munitions for World War I and World War II as the factories of the automobile producers were retooled to produce airplanes and ground vehicles.

global industrial centers like Chicago and New York.¹² Detroit's great migration began during the early 1910s with the influx of migrants to work in the automotive and war industries. The 1910-1920s are frequently marked as the ramping up of Detroit industries, the time of Ford's widely touted, but difficult to achieve, \$5 day,¹³ both of which brought an influx of migrants in search of work. Foreign migration began to slow with the advent of the Great War and was largely curtailed with the passage of the 1924 immigration act. Not surprisingly, the curtailment of foreign immigration ushered in an increased migration of American born people from the southern states to the north. As the tide of workers from abroad stemmed—labor agents were sent to the south to recruit men to work in the factories of the north and many migrants in return trips home to the south would often state and perhaps overstate the realities of opportunities and life in the North. And the promise of jobs and opportunities made Detroit a destination for sojourners and families from the

¹² See for example Abu-Lughod, Janet L. 1999. *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹³ The Five Dollar Day, announced on January 5, 1914 was not the actual wage, but included profit-sharing instituted by the company in hopes of investing workers with a sense of ownership in the product and perhaps more importantly, "the Five Dollar Day attempted to solve attitudinal and behavioral problems with an effort to change the worker's domestic environment." Ford believed that every man was entitled to their base wage, which at that time was \$2.50, but the balance of the amount that made up the other half of the Five Dollar Day was only available after proved and continued investigation to ensure that the workers demonstrated "thrift, good habits, and good home conditions" and were saving towards a home or supporting a family adequately, as well as proving themselves to be a punctual and effective worker. To that end the average worker was observed not only on the job, but was subjected to visits and investigations by the Ford Motor Company's Sociology department. The investigations were carried out only for those who made \$200 per month or less, anyone outside of that wage bracket was exempted and not subject to the company investigating their personal life. See for example Babson, Steve. 1986 (1984). *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press; Meyer, Stephen III. 1981. *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company*. Albany: State University of New York Press; and Hooker, Clarence. 1997. *Life in the shadows of the Crystal Palace, 1910-1927 : Ford workers in the Model T Era*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, for more information on Ford during the 1900s-1920s.

south, the east, Mexico, Canada, both of which were exempt from the quotas under 1924 Immigration Act. The rapid industrialization of Detroit and the availability of work for any (white) man¹⁴ that wanted a job, resulted in an increased economic status and allowed many to access the “American Dream” of home and car ownership for the first time.¹⁵ Detroit’s second big migration happened during World War II as more people came to the City to work in and power the factories that had been changed over from automobile production to the production of war munitions.

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century depictions of Detroit typically situate the analysis of its post-industrial state from a perspective of urban history,

¹⁴ Jobs were readily available for American men, and increasingly so for white ethnic men. Non-white men were typically able to access work—but found themselves frequently in the “hardest and dirtiest jobs.” Women had varying opportunities for work and non-white women almost always worked as domestics, laundresses. See for example, Washington, Forrester B. “The Negro in Detroit: A Survey of Conditions of a Negro Group in a Northern Industrial Center during the War Prosperity Period”, 1920. Research Bureau, Associated Charities of Detroit; Babson, Steve. 1986 (1984). *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, Dancy, John C. 1966. *Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, Zunz, Olivier. 1982. *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ In order to realize this idea of home ownership and through it access to the American dream, steady work at a regular rate was required to allow the working class to enter into homeownership. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, homes were typically purchased by the wealthy outright or by the working person through land contract. It was not until after World War I that mortgages were popularized, due to the facts that consumer credit was more readily available, diminishing stigma attached to consumer debt and financing, as well as rising costs. See for example Kenneth Jackson *Crabgrass Frontier* and Lendol Calder *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*. In fact rapid industrialization through the automotive industry provided the means for two important factors in the increase and availability of consumer credit, the means through which some workers could earn a regular wage but also popularized and began to destigmatize buying on credit with the wide-scale financing of new cars. Car manufacturers were smart in that through financing they were able to sell more cars to people who could not afford to buy them outright as Lendol Calder’s work reveals, “By 1924, almost three out of four new cars were bought “on time...No other consumer durable good accounted for nearly as much consumer debt...Without credit financing, the automobile would not so quickly have reached, and perhaps never have reached, a true mass market...Installment credit and the automobile were both cause and consequence of each other’s success” (p. 184). As people began to buy cars that enabled them to move further out of the city center further away from jobs that before were accessible only by streetcar. As the promise of the less populated outer areas and neighborhoods with single family homes became available more and more people were interested in buying homes outside of the center city.

planning, and economic frames.¹⁶ In this contemporary moment demographers, sociologists, geographers and policy makers seek to explore and understand what some have termed the “back-to-the-city” movement.¹⁷ In urban planning literature more generally there is a trend to foreground downtown redevelopment in consumption-oriented trends¹⁸ that aim to draw a specific consumer class back to downtown. Detroit is unique for the ways in which the downtown is still relatively stagnant in terms of development despite the frenzy of building surrounding the new downtown baseball and football stadium and its hosting of the Super Bowl XL in 2006 and the Baseball All Star Game in 2005.¹⁹ Some position Detroit as perhaps the first post-urban city as the trees begin to retake the landscape that was originally cleared to build houses, factories, and stores.²⁰ There is almost a return to a “state of nature” if you will, a landscape that is perceived through capitalist eyes as uncultivated and uninhabited. And this logic that underwrote conquest in fact continues through

¹⁶ See for example Darden, Joe T., Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas. 1987. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Sugrue, Thomas J. 1996. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Thomas, June Manning. 1997. *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Trachte, Kent and Robert Ross. 1985. “The Crisis of Detroit and the Emergence of Global Capitalism.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Volume 9: No. 2: 186-217.

¹⁷ See for example Sanchez et al 2001. Sanchez, Thomas W. and Casey J. Dawkins. 2001. “Distinguishing City and Suburban Movers: Evidence from the American Housing Survey.” *Housing Policy Debate*. 12 (3): 607-631.

¹⁸ See for example Friedan, Bernard J. and Lynne B. Sagalyn. 1989. *Downtown, Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities*. Cambridge: The MIT Press and Florida, Richard. 2002. *The Rise of the Creative Class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁹ See for example Maynard, Micheline. 2006. “Detroit Polishes, and Demolishes, for the Super Bowl.” *New York Times*, January 22 and Ross, Bob and Don Mitchell. 2004. “Commentary: Neoliberal Landscapes of Deception: Detroit, Ford Field, and The Ford Motor Company.” *Urban Geography*. Vol 25(7): 685-690.

²⁰ See for example the photographs and commentary in Lowell Boileau’s project “The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit” at www.detroiteyes.com/home.htm, Herron, Jerry (1987), and Park, Kyong. 2005. *Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond*. Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers.

processes of gentrification and renewal. The ways in which Detroit refuses to “behave” according to normative standards of capitalist consumption and the ways in which it historically has refused to behave given its long history as a site of radical political activism and labor, race, social justice, and socialist organizing, makes its trajectory and past unique.

Positioning the landscape as anything but “natural” however, this work seeks to understand and engage the *racialized* production in and of Detroit. Perhaps no metropolitan region in the United States is recalled as more stratified along markers of race and economics than the city of Detroit. A review of the literature on Detroit tells us that Detroit’s decline is welded to the decline of the prominence of the United States auto industry and the rise of suburban growth. The “hell” that the commercial that opened this discussion underscores is the departure of the auto industry and with that the people, jobs, and productions that used to power Detroit. And in the last few decades, Detroit has been written almost exclusively via the tropes of industry, black/white racial conflict, and the continual and continued population exodus of the City.²¹ Nearly every book, academic or popular, written about the City of Detroit since the 1950s engages racial stratification and the decentralization of Detroit industry from city-center to suburbs, as dual tropes or in some cases interlinked tropes

²¹ See for example, Lee, Alfred McClung. 1943. *Race Riot*. New York: Dryden; Fine, Sidney. 1989. *Violence in the model city: The Cavanagh Administration, race relations, and the Detroit riot of 1967*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Shogan, Robert and Craig, Tom. 1976 *The Detroit race riot: A study in violence*. Philadelphia: Chilton Books, Philadelphia; Widick, B.J 1989. *Detroit: city of race and class violence*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press; Farley, Reynolds, Sheldon Danziger, Harry J. Holzer. 2000. *Detroit Divided*. New York : Russell Sage Foundation; Darden, Joe T., Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas. 1987. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

as to why the city “failed.” To most historians, sociologists, demographers, political scientists, pundits, and suburban residents the “failure” of Detroit exists in its embattled racial fragmentation and the changes in automotive production. These two ideas are often held as specters of demise in the history of Detroit. I do not ignore these ideas—but instead, from my unique situatedness as an Ethnic Studies scholar I seek to understand “race” as not always already produced or as easily legible as “population statistics,” census data, and “racial polarization” as many case studies believe. Instead of taking “race” as something fixed, constant, and immutable this dissertation analyzes how it is produced in varying time periods as well as the role of historical understanding and memory in continuing to produce and infuse contemporary understandings of race onto prior historical moments.

Racialization of Space and Spatialization of Race

Bringing together ethnic studies, urban history, geography, and cultural studies, I argue that the spatial productions of and within Detroit are fundamentally produced by and of the relationships—real and imagined—between race and space. Indeed, as George Lipsitz argues, “the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension.”²² An analysis of this production of the racialization of space and the spatialization of race²³ is at the heart of my examination here and forms the core of not only my academic intervention, but also the ways in which I see, understand, and experience the world.

²² Lipsitz, George. 2007. “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal*, 26 (1): 10-23, p. 12.

²³ *Ibid.*

This project analyzes the simultaneous production of structural racism and the discursive production of race. It is through a linking of both the structural and the discursive production of race that the material ideas about *how* race happens emerge.

Although I attempt in this work to map and pinpoint particular moments where discourses of race emerge and are solidified in the built environment and spatial imaginary of Detroit—these are but snapshots of a continually mobile idea as race is not static. These moments are particularly revealing in their production of racial meaning in policy and memory. Although I aim to locate moments where ideas gain significance in the public memory or the historic record, the production of race, its precise moment of assembly is hard to pinpoint. Rather than a specific material production, like the manufacture of a motor or the steering column of a vehicle, the traces of race are often viewed as less tangible, although no less material. And it is sometimes in the vestiges of the materials of manufacture or the landscape itself that the fabrication of race can be located, alongside, next to, and within the constructedness of space. I follow in the work of Katherine McKittrick in merging the study of the production of race and geography. McKittrick's focus on black feminist geographies moves beyond the empirical mappings of population to the social production of space and addresses race explicitly, in contrast to its typified role as either overlooked or measurable in the context of geography.²⁴ This is why the spatial production of race both in the imaginary and the material landscapes of the city are places where race as an idea can be located and examined. Not necessarily in

²⁴ McKittrick, 14-15.

measurable statistics of population and demographics but in the *idea* of race. Spaces are the mappings and holders of the ideas and meanings—of the places that are inscribed with race, rather than the counting of bodies—understanding then the *significance* of race beyond the corporeal production of racialized persons. Through this then, its embeddedness in our cities, in our spaces, in our consensus memory, and our future imaginary, are revealed.

This project sees the linking of spatiality between race and the city-space as co-constructed. Rather than engaging the production of the city as a whole, this work engages locations looking for the ways in which race is produced, but cannot be separated from the intersectional production of racial, gendered, and classed identities in places such as public housing and neighborhood. Although gender is not a primary analytic that I engage throughout the dissertation, it is important here to note the production of Detroit in popular constructions as male. From the Chrysler commercial that opened this chapter and its paucity of female representations, to the gendered constructions of an industrialized, city-space as always already powered by and shut down by the workings and machinations of men—Detroit’s production has always been seen as masculinized. But like the other spaces of the dissertation—the work attempts to not understand the masculinization of Detroit as “just is.” For as Katherine McKittrick argues, “the idea that space ‘just is’ and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which ‘just is’ not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly

calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are.”²⁵ I attempt to show *how* the masculinization of the city is created. My spaces of analysis—public housing, slum clearance, the filmic neighborhood, and the nostalgic neighborhood are clearly and specifically gendered. Moving beyond an analysis of materiality of gendered bodies in space, but rather the gendered construction of space—is important to my understanding of the production of Detroit as a masculine space.

This work seeks to destabilize the naturalization of representations of race and space in Detroit and as part of that will work to also engage production of Detroit not “just is” but as willfully constructed to understand the intersectional productions of both Detroit and its inhabitants. And in this respect I follow in the footsteps of the recent and exciting work of urban historians²⁶ and cultural studies scholars²⁷ who seek to understand and engage the production of race within and onto the city landscape. Scholars of critical geography are also moving in ways that center racism as a central logic of the organization of space.²⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore in particular informs my

²⁵ McKittrick, xi.

²⁶ See for example, Molina, Natalia. 2006. *Fit to be citizens?: public health and race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Alvarez, Luis. 2008. *The power of the zoot : youth culture and resistance during World War II* Berkeley: University of California Press; Kurashige, Scott. 2008. *The shifting grounds of race: black and Japanese Americans in the making of multiethnic Los Angeles*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; Pulido, Laura. 2006. *Black, brown, yellow, and left: radical activism in Los Angeles*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Shah, Nayan. 2001. *Contagious divides: epidemics and race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁷ See for example, Avila, Eric. 2004. *Popular culture in the age of white flight: fear and fantasy in suburban Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Macek, Steve. 2006. *Urban nightmares: the media, the Right, and the moral panic over the city*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Lee, James Kyung-Jin. 2004. *Urban triage: race and the fictions of multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Song, Min Hyung. 2005. *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riot*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

²⁸ See for example Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography.” *The Professional Geographer*, 54 (1) 2002: 15-24; Pulido, Laura. “Reflections on a White Discipline.” *The Professional Geographer*, 54 (1) 2002: 42-49; Brahinsky, Rachel. “Race and

work as she calls for piecing together “a complex series of abstractions in order to analyze and produce a multiscalar geographical object of analysis” that does not lead to “monolithic view of the state or an “essentialist” view of race”²⁹ as a necessary intervention. Gilmore acknowledges that although the state is often seen and sited as object of production and resolution of crisis—the abstraction of conflict and struggle “from multiple sites of production to state milieu does more than produce a free-floating—or even an interest-group-defined—squabble over the appropriate disposition of public resources.”³⁰ My work then emerges from this framework, understanding the multi-sitedness in the production of race and structural racism in particular. Race happens everywhere as a material and ideological fashioning of space, place, and identity. As such this dissertation locates itself within the intersections of comparative ethnic studies, geography, urban studies, and cultural studies in order to locate the depth and breadth of the production of race and space in theory and in the lived materiality and imaginary.

While many view Detroit and its division along spatial and narrativized ideas of “blackness” and “whiteness” as fixed points of departure, my work is significant in its attempt to understand initial productions, later reproductions, and variants of the idea of race. The messiness in analyzing the production of race and its linkage to space involves the process of understanding the contemporary meaning of race in a

the City: The (Re)development of Urban Identity” *Geography Compass*, 2011, 5(3): 144–153; Price, Patricia L. “At the crossroads: critical race theory and critical geographies of race,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34(2) (2010) pp. 147–174.

²⁹ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography.” *The Professional Geographer*, 54 (1) 2002: 15-24.

³⁰ Gilmore, 16.

particular moment, as well as the complicated and complex relationship the United States has to ideas of “race.” So while on the one hand there is a “racial common sense” about Detroit narrativized along ideas of “most segregated metropolitan area in the United States.” In some ways this parallels a national “racial common sense” in which much of the complex negotiations of race, national-origin, nation, gender, and class are often elided through the workings of consensus memories of the end of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, the American immigrant narrative, the American Dream, as representative moments of national productions of “justice” and “equal opportunity.” The collapse and recuperation of racism through these narratives and their attendant application to space reveals what Katherine McKittrick calls “the naturalizations of difference” and the naturalization of bodies and places both materially and discursively. According to McKittrick, “this naturalization of “difference” is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of transparent space, the idea that space “just is,” and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true.”³¹ I choose to examine the particular relationship between race and its specific productions and imbeddedness in ideas of place and space to reveal an understanding of the mutually constitutive processes of race-making and space-making that does not allow easy understandings of “race” as historically and contemporarily manifested as always already produced.

From the European settlers who found the ways in which the indigenous in the “New World” did not “use and cultivate the land” in a Lockean sense of “use and

³¹ McKittrick, xv.

cultivation” justification for conquest and colonization to the judges and politicians who made various rulings in the early 20th century as to who was eligible for citizenship and through citizenship able to access property—the relationship between productions of place has always been linked to the production of ideas of race, citizenship, class, and gender. As critical legal scholar Cheryl Harris outlines the racial logics of property in her foundational text, “Whiteness as Property,” race becomes the dividing line between the ability *to own* property and the ability *to be* property.³² In this backdrop, Detroit presents an excellent case study for understanding the ways in which the legacies of structural and institutional racism of the past influence and structure the present. This work begins by examining the period of the 1930s-1950s in terms of access to housing and impacts of urban renewal. I position this analysis as an appropriate place to interpret the current urban reality and position Detroit not as a post-industrial city ravaged by the lack of industry, but of a city ravaged by acts of racism.

This work is significant particularly in a moment when race is simultaneously becoming an object of attack and disappeared, when all over the U.S. pundits and everyday people say that race doesn’t matter, that “I don’t see race,” that “we have a black President” while the incarcerated population of people of color rises and the attacks on people of color grow. I hope that this work will compel the conversation about race to move from its focus on personal responsibility and the ideology of “choice” through a historical illumination that highlights the specific processes and

³² Harris, Cheryl. 1993. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 106 (8): June 1993.

role the government and other powerful groups had in creating the contemporary social landscape at the height of Detroit's economic dominance. I do this in order to highlight the many ways in which we are still not and may never be "post-racial" until the traumas of the past and their still contemporary spawn are not only acknowledged, but also rectified. This project works to make visible and explicit what is often considered the invisibility of racial spatialization—the ideas that geographic space is both neutralized and naturalized in terms of race. So much of the production of space is considered invisible beyond issues of community planning and development in terms of how space is given and grows meanings.

Analyzing Productions of Race and Space: Mapping the Dissertation

This work illuminates the productions of race and space and aims to reconnect and link the traces of structural racism to the contemporary production of Detroit as post-racial or after race. Although the contemporary moment attempts to delink race from structural racism, this work through the linking of historical deployments of racist policies to present day effects, reveals the structural vestiges of race within the current moment. I draw from my training as an interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies scholar and rely on a methodological approach that enables an engagement of the fluid and mutable ways in which race is produced and constructed. I utilize archival materials of city agencies to analyze the productions of race in social policy in Part I and a cultural studies lens to analyzing filmic representations and the ways in which the internet produces ideas of space and spatial relations in Part II. Through the

examination of multiple modes of production—policy and popular culture—I am able to reveal the multiple registers that race is produced and enacted.

The manufacture of the dissertation into two distinct parts is intended to reveal both the production of racial and spatial logics and the disappearance of systemic racism in the structural understanding of the present day. It is through these two distinct examinations that I can begin to analyze the following question: “How do racial logics simultaneously produce spatial logics and then also disappear?” It is not that race is invisible, but often rendered as such. Part I, ““Public” Constructions of Race in the Spaces of the Street,” focuses intensely on the relationship between racial logics and the production of space and in particular the racialized notions that produced public housing and slum clearance in the city of Detroit. Part II, “Reproducing Race On and Off Screen,” focuses on the simultaneous forgetting of the structural forces of racism and production of contemporary racialized ideals of the space of Detroit as criminal, depraved and outside of nation.

Given the scope of a dissertation project there are limitations to this study. The main absence is the historical gap that the dissertation makes from Part I and Part II, roughly ending Part I in the 1950s and picking up Part II in 2008 and beyond. While this is slightly unconventional, there is a rationale to my choice to focus on the time periods as laid out. The time periods that I choose are uniquely situated to address my argument through their consideration in popular memory as both the apex and nadir of Detroit. The period of focus in Part I, primarily the time period of the late 1930s through the early 1950s represents the period of time when Detroit as a city and a

place was forward thinking—was growing, was making plans for its projected continued growth and its place as one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the United States, if not the world. This period is particularly important—because save for the financial and building limitations imposed by the Depression and World War II—Detroit was planning for its future of greatness, which is much different than the planning of the later twentieth century—which primarily revolves around stemming the “crisis” of the city. On one hand then, the importance of understanding and analyzing Detroit’s priorities and productions as it planned for its greatness, is a perspective that is missing from most of the later literature on Detroit as it points to this time period for its failures. Failures abound, but it is strikingly significant the ways in which Detroit in its 1946 “Master Plan” addressed its “race problem” through the planned demolition of a large swath of the black community. Detroit, as a Northern city played that fine balance between an acknowledged Jim Crow and an attempt to present itself as a city of justice and equality of opportunity. As such, the focus of Part I traces the rhetorical disassociation from race in policy formation, despite the intent to continue to create and destroy neighborhoods based on a racialized logic of separate and unequal, within the context of Detroit’s “greatness.”

The focus of Part II, the most recent and contemporary renderings of Detroit marks the time period that I call post post-industrial, the time period where and when policies and sentiments construct Detroit primarily as already dead, decaying, and done. It is this contemporary period that the Chrysler commercial references and that supports the State of Michigan’s mandate to shut down half of Detroit’s public schools,

increasing high school class size to 60 students per class. It is this moment that considers Detroit the ultimate example of post-industrial demise in the United States as books, shows, movies, and other forms of media depict the city as a monument to the past—as a city of ruins, bombed out by its racially divided past and its industrial failures. I open Part II of the dissertation at this moment to engage and expose the narrative production of post-industrialization as only one part of a larger story of neoliberalism and the rhetoric of colorblindness.

Part I of the dissertation, ““Public” Constructions of Race in the Spaces of the Street,” serves as a historical analysis of the national and local policies that shaped Detroit’s public housing and slum clearance policies from the mid 1930s through the mid 1950s. Part I argues that Detroit’s earliest housing policies and practices were constructed explicitly to be separate and unequal in terms of racial segregation. Although the initial policies rarely mentioned race directly, an analysis of the key policies reveal the ways in which race was implied on a local level in terms of spaces of location. To that end, model theories and studies that inform my work include George Lipsitz’s theorization on the spatial imaginary, Josh Sides’s discussion on the representation, metonymy, and elision of the City of Compton, and Natalia Molina’s work showing how the work of public health officials in Los Angeles shaped ideas about race, citizenship, and neighborhood.³³ These frameworks move away from standard studies of housing, segregation, and neighborhoods through the lens of hard

³³ Lipsitz, George. 2007. “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal*, 26 (1): 10-23; Sides, Josh. 2004. “Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb,” *American Quarterly*, 56(3): 583-605; Molina, Natalia. 2006. *Fit to be Citizens: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

and fast boundaries and borders. Part I of the dissertation more generally reveals the ways in which race was produced through policy formation during and preceding the time period that is considered Detroit's "peak."

Chapter 1, "The Spatial Imaginary of Public Housing: Constructions and Contradictions of "Brick Cities,"" examines the formation and implementation of Detroit's public housing program in the late 1930s through its "official" desegregation in the mid-1950s. Relying upon archival data and city history, the chapter traces the racialization of Detroit's racially separate public housing and the spatialization of race in the city imaginary. Chapter 2, "Housing For Some: Slum Clearance and the Relocation/Razing of the American Dream," also utilizes archival data to show how the interlocking forces of private and public policies and practices attempted to control the movements, containment, and ultimately demolition of racial and to an extent, classed space. This chapter follows the trajectory of the racial imaginary constructed in Chapter 1 to its epoch in the 1950s as slum clearance and urban removal became literally and figuratively projects of "cleaning up" black communities. This chapter in particular focuses on The 1949 Housing Act as a whole, and its slum clearance provision in particular as it marks a pivotal juncture between the historically condoned forms of blatant racism and the more contemporary realities of hidden, yet still prevalent institutional racism.

While Part I of the dissertation traces the rhetorical disassociation from race in policy formation, despite the intent to continue to create and destroy neighborhoods based on a racialized logic of separate and unequal, Part II, "Reproducing Race On

and Off the Screen,” seeks to understand how the possessive investment in whiteness is disappeared from the historical understanding of the trajectory of Detroit. We live in an era that uses the rhetoric of color-blindness rooted in a consensus memory³⁴ that presupposes the Civil Rights Era and accompanying Movement achieved race equity in the United States. The institutionalization and production of the memory and narrative of Dr. Martin Luther King has been used to justify everything from the end of racism to the end of affirmative action and the work of the Civil Rights Movement more generally has been used as a redemptive narrative and consolidation of the United States racist past through the notion of one American nation.³⁵ The rhetoric of “color-blindness” in America presupposes that each individual American has equal access to work, education, and housing in the United States. While the chapters in Part I of the dissertation focus on the role of public policy in the creation of Detroit and housing in the spatial imaginary, the chapters in Part II provides a reflection of how those policies impact the cultural imaginary long after their implementation.

Chapter 3, “Detroit’s Post-Industrial Frontier: *Gran Torino* as Lens into Masculinity and Property in the Post-Industrial City,” positions the film *Gran Torino* (2008) as a frame to illustrate both the broader cultural representations of Detroit and as an alternative form to understand the lasting impacts of housing and city policy. As

³⁴ Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford in their edited collection, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (2006) talk about consensus memory as related to the Civil Rights Movement as “a dominant narrative of the movement’s goals, practices, victories, and of course, its most lasting legacies” (p. xiv).

³⁵ See for example Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 2010, *Racism Without Racists*, Nikhil Pal Singh 2004, *Black is a Country*, and Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford 2006, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*.

such, *Gran Torino* is a cultural document that serves as a reflection of the cultural imaginary produced about Detroit, linking notions of racialization and spatialization not only in the production of policy and spaces, but utilizing the space of film as a window to understanding the representation of Detroit through a cultural artifact produced in and representing Detroit.³⁶ Chapter 4, “Digital Discourse and Memory of the City,” utilizes the user forums on www.city-data.com, a website primarily focused on distributing and providing information on housing, home buying, rental markets and relocation, to locate and analyze the production of contemporary ideas of race, residence, and memory in and of Detroit. As the chapter shows, while on one hand the space of the Internet is different from the material spaces of street, the ideas that flow between the “virtual” and the “real” recycle, reaffirm and mimic ideologies that produced and perpetuate the built environment and its racial imaginary. At stake is the production of the narrative of Detroit’s past, present, and future and how the Internet, much like other forms of media, has the potential to create and maintain an investment in the discursive production of Detroit’s failure and depravity as individualized and racialized, despite voices that aim to open up and shift the narrative toward a full understanding of the institutional investment in racist policies and practices.

This dissertation maps the shifts in understandings of race and its linkage to public policy, the built environment, and the racial and spatial imaginary. While utilizing Detroit as its central location and space of analysis, the processes and ideas located in the dissertation circulate and reverberate in the understandings and

³⁶ The usage of film to analyze the discursive production of the city follows along the lines of Steve Macek’s work in *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic Over the City*, 2006, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

productions of race in many of cities, neighborhoods, and spatial imaginaries across the United States. Revisiting the “Born of Fire” commercial that opened this introduction—the fundamental questions of Detroit and its place, its role in the nation, and the imaginary for its future live on in the way it is positioned as outside of the nation—as both the Chrysler 200 is “imported from Detroit” and the city and by default its people are produced as outside of nation. How did the shift happen, from Detroit as celebrated as harbinger of the nation—as the center of the “arsenal of democracy” and preeminent example of industrialization—to its current focus as outside of nation, as aberration? How are notions of “difference” mapped onto and into the landscape of Detroit? I will begin with Part I, to analyze the production of difference during the peak of Detroit’s prominence and the ways in which “difference” was produced locally and move toward Part II of the dissertation to understand in which Detroit in its entirety was produced as “different” in the national and local landscapes.

Part I:
“Public” Constructions of Race in the Spaces of the Street

**Chapter One:
Spatial Imaginary of Public Housing:
Constructions and Contradictions of “Brick Cities”**

I was raised most of my life in the Brewster Projects. Many people call it “brick city” because it was not intended for blacks to venture outside of brick city and advance themselves....

To us that was the best housing because you could not find buildings that were built of the material and the structure, they were sturdy buildings. And so it was a Godsend, it was like moving into a mansion and even some of my friends that lived in the South used to say that when they used to go visit their friends that lived in the projects it was like going to heaven.¹

-Deanna Neely

Deanna Neely is a third generation Detroitier whose grandparents were among the first to move into the Brewster Housing Projects after their completion in 1938. Some years later Ms. Neely and her family moved into the Brewster-Douglas addition. Ms. Neely’s experiences and reflections echo the contradictions implicit in Detroit’s racially segregated public housing program, which created and formalized a policy of separate and unequal public housing in the City of Detroit. As this chapter will show, the contradictions that Neely illuminates surrounded the formation and implementation of the public housing program in Detroit and in cities across the nation.² On the one hand, the options for structurally safe and sound housing with heat and running water for most people of color were limited and public housing was one place where new, affordable, and modern housing was available in a racially segregated and uneven private marketplace. Yet, public housing, as a part of the racial

¹ Interview Deanna Neely June 19, 2009.

² See for example Fuerst, J.S. 2005. *When Public Housing Was Paradise*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press and Hunt, Bradford. 2009. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

state,³ both served as a location of concession to African American calls for fair housing while simultaneously institutionalizing racial segregation. The Detroit Housing Commission, in its creation and maintenance of a policy of separate and unequal housing options for African Americans continued a de facto precedence of spatial isolation and went further to make in this part of institutional policy through its official decision-making and policy implementation. Therefore, when the Fair Housing Act finally passed in 1968, which mandated equal access to housing, the impacts of decades of segregation and inequality were already mapped into and onto the system.

In this chapter I argue that the Detroit Housing Commission's racial policy was one of the primary vehicles used to develop, cement, and structure the relationship between race and housing and to show the state sponsored and institutional racism of the urban north. I engage with Detroit urban historians such as Thomas Sugrue and Dominic Capeci, who write in depth about the role of public housing in agitating a crisis of race relations.⁴ The more recent work of David Freund articulates the role of white Detroiters' shifting views about race and property in the mid-century as an important ideological shift that continued to fuel segregation even as "race relations"

³ I draw on the term racial state from the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) Omi and Winant who see the state as inherently racial and position that every movement or shift in the racial order—concessions, reform, change, and backlash—all happen within the confines of state mediated policies intent on maintaining the state's investment in racial difference. As such, the state is seen as both the target and site of resolution for most policy change—simultaneously reasserting its power from its role as both producer of racial inequality and the idealized site of resolution of racial inequality.

⁴ See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 1996 and Dominic Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*, 1984.

were seen to improve.⁵ Sugrue, Capeci, and Freund make interventions to shift the focus of Detroit's "urban crisis" back before the common marker of 1967, to the World War II moment and do an important job in showing the ways in which race operated in mid-twentieth century Detroit and created and facilitated a system of separate and unequal while many others remember the 1940s and 1950s as Detroit's "peak," the height before the 1967 rebellion and its typical narratives of white flight and decline.⁶ Part I of the dissertation continues the conversation of focus on the time period seen as the apex of Detroit. While I draw from the groundwork laid by scholars such as Sugrue, Capeci, and Freund, who make essential contributions in showing the unequal ways in which race operated in Detroit, Part I, makes two important interventions. First, it seeks to analyze *how* ideas about race emerge and are materialized in policy through an analysis of archival material. Secondly, Part I positions the work of public housing and slum clearance within the racial state and sees both the promise of democratic reform and the institutionalization of race as, "a process of clash and compromise between racial movements and the state."⁷

As an Ethnic Studies project this work sees race and ethnicity as more than determining factors or sociological markers of "success" and "failure" and seeks to understand *how* the relationship between the racialization of space and the spatialization of race is established. To that end, model theories and studies that

⁵ See David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, 2007.

⁶ See for example Kevin Boyle's 2001 article detailing the state of the literature in positioning "urban crisis." "The Ruins of Detroit: Exploring the Urban Crisis in the Motor City," *The Michigan Historical Review*, 27(1): 109-127.

⁷ Omi and Winant, 1994, 79.

inform my work include George Lipsitz's theorization on the spatial imaginary, Josh Sides's discussion on the representation, metonymy, and elision of the City of Compton, and Natalia Molina's work showing how the work of public health officials in Los Angeles shaped ideas about race, citizenship, and neighborhood.⁸ These frameworks move away from standard studies of housing, segregation, and neighborhoods through the lens of hard and fast boundaries and borders. I also link to the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore and her particular engagement with the "fatal couplings of power and difference" as linked and signified through and within racism and geography.⁹ In particular Gilmore raises the idea of understanding changes and redistribution of power within and around both times of crisis and also times of and also "fixed" through state policies to remedy exclusion during "good" times are part of the same action in controlling and asserting power—whether reform or repression over a particular segment of society.¹⁰ Gilmore in conversation with Michael Omi and Howard Winant who rely on the narrative and notion of the "racial state" wherein the state is inherently racial and will work to maintain the "equilibrium" in the face of conflict or crisis.¹¹ This chapter and Part I of the dissertation more generally reveal the ways in which racial difference was produced through policy formation during and preceding the time period that is considered Detroit's "peak" through policies of both

⁸ Lipsitz, George. 2007. "The Racialization of Space and the Spatiaization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal*, 26 (1): 10-23; Sides, Josh. 2004. "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," *American Quarterly*, 56(3): 583-605; Molina, Natalia. 2006. *Fit to be Citizens: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *The Professional Geographer*, 54 (1) 2002: 15-24.

¹⁰ Gilmore, 17, 21.

¹¹ Omi and Winant, 84-88.

reform and repression in order to underscore the ways in ways that the City planned for its future during its time of growth.

I revisit the historical implementation of the Federal Housing Acts of 1934, 1937, and 1949 to understand not only the production of a racial crisis in the City, but to understand the ways in which ideological and racial “common sense” about blackness and whiteness emerged via policies and practices in attempts to balance and maintain the equilibrium of the racial state both nationally and locally. Of particular focus are the ways in which legislated ideas of justice are enacted within the provisions of public housing in the Housing Acts of 1934, 1937, and 1949, and how Detroit’s local enactments of these policies rely on already formed ideologies and enactments of decades of separate and unequal access to housing. So even after racial reform policies are enacted in the wake of *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) and the Housing Act of 1949, a trajectory of racist policies are not only in effect, but continue to be enacted revealing the contradictions, not only for residents like Ms. Neely, but also for those implementing and enacting public housing. On the one hand there were those reformers who wanted to provide decent housing for all populations and there were others who utilized public housing as a way to formalize existing policies on segregated housing, thereby creating and institutionalizing a racial common sense regarding who lives where and in what types of homes. While the Detroit Housing Commission and other government agencies served primarily as the workhorse of whatever administration was in power, there were commissioners, like Reverend Horace White that vociferously voiced their opposition and George Schermer, head of

the Detroit Interracial Committee 1945-53, that urged the mayors and housing commission to implement fair housing policies in both public and private housing. Organizations like the Detroit Urban League (DUL) and its directors, Forrest B. Washington and John Dancy proved essential in advocacy for Black Detroiters. Even within the context of the contestation over ideals of organizations like the DUL, at times chided for being overly committed to promoting ideas of middle class respectability and black uplift, the organization served as an advocate of the black community.¹² In some ways it was precisely because of its connections with the City power structure and investment in middle-class respectability, that the DUL was able to find and place African Americans into jobs. In the battles over public housing and slum clearance, the DUL proved itself as an advocate of Detroit's African American populations. As will be shown in the next chapter, even some private lenders and real estate agents—long the private funding villains in the narratives of racially biased access to mortgages and homes—showed reluctance to support Detroit's programs of slum clearance, public housing, and urban renewal. While the City had the power to produce and enact policies, this chapter shows that clearly this was not without resistance and active contestation of the program by those within and outside of government. It is in their stories that the fluidity and the constructedness of race, both within the policy documents themselves as well as the material production and reproduction of racialized space can be located.

¹² See for example, Smith, Suzanne E. 2001. "Boogie Chillen": Uncovering Detroit's African-American Cultural History," *The Michigan Historical Review*, 27(1): 93-107; Thomas, Richard. 1992. *Life for us is what we Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Wolcott, Victoria. 2001. *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Public Housing as Part of New Deal

The Federal Housing Program came into existence as part of the Depression-era Public Works programs. The Public Works Administration (PWA) was established in 1933 as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act. The PWA's intent was, "to engage in construction, reconstruction, alteration, or repair under public regulation or control of low-cost housing and slum-clearance projects along with traditional government building projects such as highways and public buildings."¹³ The national discussion of public housing reached a peak during the Great Depression as many housing and social welfare advocates were able to gain more popular support for publicly funded housing due to the belief that many "good" families were finding themselves homeless or inadequately housed. Prior to the massive economic downturn the opposition to public housing had been great and often opposed using rhetoric that hard work and the American meritocracy would provide stable housing. During the Depression, the rhetoric of the "deserving" poor began to gain currency.

The years from 1933 to 1938 were essential in the creation and implementation of government financing and underwriting of both public and private housing. While this chapter focuses primarily on the legislation that impacted the formation of public housing, it should not be seen as separate from the concurrent legislation that financed private housing, which is an important focus of Part II of the dissertation. It is important to note the attempts historically and even contemporarily, to distance the

¹³ Radford, Gail. "The Federal Government and Housing During the Great Depression" pp. 102-120, in Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

public financing of government housing from the public financing of private mortgages by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal National Mortgage Administration (Fannie Mae), which were established in 1933 and 1938 respectively. From the start the dual goals of both housing and slum clearance by the federal government impacted both the priorities and enactment of local housing guidelines. Scholars of public housing mark the passage of the 1937 Wagner-Steagall Act and its attendant cost limitation as the beginning of the decline of public housing and many believe that this first initial disinvestment foretold the super-block, fortress-like, and under-funded future of public housing.¹⁴

The 1930s and 1940s were decades of shift both in urban housing and the suburbanization of the United States. The context both of Depression and World War shaped not only the national rhetoric of democracy and citizenship, but also impacted the resources, both financial and material, available to build private and public housing during these decades. These decades also marked the formation of national and local housing and building policies, formalizing what had primarily been up until this point an informal policy of segregation in the private housing market. This chapter focuses on the ramifications of government involvement in housing and the ways in which despite its goals and rhetoric of “housing for all” the implementation of public housing served to further formalize and institutionalize racial, class, and gendered notions of citizenship. And it begs the question, if “housing for all” results

¹⁴ See for example Radford, Gail. “The Federal Government and Housing During the Great Depression” in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds., 2000 University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 102-120.

in a significant population still not housed or under-housed than what and who, both discursively and in lived reality, constitute the “all” in the national scope. The disengagement, invisibility, and the “urban apartheid” that scholars ascribe to the 1970s and 1980s have their roots much earlier.¹⁵ This work places the emergence of both the hyper and invisibility of “urban crisis” in the very roots of the public housing program. With the building of the first public housing projects in Detroit and across the country, the state formalized its active role in segregation, and institutional and systemic investments in whiteness as property.

The scope of this chapter emerges alongside the major national housing legislation passed in 1933 as part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal. Housing scholars often foreground 1933 as a watershed moment with the establishment of the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), and I too engage the establishment of these agencies as an important part of financing private housing. For this chapter however, the New Deal legislation that is of central importance is the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, which created the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration (PWA). The act “instructed the PWA to engage in construction, reconstruction, alteration, or repair under public regulation or control of low-cost housing and slum-clearance projects along with traditional government building projects such as highways and public buildings.”¹⁶ The PWA began its program of slum clearance and public housing

¹⁵ See for example Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *Urban Apartheid*, 1993.

¹⁶ Radford, Gail. “The Federal Government and Housing During the Great Depression” pp. 102-120. Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor*

primarily as a way to create jobs and secondarily as a way to address homelessness and deteriorating urban cores. As can be seen in the current economic moment, construction starts narratively serve as a way to move the economy forward and as the Roosevelt Administration funded various public works programs including housing, so too is the Obama administration funding highway renewal and other such programs to stimulate the economy. As is true now as was then, the fundamental mission of the PWA's Housing Division was to create jobs. The by-product this was a good one since cities across the nation, including Detroit, were in the midst of a housing crisis brought on by the urban migration during the 1910s and 1920s of foreign and domestic migrants to work in the war and automobile industries.

Detroit's Housing for All: Separate and Unequal

On the heels of the passage of the National Recovery Act, the Detroit Housing Commission was established on November 24, 1933. Following the announcement, the Federal Emergency Housing Commission allocated the City of Detroit \$3,200,000 for slum clearance and the construction of low rent housing. The Detroit Housing Commission was officially charged with the development and administration of federally aided low-cost housing upon approval of the Detroit Common Council, on January 15, 1934.¹⁷ The Detroit Housing Commission, in its own written history

Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 104.

¹⁷ "The History, Organization, and Function of the Detroit Housing Commission", July 1963, Carl Almlad Collection, Box 13, Folder 7, Detroit Housing Commission History, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

acknowledged that the original intent of the Detroit Public Housing program like many other programs across the nation was as an,

Experimental public works program, which was expected to increase employment, while it also stimulated business activities, cleared slum areas, and provided decent, safe and sanitary housing for families of low income. The provision of adequate housing was merely a by-product of the program until it found expression through passage of the Wagner Steagall Act of 1937, which established the National Housing Authority.¹⁸

The 1937 Housing Act formalized the national public housing authority with its provision of federal subsidy to local public housing agencies primarily for the creation of public housing. While seemingly a victory for urban housing and housing reform, as the 1937 Housing Act created a “quasi-autonomous agency called the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA) to administer the program at the national level,” the local administration of the program varied from city to city. The USHA functioned independently as it had its own sources of revenue, and as such the agency had local governments make the decisions, “as to where to locate subsidized housing, and even the decision as to whether to build at all.”¹⁹ This resulted in an uneven application of public housing from city to city and also resulted in the ability of powerful anti-housing groups to lobby local governments against building public housing. Also included in this bill were changes to keep construction costs minimal, to specifically exclude all but the lowest income groups, and mandated elimination of slum property

¹⁸ “The History, Organization, and Function of the Detroit Housing Commission”, July 1963, Carl Almlad Collection, Box 13, Folder 7, Detroit Housing Commission History, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁹Radford, Gail. “The Federal Government and Housing During the Great Depression” pp. 102-120. Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 111.

in a quantity equal to new dwelling units constructed.²⁰ And it was through this provision, the “equivalent elimination clause” that formally linked public housing to slum clearance. The 1937 Housing Act set the stage for the way in which public housing was both administered and the ways the goals of the program were enacted. While initially housing reformers were cautiously optimistic about the role of public housing, its enactment resulted in differing realities for the public. In Detroit in particular, the local administration utilized its power to enact its slum clearance provisions in certain neighborhoods and with particular projects and utilized its discretion to build on vacant land in other situations.

Detroit’s only housing projects initially enacted under the PWA legislation (all subsequent projects emerged after 1937 and were enacted under the 1937 Housing Act) were the Brewster Housing Project and the Parkside Housing Project. However, these two projects are important for the precedence that they set for Detroit’s public housing program and later projects upheld the model created by Brewster and Parkside. On September 9, 1935 Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was the honored guest of the City of Detroit and the Detroit Housing Commission at the “Demolition Ceremony” and public reception celebrating the razing of the building that occupied the intended location of the Brewster Project. Roosevelt, the First Lady of the United States, long an advocate of housing for the poor, was a supporter of the Housing Acts of 1934 and 1937. This moment represented not only Detroit’s first official program of slum

²⁰ Radford, Gail. “The Federal Government and Housing During the Great Depression” pp. 102-120. Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 111.

clearance, but also the beginning of its unofficial, and later official, policy of a racially segregated housing program. These first two housing projects were intended as such to be one project for white families, Parkside, and one project for African American families, Brewster. Since the Brewster project was built on a site that was already occupied with housing and businesses, the federal government had obstacles in acquiring the land parcels with owners that were reluctant to sell or refused to sell at the prices offered.²¹ While the land for the Brewster site, “in the heart of Detroit’s Negro²² slum area,” locally referred to as “black bottom” was mostly acquired, cleared, and some construction was underway by 1937, there were some sellers unwilling to sell their land.²³ However, with the passage of the 1937 Housing Act the acquisition of land moved from the purview of the Federal government to City government. The City of Detroit, through legal processes, was finally able to acquire the land for condemnation. The first tenants moved into Brewster in October 1938.

The historically black neighborhood in Detroit was called black bottom long before it served as the center of the African American community. Its name dates back to Detroit’s settlement by French farmers. In those days ribbon farms stretched from the Detroit river northward in long strips. Each farm had 200-800 feet of

²¹ A 1936 Louisville decision ruled that the United States Government had no power to condemn land for public housing, see Detroit Housing Commission Sixth Annual Report, December 1940, George Edwards Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, Housing 1938-1940, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²² The usage of “Negro” and “Colored” in this chapter and throughout Part I is purely in reference to the historical usage of these terms and I have left these words in their original usage when referencing historical documents and events. When not in direct reference the terms black and African American are used instead.

²³ Detroit Housing Commission Sixth Annual Report, December 1940, George Edwards Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, Housing 1938-1940, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. This area was comprised of ten blocks bounded by Mack Avenue on the north, Wilkins Street on the south, Hastings Street on the East, and Beaubien Street on the west.

waterfront and the rest of the farm lay like a skinny strip stretching northward. These farms lay the groundwork for some Detroit's earliest original streets. The area that stretched from the river just east of the main thoroughfare of Woodward Avenue was named black bottom for its rich dark soil that made it an ideal site for farming. However, its twentieth century racially charged moniker was not lost on Detroiters. As the area increasingly served as the center of the African American neighborhood, the name gained reference to both the dark soil and the racialized markers of the primary inhabitants.²⁴ Josh Sides' work on metonymy and the representation and shifting material and ideological meanings of the city of Compton, California is useful to think through the ways in which the idea of a place can shift in the imaginary, without any actual change to in its physical landscape.²⁵ Sides' work presents a model study to think through and engage my own positioning about the power of the material and imaginary production of the space of Detroit. In both Sides work as well as my own, there is the underlying understanding that the actual physical and material locations of examination do not shift or change—but it is the meaning attached to the location that shifts. As the next chapter shows, the ideological understanding then has the power to shift the land use policies of the material landscape. At work already then in the Detroit Housing Commission's policy on public housing is an understanding of the space of "black bottom" as already identified with blackness. The

²⁴ There is reference to various "black bottom" communities in cities and states across the country that referred to the locations that were primarily black, for example Philadelphia's historic black community was also referred to as "black bottom." Add more secondary sources here as well as follow up on Philadelphia <http://blackbottom.org/communities/blackbottom/history/>

²⁵ Sides, Josh. 2004. "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," *American Quarterly*, 56(3): 583-605

work of both Josh Sides and Kay Anderson²⁶ are useful here to think about how the racialization of space—the ways in which a space becomes linked ideologically to a racial or ethnic group as the racialization of space emerges from the spatialization of race due to institutional or systemic racism.

From the onset of public housing development, the relationship between building on vacant land, versus building on already occupied land was a clear difference in how housing was carried out very differently for African Americans and whites. The relationship between ideas of land and land use planning are very important to think about in terms of spatialization of race and the racialization of space. The Brewster and Parkside projects set the precedent in Detroit. Ground was broken in 1935 and the first residents moved into both in 1938. As stated above the two projects were built with the intent that the Brewster Projects would house African Americans and the Parkside Projects would house whites.

The Brewster Projects were built on a land site that was in the middle of the central city; in the “Black Bottom” neighborhood, an area most considered “the East-side ghetto” and were built on previously occupied land that was subsequently cleared as a program of slum clearance. This fact alone meant that in order for the new housing to be built, first old housing and businesses had to be cleared and removed. Although research to verify this is scant, later projects of slum clearance definitely verify that the displacement that occurs as a result of slum clearance often exceeds the

²⁶ Anderson, Kay J. 1987. “The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Dec, 1987), 580-598.

available number of units being built in its place.²⁷ This makes sense due to the reality that one of the main goals of public housing was to combat overcrowding and the doubling up of families in existing housing. However, the fact that public housing sites for African Americans were almost always planned for already occupied land means that the advent of new housing exacerbated an already overcrowded housing market.

This is in direct comparison to the Parkside projects, for white residents, which was built on a vacant land site. This indicates that whites were not displaced or removed from housing in the building of the public housing. In fact this means that whites could move directly from their substandard housing to the new public housing, thereby increasing for the moment the availability of the housing available and open to whites. The precedent of building for blacks as a matter of slum clearance and building for whites on vacant lands began in the 1930s and continued up through the mid-1950s in Detroit. In so doing it can also be seen as a way in which white space or land is seen as unmarked, open, and vacant, while black space is seen as marked and contained.

Figure 1 (below) “Map of Detroit” was prepared by the Detroit Housing Commission for its Sixth Annual Report in 1940. The area marked “1” on the map is the Brewster Housing Project and the area marked “2” is the Parkside Housing Project. As can be seen from the map, the Brewster Project is surrounded on three

²⁷ See for example, Robert J. Mowitz and Deil S. Wright’s chapter “The Gratiot Redevelopment Project: Regenerating the Core City” in *Profile of a Metropolis*, 1962, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 11-80 for a glimpse of the massive displacement precipitated by the Gratiot Redevelopment Project in the 1950s.

sides by an area demarcated as “slum” and the Parkside Project, as discussed earlier is surrounded by vacant land areas.

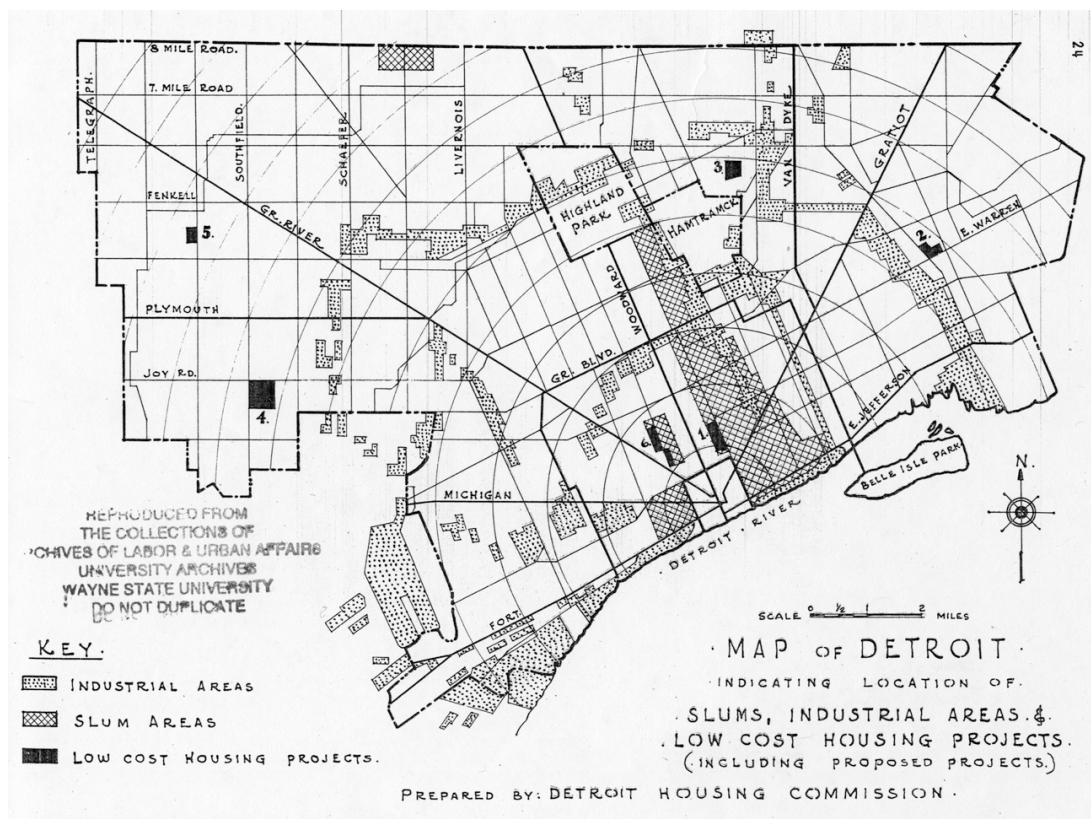


Figure 1. Map of Detroit as prepared for the Detroit Housing Commission’s Sixth Annual Report, 1940

To raze “slum” land in 1935 for the erection of the Brewster Project meant that a fair amount of housing and businesses were demolished in advance of the project. This also meant that in the three years between razing of the land and the beginning of occupancy of the project, there was a net loss in the number of housing units available for African Americans, thereby exacerbating an already overcrowded and saturated citywide housing market. Whereas in the case of Parkside, the development was built on previously vacant land, thereby increasing substantially the number of housing units available to whites upon completion of the property. Additionally, those who

were dislocated/removed from the neighborhood for the Brewster slum clearance were not guaranteed placement in Brewster upon completion. The policy of building on slum cleared versus vacant sites continued on well into the 1950s as indicated by a 1952 letter from George Schermer, Director of the Inter-racial Committee to Mayor Cobo, as part of a discussion on how to move Detroit's public housing program in a different direction,

The original Parkside and all except one of the other developments projected for white occupancy were allocated to vacant sites, thus providing a plan for moving white people from the slums before clearance. The original Brewster and all the other developments projected for Negro occupancy were allocated to slum clearance sites, thus requiring moving Negro people off the sites before clearance, with no plans for interim housing.²⁸

The City's precedent of lack of real relocation options for those impacted by slum clearance first began with its policies of relocation for the Brewster Project. As later relocation projects reveal, often those who were removed due to slum clearance, those whose homes and neighborhoods were considered so blighted that they are demolished, found themselves in equally bad housing situations, repeating the processes of doubling up, of moving into inadequate housing, and continuing to be ill-housed. This idea of hyper-mobility, or presumed move-ability, is an important concept to think through in terms of Part I of the dissertation as Part II of the dissertation looks at and explores ideas of containment and stuckedness—not in particular neighborhoods, but in the City of Detroit as a whole.

²⁸ Letter and attachment to Albert Cobo from George Schermer, March 25, 1952, Mayors Papers 1952, Box 3, Folder, Interracial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. Mayor Cobo was notoriously anti-public housing and his administration oversaw both the massive 120+ acre clearance of the Gratiot Area and a decisive decision to not apply for Federal funds to build new public housing.

While at a legislative and oftentimes historical level the process of “slum clearance” is seen as a primarily bureaucratic process marked by approvals, start dates, and completion times, at the ground level, it is a story of personal displacement.²⁹ Although information on the above mentioned owners who were holdouts in selling their land is limited, it is likely that if the owners of the land were African American they would be unable to buy land in another area regardless of how much the government was offering, particularly when the housing availability rate was so low, due to the racial limitations that limited options for purchase. The reality was, that the government was not offering a whole lot of money for properties condemned for slum clearance. Additionally, the plight of renters is almost completely ignored in the record, despite the fact that the area was densely populated and housed many renters.

One of point of view accounts in the printed record is that of Mrs. Rosella Jackson. An August 29, 1935 story by “The Detroit News” recounts the displacement experience of Mrs. Jackson as, according to the title of the article, “Willing to Give Up Home as a Gesture to First Lady.” Within its text the News tells its readers that Mrs. Jackson was told the day before the article was printed, “that the house in which she lives would be torn down during ceremonies marking the beginning of Detroit’s East Side slum clearance project,” to be presided over by Eleanor Roosevelt. According to the same article, Mrs. Jackson, “complained that she would probably have to move her things into the street, and that she had nowhere to go.” Apparently after she learned

²⁹ Later projects like the 1950s-era Gratiot project has much more documentation regarding displacement and relocation, unfortunately the documentation on the relocation for Brewster is very limited.

that Mrs. Roosevelt would preside over the ceremonies and deliver an address Mrs. Jackson said, “If that’s the case they can move my things right out to the field next door, and I’ll live in a tent, I don’t want Mrs. Roosevelt to get mad at me.” While the article ascribes Mrs. Jackson’s actions as, “no more gracious gesture humble though it may be, was ever accorded to a First Lady of the land,”³⁰ there was much assumed and implied by the author. Clearly Mrs. Jackson was shocked to hear that she would have precisely 11 days to find a place and move before the scheduled demolition day. It also glosses over the reality that during an extreme housing shortage, there is little housing, and likely if Mrs. Jackson is living in a house that, according to the article’s calculations, was built before 1876 and was “a tumbled-down one-story frame structure,” she most likely has few options. And clearly she spoke up and said that she had nowhere to go. However, these are the stories that are glossed over, that are rewoven into the narrative of national good and as a “Gesture to the First Lady.” But what of this lady, Mrs. Jackson, clearly by City and Federal standards a second class citizen, whose own home may be sacrificed purportedly to build homes for others, under the auspices of creation of “housing for all.” The gesture and the narrative of Eleanor Roosevelt can be read as part of the accommodation of Roosevelt as a sympathetic figure of the state—who believes in and supports public housing, yet does so within the accepted practice of separate and unequal.

The Parkside Project, built on previously vacant land did not have as many starts and stops as Brewster as the matter of land acquisition was much easier since the

³⁰ “Willing to Give up Home as Gesture to First Lady,” August 29, 1935, Josephine Gomon Papers, Scrapbooks 1933-37, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

land acquired was under the ownership of one party. Although, there was considerable opposition to its construction by local residents and businesses, and the project itself became a major point of contention in the 1935 Detroit Common Council election, the project was eventually approved. The Parkside project was built on a 31-acre site, in contrast to Brewster's 22-acre site.³¹ The first tenants also moved into the Parkside Project in October 1938. The Parkside and Brewster Homes both had extensions added to the original projects after the passage of the 1937 Housing Act.

On paper the projects could be seen as "equal" in that they were in process at the same time, that they were completed and ready for occupancy for the same time, and were intended to receive equal management and services from the City and Federal governments and in so doing aimed to maintain the racial equilibrium of the racial state. However, before the first residents even moved in there were differences based on their differently built structures. In comparison, Brewster's 701 units were built on a 22-acre site and Parkside's 775 units were built on a 31-acre site. The difference in land size resulted in 32 dwelling units/acre for Brewster and 25 dwelling units/acre for Parkside. Additionally, 384 units, over half of the 701 total units in Brewster were 1 bedrooms, 251 units were 2 bedrooms, 42 were studios, and only 24 were 3 bedrooms. In comparison, 398, over half of Parkside's units were 2 bedrooms, 253 were 1 bedrooms, 48 were studios, and 76 were 3 bedrooms. Because of housing guidelines the differing size of the units meant that families were disproportionately ineligible from the Brewster homes in comparison to Parkside as there were

³¹ Parkside was located on the far Eastside and was bounded by Frankfort Street to the North, Gray Street to the East, Warren Avenue to the South, and Connor Street to the West.

restrictions indicating that children must not share bedrooms with adults. In this establishment of different physical buildings the materiality of difference was inscribed along and within racialized lines.

The screening process for perspective public housing tenants was quite rigorous and is in line with other sorts of social and moral uplift campaigns, reaching far beyond family size. It resulted in nearly every aspect of an applicant's life being examined prior to admittance into public housing and often the social workers and housing commission workers explored issues beyond the scope of financial and housing qualifications, but made attempts to make moral judgments about their tenants. According to the Sixth Annual Housing Commission report, applicants were evaluated and screened on a variety of measures. For example, an applicant's current living conditions were inspected, "to comply with the USHA requirement that all tenants must be taken from substandard living conditions." In addition to a home inspection an applicant's income was checked, credit investigated, and evaluations were made as to, "his relative fitness to adjust himself to decent living environment considered." The applicant check echoes the ideas of "fitness" that Henry Ford's sociology department verified in worker eligibility for the "\$5 day" as I discuss elsewhere.³² Additionally the Housing Commission verified that the applicant lived in Detroit for at least one year and that family income cannot exceed five times the

³² I have in preparation an article entitled, "Manufacturing "White" Men: Ford Motor Company and the Productions of Masculinity, Race, and Citizenship on the Factory Floor" which explores the myth, manufacture, and management of the \$5 Day.

amount of rent for the unit.³³ The rent restriction in particular ensured that the family would always pay at least 20% of their income on rent, which is a large minimum proportion of total income to spend on housing—which added to the continual vulnerability of families in public housing.

The resident inspection administered by the Housing Commission also served to maintain a heteronormative patriarchal ideal of family, seen in the ways in which the authorities constructed notions of family applicant groups that were considered “fit” to be “allowed” into public housing. Priority for housing from its inception included families comprised of mother, father, and children, and families headed by widowed mothers and children. The “in tact” family was privileged unless of course the family was fatherless due to the absence of male through death, wherein social security and other forms of welfare were extended, primarily as a way to retain the virtue and respectability of the widowed white woman, “who could potentially sink into poverty and sin if she failed to receive money that enabled her to stay at home with her children.”³⁴ Any other absence of a state legalized male head of household—through divorce, desertion, or out-of-wedlock family compositions were not considered. Single men, male-headed households, and placements for divorced women with children were unaccounted for and seen *outside* of the state and local policy formation of “family.”

³³ Detroit Housing Commission Sixth Annual Report, December 1940, George Edwards Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, Housing 1938-1940, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, p. 53.

³⁴ Shockley, Megan Taylor. 2004. “We, Too, Are Americans”: African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 4.

The City's limited definition of family and its judgment of who "deserved" public housing reached far beyond the Housing Commission's initial inception. In 1953 Marie Montgomery, a mother of a soldier wrote to the mayor inquiring about her status on the waiting list for public housing. Ms. Montgomery wrote to the Mayor at his home address after she, "wrote to you quite a number of time at City Hall with no reply," telling the Mayor that her son stationed at Fort Knox has to come home for one week due to her illness and to help with his 3 younger sisters. "I am living in a attic on the 3rd floor with very poor convnience (sic) ... Could you please help me to get a project? We don't have proper living conditions, an (sic) I would like to get a place so I could try to get well."³⁵

After receiving the letter, it was passed onto the Housing Commission for reply. The reply which Mrs. Montgomery received, rather than an answer of help or assistance, was a condemnation for the City's perceived lack of stability of her family. The reply partially included the following:

We have checked with Tenant Selection Office and find that you have been registered there for a considerable length of time. We were informed that the four children you speak about were all by different fathers and, further, that you were married to none of them at the time of the birth of these children. This does not indicate to this office that you are a stable family unit and a reasonable rent risk. In view of the thousands of applications we have on file and, in view of the facts that we have mentioned, we cannot offer you hope of any placement at this time. We sincerely regret that the Commission is not in the position to house all of the thousands of families who make application.³⁶

³⁵ Letter to Mayor Cobo from Marie Montgomery, September 12, 1953, Mayors Papers 1953, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission 2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

³⁶ Letter Marie Montgomery from Mark Herley, Assistant Director DHC, September 29, 1953, Mayors Papers 1953, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission 2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

The limited way in which the city defines a “stable family unit” is striking in its lack of compassion and ironic in that Mrs. Montgomery was writing in order to create some stability for her family and for her to get well. The Housing Commission’s linkage of family instability leads itself to rental risk seems to perpetuate a cycle of instability. Instead of accepting culpability for its own inability to provide housing for its residents, the city exercises and makes judgments of moral authority, in fact blaming this woman for her inability to secure housing, rather than acknowledging that there is not adequate housing. In response to a citizen’s request for aid, and a desire to seek a better home and a chance to regain health for herself and her family, she is met with condemnation and a dead end.

Beyond varied unit size, the differing locations in vacant versus crowded formerly slum areas impacted more than simply acreage. Vacant land with access to recreational space indicated that the surrounding area while not the most expensive area, was an area that had room for growth and for businesses and other residents to improve upon. Building in an already declared “slum” area meant that the area surrounding the new development was still overcrowded, old and dilapidated, and suffered from poor provision of public services like sewer lines, water, trash collection, poor or overcrowded schools, and lack of fire protections. The irony of the design and placement of the projects is clear, particularly when social reformers of this time were completely focused on ideas of environment and community as ways to create good citizens and the idea of the healthful living environment.

Although the irony of their placement would not be recognized for a few years, the immediate official reaction to the public housing was seen as massive, standardized improvements for those living in them. In its Sixth Annual Report, the Detroit Housing Commission reflected:

It has been most gratifying to the Detroit Housing Commission to witness the growing community spirit and civic usefulness of its first two housing projects.... A complete metamorphosis of family living among the tenants of these projects has taken place. Many of the homes from which they moved were miserable, damp, unhealthful quarters in which disease, ill-health and demoralization were bred, and where the conduct of decent American standards of living were impossible. One can only guess at the regeneration made possible by admission to homes flooded with light and sunshine, abundant recreation facilities, and the possibility of community living-until he has actually witnessed the change himself.³⁷

The Housing Commission aimed to illuminate the change that *it* was able to implement in the living conditions of its residents. The sentiment, by default, demarcates those who live in overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions as unable to meet decent standards of living. While this was often ascribed to a personal lack by institutions and reformers nationwide, the Housing Commission, in this statement, indicated that failure to meet decent standards of living was primarily due to the housing quality available. However, this meant that those who are unable to reside in public housing were still experiencing these conditions, and were frequently blamed for their conditions and their standards of living as a personalized rather than systemic or institutionalized creation.

³⁷ Detroit Housing Commission Sixth Annual Report, December 1940, George Edwards Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, Housing 1938-1940, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, p. 53.

By 1945 the Detroit Housing Commission reflected back on six years of operation at the Parkside and Brewster Projects and talked about reinvigorating the housing program after the stall of the war years. In particular they address the “effects of a healthful living environment” on residents and on the community and state:

The effect of the projects on the surrounding community is often questioned. Any attempt to measure the influence of Brewster on the surrounding district is not valid in view of its relatively small area midst square miles of slums. The most the community of Brewster Homes can do is to raise and maintain improved standards of living and property care. However, this example for emulation is not enough to make but slight improvement on the encircling community. Basic living factors of dilapidation and slums which surround Brewster constitute odds against the spread of good influences which are quite insurmountable. The fact remains that to change the environment of the surrounding community, the entire section must be completely torn down and redeveloped.³⁸

In retrospect the Housing Commission itself saw the limitations of its own development based on the structural and institutional racism already in place by locating Brewster in a pre-existing “slum” area. Given the context of this retrospective discussion of the project in 1945, it is also important to note that by this time the City of Detroit was already undertaking plans and preparations to announce its 1946 Detroit Plan which outlined its intent to raze the general area south of the Brewster Projects and perhaps was attempting to solidify and articulate a public opinion that the whole area was indeed a slum.

Building and Demolition Plans for the Future: Real Property Surveys and Master Plans

³⁸ Detroit Housing Commission Tenth Annual Report, May 1945, Mayoral Papers 1944, Box 6, Folder, Housing Commission, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, p. 15.

The passage of the Wagner-Steagall Federal Housing Act of 1937, which, through its mandate for improved quality, not quantity, of housing through its subsidy for public housing construction and slum clearance was the impetus for Detroit's 1938 Real Property Survey. Building on the Brewster and Parkside Housing Projects as examples of both "effective" public housing and slum clearance, the City of Detroit commissioned a Real Property Survey in 1938. Headed by the Detroit Housing Commission, "to obtain accurate information on housing conditions, such as occupancy, type of structure, rentals, sanitary facilities and extent and location of substandard housing,"³⁹ the Real Property Survey of 1938 was undertaken to define and delineate specific areas for slum clearance under the federal program for federal housing.

The Detroit Housing Commission, along with six other City departments—Departments of Building and Safety Engineering, Police, Fire, Public Welfare, Health, Public Works—all agreed and recommended the clearance of the lower east side slum area. The reasons for these agencies to identify this site included that it was:

A breeding spot for crime...areas in which contagious disease flourish...unhealthfulness and insanitation...cost of government services rendered is out of proportion to the taxes levied—areas that are maintained at the expense of the taxpayers as a whole...areas in which private industry has done next to nothing for over a twenty year period.⁴⁰

³⁹ Letter and Attachments to Edward D. Connor from George Schermer (of the Housing Commission), December 17, 1943, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁴⁰ Text for Gratiot Redevelopment-DMI Application for Final Advance from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Under the Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment Program, December 1950, Box 12, Folder 37, Carl Almlblad Papers, WPR, WSU.

This data, pulled initially from the commission's Fifth Annual Report, never once indicated that it was in fact Detroit policies that created the conditions, which it then used as rationale for slum clearance. It blamed the residents and the outcomes of years of forced ghettoization, for the lived reality of space. It is in the coded language of "contagious disease," unhealthfulness, overuse of government resources, and crime that racial logics and common sense are formed.⁴¹ This section does not make direct reference to the racial make up of the neighborhood, but these are the same types of coded language that is applied to black neighborhoods throughout the 1930s and well into the 1960s, culminating in the depictions in the 1970s to the 1990s of the "welfare queen" and attendant "hood" neighborhood. So although the idea of race neutrality fuels the policy formation, the policies are anything but race neutral. The 1938 survey while in this section was "race neutral" in that it does not mention race, was anything but race neutral in the coded language that it deploys. The reality of the situation is that the link between race and space had already been formed in this space as anyone familiar with the City would know all too well that this area was the African American ghetto. The spatial imaginary of the space was already conceptualized physically and symbolically created as a space of undesirability. This same 1938 survey also indicated "an acute housing shortage for low income families" and "a particularly difficult problem in housing for the Negro families of the city."⁴² According to the survey, "Of the 29,667 dwelling units occupied by Negroes, 14,897 were substandard,

⁴¹ See for example Natalia Molina's *Fit to Be Citizens?* (2006) and Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides* (2001) for discussions of the linkages between public health policy formation and racial formation.

⁴² Text for Gratiot Redevelopment-DMI Application for Final Advance from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Under the Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment Program, December 1950, Box 12, Folder 37, Carl Almlblad Papers, WPR, WSU.

in need of major repairs or unfit for use, lacking sanitary facilities or running water, or having an occupancy of over 1.5 persons per room.”⁴³ Meaning that in 1938, 50% of the dwelling units for African Americans were substandard, one out of every 2 units. Yet, far more people and families than that were impacted due to extreme overcrowding. At the same time that the extreme overcrowding was acknowledged, slum clearance was proposed. What then was to happen of the low-income people and families who are displaced and removed by renewal? This is the question that will continue to echo throughout this examination of Detroit’s urban renewal program that I address more in depth in the next chapter.

The slum clearance plan as set forth on the heels of the Real Property Survey was stymied when federal fund allocations were reduced and the proposed clearance of the Lower Eastside was put on hold due primarily to the tie up of money, building material, and labor due to World War II. However, the findings of the Real Property Survey were the basis for the Master Plan, which was commissioned in 1941 and recommissioned in 1944 as the Detroit Housing Commission prepared its first studies for development of the Lower Eastside slum area. The Detroit Plan released November 18, 1946 proposed clearance of the Lower Eastside Gratiot Area and public acquisition of the land in order to do so. The Detroit Plan outlined the ways in which the City planned its future growth and intended to stem the movement of its middle class residents to the suburbs through policies of slum clearance and development of

⁴³ Letter and Attachments to Edward D. Connor from George Schermer (of the Housing Commission), December 17, 1943, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

the Eastside slum area into middle class housing. The Detroit Plan and its redevelopment and slum clearance proposals are the focus of the next chapter.

Need for Housing: Public, Private, Any

The housing crunch that began in the 1910s continued throughout the era of the Great Depression and the War Years. By 1917 the Detroit Urban League had identified a housing crisis, particularly for the African American community. The DUL's 1917 document, "Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan" states that, "Since the 1910 census it [the colored population] has increased from less than 6000 to considerably more than 20,000 at the present time. The greater part of this increase has occurred (sic) during the past twelve months."⁴⁴ The population explosion created by the increasing production of industries for World War I and the increasing productivity of the automobile industry resulted in increasing migration to Detroit by African Americans from the south, northeast, and Midwest. The Detroit Urban League in 1917 illuminated the overcrowding of the area that would eventually be partially razed in the 1930s and again in the 1950s, as discussed further in the next chapter. The DUL's researchers reveal:

The Negro is limited in the scope from which he can rent, almost entirely to the district already mentioned. Yet in the past six years, hardly one new home has been built on that district, and during the same period the Negro population has increased from 6000 to over 20,000.

⁴⁴ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Briefly, the situation can be summed as follows: 15,000 Negroes with daily additions are trying to squeeze into a district that normally houses about 3,000.

The houses inhabited by the colored people in this district vary, but on the whole they are the least desirable in the city. Houses of 4 or 5 rooms crowded with population pay the highest possible rents. Of 100 houses, on which we were able to obtain figures in the past two weeks, about 50 consisted of 4 or 5 rooms with no bath and frequently no inside toilet, and in no case was less than \$20 per month rent charged. In most instances, \$30 to \$35 was rent per month for rooms.⁴⁵

The overcrowding situation in Detroit was not unique as other urban centers of the time experienced similar overcrowding, particularly in the years from 1910-1950. Between 1900 and 1950 Detroit's population exploded.⁴⁶ In 1900 Detroit's population was 285,704 people. The 1910 population was 465,766 and more than doubled by 1920 to 993,678. The population grew by over 50% by 1930 to 1,568,662, still grew slightly during the depression to 1,623,452 and after WWII to an all time high of 1,849,568 by 1950. As the World War II economy boomed, more migrants arrived in Detroit and exacerbated an already tight housing market, partially an outcome of the dearth of construction since the Depression for economic reasons and during the War due to the rationing and scarcity of building materials and workers. The entire population was impacted by the need for housing, but the African American community, due to restrictions in their ability to move to other Detroit neighborhoods and suburbs were particularly impacted given the small size of the Black Bottom area.

⁴⁵ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁴⁶ Population statistics from Thomas, June Manning, 1997, p. 14.

While most immigrants and migrants faced difficulty in finding housing, according to a 1943 letter from the Housing Commission,

The in-migrant Negro families have faced their greatest problem in finding a dwelling. Our records at the War Housing Center and Tenant Selection Office bear out this fact. Through the Homes Conversion program, registration of private homes and rooms, new building and public housing it has been possible to find accommodations for most of the applicants of the white race. However, the Homes Use program has not provided dwellings or rooms for Negro occupancy, and there is a great backlog of applications from Negroes that cannot be processed. The only sources of Negro housing at the present time are the public war housing projects and a few cases of government conversion.

The housing problem of the Negro goes back to the twenties and thirties when the Negro population increased, and restrictive covenants prevented their residential expansion. As a result, they have been forced to buy or rent in the older dilapidated and crowded areas of the city.⁴⁷

The housing shortage was acute and not only in terms of quantity, but in terms of housing conditions. The 1930s and 1940s were crucial moments in terms of the housing crisis since the doubling up and tripling up of families into units designed for only one family continued to rapidly deteriorate the existing housing stock as well as put increased pressure on city services since the infrastructure was not increasing to support the increased number of residents and usage. Instead of opening up vacant areas for war workers and private citizens, the city refused to make those changes and exacerbated worsening conditions in an already overworked and overcrowded community.

As shown above, there was a large lack of availability for housing of African Americans in the private housing market. Many believed that public and government

⁴⁷ Letter and Attachments to Edward D. Connor from George Schermer (of the Housing Commission), December 17, 1943, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

supported housing was one of the only ways to open up more housing in order to alleviate the shortage. But even the existing public housing, while meeting some of the demand, barely addressed the extreme overcrowding. According to the Real Property Survey of 1938, there were 69,854 sub-standard dwelling units in the city. While some of those occupying sub-standard units were eligible for public housing, as of 1941 “only 4661 units have been provided in public housing projects already constructed or now building, and even the projects presently contemplated will not add more than 2656 units to this total.”⁴⁸ In terms of the public housing market, the wait and need for housing was unparalleled as is shown by a letter from the Detroit Housing Commission in 1943,

The records of our Tenant Selection Office indicate the critical need of housing. At the end of 1941 there was a waiting list of over 5,000 registrations, which are still uncleared because of lack of dwelling facilities. At the end of November 1943, there were 11,326 uncleared registrations for low-rent and war housing.

The registrations from Negro families have been steadily increasing during the past six months, both as to percent of total and as to number. During the year of 1942 Negro registrations were 11% of the total registrations. In June of this year they constituted 30% and in November they had increased proportionately to practically 50%. In the light of the tremendous housing pressure it is reasonable to assume that this trend will continue, and that by the end of the year Negro registrations for dwellings per month will be equal in number to white.

For the last two months alone there were 2,471 registrations from Negro families, surpassing the figure for the whole year of 1942. This year there will be about 8,300 Negro registrations.

⁴⁸ “An Invitation to Investigate Detroit as an Unequalled Opportunity for Investment in Housing,” an open letter from Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, July 1941, Mayors Papers 1940, Box 12, Folder Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

The Public housing program has been the only source of standard sanitary low-rent housing for Negroes. Under this program there are now 1,441 public dwelling units already occupied, and an additional 636 dwellings under construction. 736 dwelling units will be provided in a post-war permanent project now under loan contract.⁴⁹

It is clear that there was a crisis not only of private but public housing, particularly for African Americans. As the statistics and analysis indicate public housing was at times the only option for moving many African Americans into sanitary and standard housing that met basic requirements of adequate shelter. This provides an interesting understanding of the ideas that Ruth Wilson Gilmore sets forth about the “reformist fix”⁵⁰ of the state in that on one hand the state is legislating a mode for access to better housing, while on the other it is replicating the racial hierarchy at play in both “public housing” but more tellingly in society at large.

The situation with public housing reached crisis proportions by the end of the WWII and continued to increase due to the influx of returning GIs. When the city began the major slum clearance program in 1949 centered in the primarily African American Lower Eastside neighborhood, as outlined by the Detroit Plan, it increasingly exacerbated the situation. For example when following up in 1953 on a family on the waiting list for housing, the Housing Commission revealed the following,

In checking with our Tenant Selection Office, we find that the Thompson family registered on March 23, 1948. The family at that time consisted of man, wife and three children. Mr. Thompson is a Non-Veteran. The family is still registered and now has increased in size to

⁴⁹ Letter and Attachments to Edward D. Connor from George Schermer (of the Housing Commission), December 17, 1943, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁵⁰ Gilmore, 21.

man, wife and seven children. . . Federal regulations require that we give preference to families of Servicemen and Veterans. After taking care of Veterans' needs, we then process the applications of Non-Veterans, based on housing need, in order of their registration. Our records show that at the present time we have 6173 Negro registrations on file. 893 of these are Veteran applications, completely processed, waiting for placement. We also have 588 Non-Veteran applications, already processed for placement, whose registration date back prior to 1948. It can be seen, therefore, that to place the Thompson family at the present time would be violating the equities of the 893 Veteran families and 588 Non-Veteran families who registered prior to 1948.⁵¹

The reality that a family has been on the waiting list for five and half years and has no hope of being placed anytime soon since there are over 1400 families ahead of them proved that the crisis of housing reached epic proportions. One additional factor that further exacerbated the crisis for African American veterans housing in particular were the overlapping events of slum clearance of the most densely populated African American neighborhood, the demolition and deprogramming of Temporary War Housing, and the impacted private market, which are discussed further in the next chapter.

Public Housing: “Brick City” and Heaven?

Initially, the 1930s-era segregated housing policy of the Housing Commission received little criticism, as the need for housing was so acute that the promise of new housing was widely welcomed by most of the public. Although the initial projects were faced with little resistance over the racial occupancy pattern and policy, the issue of race would continually be a point of contention for the public and for the Housing

⁵¹ Letter to Detroit Common Council from Harry Durbin, August 21, 1953, Mayors Papers 1953, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission 2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Commission itself for decades to come. As George Schermer, formerly of the Housing Commission and the most notable Director of the Mayor's Interracial Committee, would reflect in 1950,

The history of public housing in Detroit is characterized by a continuous public struggle over the question of the pattern of racial occupancy. In the early stages the Housing Commission fell into what was at that time a deceptively easy policy of racial segregation. At the start even Negro organizations did not oppose the policy. It was not until the heavy migrations of Negroes into Detroit during the war period were under way that there developed the realization that the official sanction of racial segregation by the city government was a major factor standing in the way of expanding housing facilities for the Negro community. Efforts by Negro, religious, labor and civic organizations to change the city policy were countered by vigorous organized pressure from white neighborhood improvement organizations which proved in the end to be the stronger force.⁵²

Initially many Detroiters were excited to be placed in the new public housing units.

This primarily is due to the fact that because of the racially restricted private market that existed, most African Americans were only able to rent or buy property in the Eastside area that was targeted for clearance in the 1938 Real Property Survey.

Within the workings of private and public forces, the few spaces available existed within the state-enforced racially segregated public housing. While on one hand, it was sound housing that met an extreme need for housing, on the other it reinforced the landscape of segregation in its creation and implementation as separate and unequal.

Deanna Neely is a third generation Detroitier who was born in Paradise Valley in 1942. Ms. Neely's memories of the neighborhood recalled the joys of growing up on Hasting Street and stated that, "The experience of growing up in the Brewster

⁵² Enclosure of a letter to Albert Cobo from George Schermer, May 1, 1950, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights, Box 42, Folder 19, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Projects, the Brewster Douglas, and on Hastings Street is one that's invaluable."⁵³ She remembers vividly her time at the Brewster Projects with her grandparents and family. Her grandparents moved to Brewster in the 1930s and she and her mother and her siblings moved in 1955 to the Brewster-Douglass extension. Her earliest memories of the Brewster are full of love and memories of her grandparents and of the warmth and joy of the home.

My grandparents moved into the Brewster Projects and this is what I remember so vividly, that we never lived in places that were adequately heated, space was always a problem, not having water available all the time. But going to my grandparents home there was always nice heat, it was furnished well, and always hot water. We could take a bath everyday so that made a difference to me and they showed us so much love, especially during the holiday seasons. It was always so pleasant and warm.... It was a joy to go to my grandmother's house.⁵⁴

The warmth and amenities of hot water and heat are in direct contrast to some of Ms. Neely's own memories about the various houses she lived in. During the course of our conversation she remembered at least four different apartments and houses that she lived in from the time she was born in 1942 until the time she and her family moved to Brewster-Douglass in 1955. All of her former residences were right off of Hastings Street, speaking both to the fluctuation and moveability of families and people in the Lower Eastside and also the containment of the black community to the Paradise Valley/Black Bottom neighborhoods.⁵⁵ While her memories about the

⁵³ Interview Deanna Neely June 19, 2009.

⁵⁴ Interview Deanna Neely June 19, 2009.

⁵⁵ Ms. Neely does not recall why her family moved from place to place, but most likely economics had a factor in that she also recalls her mother working multiple jobs and trying really hard to provide for the family. At least two of the moves were in with grandmothers, once to Brewster and once to her paternal grandmothers home. The fluctuation and movement that Ms. Neely describes parallels the notion of moveability and "domestic networks" that Carol Stack's (1997) *All Our Kin* highlights.

neighborhood are replete with the stories of community and speak of family, friendship, and to the closeness of neighbors, friends and families, the structural inadequacies are a reality. Her first home, on Alexandrine Street off of Hastings Street seemed typical of those present in the historical record, with lots and houses being subdivided, “there was people who lived in the front of the house, we lived in the back of the house and then there was a little shack behind the back of the house and Miss Willa Mae lived in that house.” And as her earliest memories begin in the mid 1940s, Ms. Neely’s remembrances of housing in the neighborhood parallels the reality of the peak of the housing crisis in the City, “Some people lived in the storefront, some people lived so the houses were sectioned off to be multiple dwellings, some people just had a room.”⁵⁶ She recalls vividly memories about living with her paternal Grandmother,⁵⁷ and the house itself.

I remember the house and what makes me remember the house is that I hated the toilet because the seat was so cold it was like a freezer in there and I remember looking out the window and we could see the steeple to this church on Canfield Street and the church is still there today.

Ms. Neely recalls both the warmness of family, of family ritual and celebration, while at the same time recalling the physical surroundings, which were inadequately heated and insulated. This is in direct comparison to her discussion of her maternal Grandparents housing in the Brewster Projects above. After her family moved into Brewster in 1955 she remembers:

Although Stack’s study took place in the 1960s, some parallels may be drawn to Ms. Neely’s discussion of the late 1940s and 1950s.

⁵⁶ Interview Deanna Neely June 19, 2009.

⁵⁷ Ms. Neely’s maternal grandparents lived in the Brewster Projects.

To us that was the best housing because you could not find buildings that were built of the material and the structure, they were sturdy buildings. And so it was a Godsend, it was like moving into a mansion and even some of my friends that lived in the South used to say that when they used to go visit their friends that lived in the projects it was like going to heaven.

Ms. Neely's remembrances echo those in D. Bradford Hunt's 2009 manuscript on Chicago Public Housing. Hunt opens his work with the recollection of a resident who moved into a new project on Chicago's South Side. The resident recalls, "The building was new, and they had a beautiful playground for the children. You couldn't ask for a better location, and the place was just marvelous. I had three bedrooms, a nice storage area, and a linen closet.... And I had wonderful neighbors.... I thought I was moving to paradise."⁵⁸ Hunt's work, while useful to think about the federal implementation of public housing more broadly, and aims to push Arnold Hirsch's oft-utilized thesis of the "second ghetto," attempts to make an argument that the failure of public housing is a failure of class based policies (over-concentration of the extremely poor, rather than working poor) and that the failure of public housing is a systemic, but not necessarily racial/racist failure.⁵⁹ This however, is not Ms. Neely's interpretation or feeling about public housing. Although she agreed and articulated that to some, "it was like heaven," she also aptly brings up the issue and feeling of containment that she and others in her community felt about the projects.

I was raised most of my life in the Brewster Projects. Many people call it "brick city" because it was not intended for blacks to venture outside of brick city and advance themselves. But because we had parents and family members that encouraged us that education was so important and

⁵⁸ Hunt, D. Bradford. 2009. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Hunt, pp. 11-12.

that was our ticket out of brick city. This is how you find so many successful black people in the City and all over the United States that came out of the City of Detroit from either black bottom or around Hasting Street, because education was prominent. And even though people want to say it was not, it was. It was important to our ancestors that we better ourselves. So you had many doctors, nurses, attorneys, and architects. You have many professional ball players that came out of City of Detroit, but you also have a lot of educated people in other professions that came out of City of Detroit and that general area.⁶⁰

In this, Ms. Neely deftly raises the issues and contradictions of housing, of the racist state, and of community. On the one hand, she remembers with fondness and pride of community and growing up on Hastings Street, of the move into Brewster—the first time she lived in a “sturdy home.” Yet within these moments of fond memories, the scripts of containment, of continual displacement, and of inequality reverberate. As Ms. Neely states here and throughout the conversation we had, the importance of education and bettering oneself to be able to move beyond the status quo confines of “brick city.” So while Hunt limits his discussion to “public housing as paradise,” Ms. Neely is able to see it simultaneously as a sturdy home with heat and hot running water, and also as a means and mode of containment, the very same simultaneous logics of repression and reform that Gilmore links to the maintenance of the hegemony of the racial state.⁶¹

Sojourner Truth: Dishonoring Her Memory in the 1941-42 Housing Controversy

In 1941 the federal government, through the Division of Defense Housing Coordination, approved funding to build housing for the war industry workers filling

⁶⁰ Interview Deanna Neely.

⁶¹ Gilmore, 21.

the new war industrial jobs. In Detroit alone, the federal government recommended construction of “1,000 government-financed and 10,000 privately built family units for the industrial workers expected to fill 84,000 new jobs.”⁶² Of these 1,000 units, 200 were earmarked for black occupancy.

The Detroit site ultimately selected for this project were

Twenty acres bound by Nevada, Fenelon, Stockton, and Eureka in a sparsely settled, mixed neighborhood. Far from the downtown black district, the site lay in northcentral Detroit, adjacent to racially balanced Atkinson School and within walking distance of mostly black Pershing High School and Conant Gardens, a sizable middle-class black community. Several Polish and a handful of black families lived in the area around the site.⁶³

The area was selected since it was not changing the racial character of this neighborhood as it was already mixed and transitioning to black. However, the selection of the site brought great opposition from both black and white homeowners in the area. While the racial opposition is much publicized and written about, the black opposition is less frequently discussed and is important in understanding the middle-class anxieties associated both with public housing and with race, primarily to understand how racialization and the collapse of class within a racial community is problematic. All too frequently race in Detroit has been separated from class and as this work continually shows racialization is intimately combined with projects of class, gender, and citizenship. As Capeci writes,

Some blacks considered the issue one of class. Black homeowners had lived in Conant Gardens for over a decade before organizing an improvement association late in the 1930s. Most of them feared the

⁶² Capeci, Dominic, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*, 1984, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 75.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 76.

project would resemble barracks, house lower-class single migrants, bring in beer gardens and pool halls, and terminate Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans and family dwellings. Smarting because the government (which had urged them to invest life savings in home ownership) threatened to depreciate their property, they followed Rev. White's advice to indicate their concerns to the housing commissioners, appealed to Democratic Congressman Rudolph G. Tenerowicz, and sought alliance with white middle-class residents.⁶⁴

The fears of depreciated value came to fruition when the FHA did stop insuring loans in the neighborhood once the project construction began.⁶⁵ When the FHA stopped insuring loans it meant that in order to purchase property a buyer must buy outright or the borrower must use non-government-backed or private mortgages. At the same time, it meant that the property would depreciate since the FHA, through its disavowal to insure mortgage loans indicated that it was an investment risk. Thereby showing and confirming that the government was largely responsible for both driving down property values and hugely culpable in making the link and relationship between race and housing.

In September 1941 the Detroit Housing Commission unanimously approved the recommendation of fellow commissioner Reverend Horace White to name the project in honor of Sojourner Truth. Truth was a prominent ex-slave, abolitionist, and feminist of national prominence who lived for thirty years in Battle Creek, Michigan until her death in 1883. Despite the racial-identity politics rhetoric, the naming of the project after Truth, was intended to be a public acknowledgement that the project would house black war workers. Regardless, there was much back and forth on the

⁶⁴ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 80.

racial occupancy of the tenants of the housing project, and even placement of the housing project itself as public opposition and pressure mounted.

Late 1941 and early 1942 were marked by threats of violence if occupancy was to take place and the waffling of the federal government in the face of threats. As counter strategy, “local black leaders organized counter protests...choosing “We Shall Not Be Moved” as their battle cry.”⁶⁶ In January, in response to the mounting tensions surrounding Sojourner Truth homes, the federal government suggested construction of the project at a new site (despite the fact that construction was already on track to complete in February), however their recommended site was no longer available and “no other suitable location was available in city limits.”⁶⁷ Finally on February 2nd, the local and federal governments officially reassigned black defense workers to Sojourner Truth.

Controversy continued during the month of February as tenants were given a moving date of February 28th and continued to put down their rental deposits. On February 27th hundreds of picketers amassed and managed to block deliveries of coal in advance of the move-ins the next day. By the morning of February 28th two to three hundred picketers had gather to block the move and a hundred Conant Gardens homeowners formed a counter-protest, with one black homeowner sitting on his front porch with a shotgun on his knees.⁶⁸ As the tenants began to attempt their move-in, accompanied by local authorities, the crowds grew and became increasingly tense. By

⁶⁶ Ibid, 83.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 96.

11am Housing Commission Director, Charles Edgecomb, called off the move as he believed occupancy was impossible, “without bloodshed and possible death.”⁶⁹

As the move-in was called off leaders and supporters of the black community were angered by the government bending to mob rule. As the day wore on the crowds grew, and by noon there were an estimated 1,000 people. By nightfall the police increased pressure and day long targeting of blacks in particular and eventually cleared the area by about midnight. After the weekend of rioting the round up of injury and arrests were as follows:

Of nearly 220 persons apprehended, half were released immediately; of the 109 rioters held for trial, mostly for carrying concealed weapons or disturbing the peace, only three were white. In all, police jailed fewer than ten whites. Approximately forty persons, including six policemen, required hospitalization. Among the most seriously wounded, black bystander Edward Perrin, Dolores Hommer, and Patrolman Edward Kross sustained head lacerations requiring stitches, and one mounted policeman had a broken arm. An unknown number of individuals incurred injuries without seeking medical assistance.⁷⁰

As Dominic Capeci points out in his thorough study of race relations in wartime Detroit, the unacknowledged casualties of the riot are the families who were left homeless.⁷¹ The families who intended to take occupancy in the Sojourner Truth Homes were now left without a home, despite the fact that they had been approved by tenant selection and paid their rent. George Schermer, then the Housing Commission’s director of tenant selection, worked for nearly two days straight trying to place the families who were unable to take occupancy. Due to the extreme housing shortage the families prior homes had already been rented, there was little available

⁶⁹ Ibid, 97.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 99.

⁷¹ Ibid, 99.

open housing, so Schermer found room for some in Brewster and in an unfinished housing project, as worked with pastors to shelter others in black churches, despite the pastors resentment at the city in its inability to shelter and house black war workers.⁷²

Through protest at the local, state, and federal levels the Sojourner Truth Homes were finally able to be occupied on April 29, 1942—a full two months past the original move-in date. The protests surrounding the new move-in date were kept strictly in check and the first families moved into their new apartments with little threat of physical violence. However, the psychic violence to both the residents and the community at large had already been leveled and many scholars see the smoldering beginnings of the 1943 Detroit Race Riot in the events surrounding the occupancy of Sojourner Truth.⁷³

Racial Formation and Formalization of Housing Policy

In April 1943, in the wake of the Sojourner Truth Housing controversy, a few months before the 1943 Race Riot, the Detroit Housing Commission adopted its first statement of record as to policy of racial occupancy. This statement declared that, the Housing Commission would “not change the racial pattern of a neighborhood.” In a 1952 memo from George Schermer, Director of the Inter-racial Committee to Harry Durbin, Director of the Housing Commission, the former called into question the Housing Commission’s continued policy of segregation when, according to Schermer,

⁷² Ibid, 99.

⁷³ For an in depth discussion of race relations and the Sojourner Truth Housing situation, please see Dominic Capeci’s book, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*.

The [April 1943] statement implied that this policy pertained to war housing only, and was for the duration of the war only. Thereafter, the only public war and veterans housing for Negroes was located within or contiguous to areas of Negro settlement. A pattern of total segregation was maintained.⁷⁴

In 1943, before the official policy on not changing the racial character was adopted by the Housing Commission, the Commission considered and held a hearing on bi-racial occupancy. Immediately after the statement was read into the minutes for permanent record at the April 29, 1943 meeting,

The Detroit Housing Commission will, in no way, change the racial characteristics of any neighborhood in Detroit through occupancy standards of housing projects under their jurisdiction. The importance of housing war workers recognized by the Detroit Housing Commission, and every effort will be made to accomplish this task. It is the opinion of the Commission that any attempt to change the racial pattern of any area in Detroit will result in violent opposition to the housing program, and could very easily reach a point where the war production efforts of this entire community could be endangered. The Commission, therefore, reaffirms its policy of respecting neighborhood racial characteristics and will not sanction any deviations from this position that could lead to internal conflict during this war period.⁷⁵

According to the minutes Commissioner White moved that the resolution not be concurred in, but the motion died as the motion was not seconded. Various members of the community, UAW representatives, the Secretary of the Detroit Council of Churches, and representatives of the Post War Placement agencies among others urged the Housing Commission to discuss the outcomes of the 24 projects throughout the

⁷⁴ Letter and Memo to Harry J. Durbin from George Schermer, March 25, 1952, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights, Box 27, Folder 7 Correspondence-Housing, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁷⁵ Jenkins, Bette Smith. 1950. *The Racial Policies of the Detroit Housing Commission and Their Administration*. Detroit: M.A. Thesis Public Administration, Wayne State University, p. 146.

country who were embracing bi-racial housing and to not pass the resolution.⁷⁶ In the end the Detroit Housing Commission hid behind the rhetoric that the Mayor and the Common Council are the ones who have the power to make a decision and the Housing Commission was merely enforcing the decision,

As far as this Housing Commission is concerned the Detroit Common Council is the determining factor in the position. In the final analysis the Common Council and the Mayor is the determining factor. . . . The Housing Commission has authority. But as far as this particular thing is concerned, the whole matter has been referred to the Common Council and the Mayor.⁷⁷

The Housing Commission's policy on separate and segregated housing projects passed in 1943 and became part of the official record. It is considered by many a contributing factor in the overall crisis of race relations in Detroit. The combination of citizen-led violence and protests to the Sojourner Truth Homes and the creation and release of the Housing Commission's policy statement, indeed served to underscore both the private and institutionalized forms of racism at work by both private citizens and public actions.

Emerging after the city's policy on placement of black and white families into public housing was the much less discussed question of placing families that fell outside of 1940s notions of "white" and "black." Although nearly absent from the public records, there were small populations of Detroit residents racially and ethnically marked as Mexican, Arab, Chinese, and Japanese. As may be inferred from the policy discussion below, prior to the discussion and implementation of the formal

⁷⁶ Ibid, 147-52.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 149-50.

racial policy these families were not accepted into housing, further suggesting the clear limitations on a racially separate policy both in terms of housing all Detroit citizens.

The practice of housing Chinese, Japanese and Mexican in-migrant war workers was suggested by Commissioner Horace White at the Commission meeting of May 13, 1943... Reverend White pointed out that members of these groups, all American citizens, had been making application for accommodations in Detroit public housing projects and that he considered it fair and right that they should be admitted... The minutes show that after considerable discussion, Commissioner Kelly moved that question be taken under advisement and that action be deferred to a later meeting. This motion carried but no further reference to it is found in the minutes. However, subsequently a few such applications were certified to projects and Mexican, Chinese and Japanese families have been and are being housed in projects designed for white occupancy.⁷⁸

In so doing, the city began to clearly define their statement and sensibility that “whiteness” can be defined most simply by an idea of “not black.” This is not to say or assume that simple acceptance into “whiteness” leads to social inclusion and citizenship. As scholars of “whiteness”⁷⁹ explore, the definition of “whiteness” in Detroit, like social constructions generally, shift depending on historical context, generational status, and local, national, and global political understandings. As a result of official policy limitations and extensions of whiteness were constructed for other groups. An example below from the late 1940s indicates:

Without Commission action, an incident has occurred which has aroused some comment in a limited area but which has been given little attention beyond that area. Reference is made to the placement of an East Indian naturalized citizen and his wife and children in a housing unit at Smith

⁷⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁷⁹ See for example Hartigan, John. 1999. *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press and Roedgier, David. 1999. *The Wages of Whiteness*. London: Verso.

Homes, a low-income white project of 210 units located at Evergreen and Lyndon Streets in northwest Detroit. The project is in an all-white neighborhood and no Negro children attend the nearby public school. Residents both within the project and from the surrounding area have made verbal protests to the project management but placement was made on the basis that the family in question, though dark skinned, is a Caucasian family and therefore there has been no violation of Commission policy. Since eighteen months have passed since the family initially occupied a public housing unit it now seems unlikely that action will be taken to effect removal or transfer.⁸⁰

This example indicates Detroit's and the U.S.'s complicated understanding of race, and often a way in which "black" and "white" are changeable and mutable depending on the circumstances. For the residents of Herman Gardens, whiteness was more than "Caucasian" and has to do with much more than skin color and ideas of citizenship.

The notion of citizenship reveals itself again in the sense of foreign and "American." In particular it reveals itself through notions such that Asian Americans may be passive neighbors and "model minorities," but are considered as foreign and always outside of Americanness. This can be clearly understood in the way in which the Housing Commission responded to a small case of World War II Japanese American former internees. In a 1948 letter from George Isabell and Thomas Orum, respectively the President and Secretary of the Detroit Negro Housing Committee to Mayor VanAntwerp there is clear anger expressed by the city's policy,

During your campaign for Mayor...you definitely and positively stated that you did not believe in and would not have 2nd class citizens.... Negroes were reduced to 2nd class citizens under the former administration and Geo. Edwards as Housing Director for the city of Detroit. Now under your administration it seems that Negroes are going to be reduced as 3rd class citizens. According to the Detroit Free Press, April 24, 1948 Mr. Inglis said that Japanese families would not be

⁸⁰ Ibid, 31.

evicted, “because of their inability to overcome racial restrictions in finding a place to live”. Negroes in Detroit voted for you against Jeffries. They do not understand why your Housing Commission is so protective of a nation with which we just ended a war, and not interested in patriotic Americans who helped to save this country. They do not understand how Japanese and other non-Whites are admitted to the White projects and all Negroes are rejected.⁸¹

This is not to try and create, deconstruct, or find roots of “the black/Asian conflict” that many scholars posit and engage in the 1990s.⁸² It is to show that the limitations of racial construction and formation wherein the decisions of the city, create and foster tension among citizens and the ways in which coalition and conflicts have a long legacy in urban landscapes. There is not an inherent “conflict” but the ways in which both the media and the structural forces produced conflict through a construction of varied access to resources is apparent in this historical situation as well. Partially, the problematics of the color-line have long been the complexities of maintaining and defining the line given the limits of a reality wherein “black” and “white” are not finite, but mutable ideologies.

Mayor VanAntwerp’s response to the Detroit Negro Housing Committee, posits the relocated Japanese American families as loyal citizens who were dutifully placed in Detroit due to “national security,” but can offer no hope for change in the massive lack of housing for African Americans.

⁸¹ Letter to Eugene VanAntwerp from George Isabell and Thomas Orum, April 29, 1948, Mayors Papers 1948, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁸² See for example Abelmann, Nancy and John Lie. 1995. *Blue Dreams*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Kim, Claire Jean. 2000. *Bitter Fruit*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; and Cho, Michael. 1996. *Another America*, videorecording. San Francisco: Center for Asian American Media.

I regret that you find fault with the Detroit Housing Commission's effort to avoid hardship on the part of the Japanese American families living at Herman Gardens. Racial restrictions against these families in Detroit represent a very serious problem as they do against members of the Negro race. The Housing Commission had no choice in the matter of providing housing for these Japanese families. They are loyal native-born American citizens who were forced to come here from California during the war for reasons of national security...At no time have I overlooked the fact that thousands of Negro families in Detroit are undergoing ruthless exploitation by unscrupulous landlords of substandard properties.⁸³

In the Mayor's text and the concerns of the Detroit Negro Housing Committee, what is unsaid and perhaps should be emphasized is the repeated displacement that both groups of citizens feels, and that regardless of current housing location, the displacement from the ideal and hope of housing for all. In the case of the Japanese Americans, their dislocation from land via the process of internment and their eventual relocation to Detroit, far from their California homes is a story of repeated displacement. And the migration story of African Americans from South to North is another story of displacement. However, the Mayor's placement of blame on the "Negro" housing situation in Detroit upon landlords and properties is unacceptable. When in actuality, both the Detroit Negro Housing Committee and the Mayor know that the Housing Commission's policies and procedures was a primary site of both exploitation and cause for continued residence in substandard properties.

After the formalization of the 1943 housing policy there was vocal demand for increased housing for working people of all races, but particularly to address the extreme overcrowding of the Eastside ghetto where the majority of African Americans

⁸³ Letter to George Isabell from Eugene, May 3, 1948, Mayors Papers 1948, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission 1, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

lived. In an April 1944 Housing Commission hearing where citizens and representatives of the UAW, Detroit Council of Churches, and the Citizens Committee all made pleas and arguments for Negro housing, but their demands went unheeded. Housing Commission chairperson, Mrs. Kelly reportedly told all those who appeared, “Any group of citizens has the right to appeal to the city and Federal governments for a change in the present pattern of housing in Detroit, but the commission can do no more than enunciate the policy of the Mayor in regard to Negro housing.”⁸⁴

Accordingly, this statement by Mrs. Kelly,

Came just after the Rev. Horace White, member of the Housing Commission, had made a motion that that body should say to the Mayor and to the Federal government that as a result of an analysis of the problem by them, they deemed the present plan of housing for Negroes as inadequate and unwise.⁸⁵

However, the Commission was unwilling to proceed under the suggestion of Commissioner White and all except White supported the position that they would maintain and enforce the Mayor’s policy on housing.

In doing so, the Detroit Housing Commission maintained that they simply carried out the will of the City and Federal governments. They maintained that they would not make recommendations in accordance with City and Federal policies, and simply worked to maintain the policies set forth by the Mayor, the state and the federal government. Despite the reality that their role was to enunciate and create policy,

⁸⁴ Wartman, Charles. “City Housing Commission Upholds Mayor’s Jim Crow Policy at Hearing.” *Michigan Chronicle*, April 8, 1944, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁸⁵ Wartman, Charles. “City Housing Commission Upholds Mayor’s Jim Crow Policy at Hearing.” *Michigan Chronicle*, April 8, 1944, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 41, Folder Committee on Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

many of the Commissioners and the majority of the body believed their role to maintain and enforce the status quo set by the administration. The administration on the other hand publicly indicated that the Commission would form policy. In this sense then, outwardly both parties were able to maintain that they were not responsible, yet they were responsible for maintaining a racially segregated institutional structure, which was in fact a decision to maintain and propel the racial state.

As would be clearly articulated as the public housing program grew in the post-war years, the City's policies would become even more regulated and segregated than those in the private housing market. As George Schermer wrote to Mayor Cobo in 1950:

The racial patterns of Detroit are not consistent or altogether fixed. Large areas are restricted against Negroes. Although these restrictions are no longer enforceable in the courts, they continue to be maintained through restrictive marketing and lending practices, voluntary agreements, social pressure and in some areas by threat of violence...

The city of Detroit in its public housing program has maintained a tighter policy of racial segregation than has the private market. Its officially stated policy has been "not to change the racial character of a neighborhood." In practice it has gone farther, having maintained strict racial segregation in all projects including those bordering on racially mixed areas.

There is a tendency in Detroit to think of meeting the housing problems of Negroes through public housing. Public housing and housing for Negroes have become synonymous in many minds. Actually the great preponderance of the Negro population has always found housing for itself wherever it was available on the private market.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Enclosure of a letter to Albert Cobo from George Schermer, May 1, 1950, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights, Box 42, Folder 19, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

This commentary from Schermer was particularly important in that the purported case of maintaining a status quo, actually resulted in a much more restrictive policy and enforcement than what is actually in practice. This type of logic and reasoning is how and why there is a sense that “the colorline” is something that is fixed and immobile, when in fact racial borders and boundaries, much like state and national borders are fluid and porous. When the Commission looked at a map and decided its policy, these ideas were partially at work.

This precedent came from the City’s policy to not change the racial character of a neighborhood through public housing. By the time Mayor Albert Cobo took office in 1950, his administration advocated the end of all public housing construction on vacant land, regardless of racial occupancy, and even the precedence of building public housing on slum cleared land was ended. The continued housing crisis, particularly for poor people of color in Detroit would only be exacerbated by the slum clearance programs of 1950s and 1960s, as is discussed further in the next chapter.

Desegregating Public Housing, the Letter of the Law Versus the Practice of the Law

On June 5, 1950 the NAACP filed a suit in the Federal District Court against the City of Detroit and Federal Housing Agencies challenging the official policy of racial segregation in public housing. In a memo dated June 21, 1950 from George Schermer to Mayor Albert Cobo, Schermer on behalf of the Interracial Committee, in light of the pending suit by the NAACP against the Housing Commission, City of

Detroit and the Public Housing Program, in regards to the practice of racial segregation of public housing projects, Schermer suggested:

The Interracial Committee has for a number of years taken the position that the policy of the Housing Commission was wrong and has many times requested that the Commission should change its policy. The Committee has been aware that some serious problems in community relationship would arise if and when the Housing Commission did change its policy, and we have often felt that the best solution would lie in court action...

From one point of view it would be advantageous for the city to decide at this time to drop its policy of segregation completely, thus avoiding the necessity of defending the practice of segregation and in effect saying to the people of Detroit and to the nation at large that the City of Detroit take a positive, progressive, wholesome approach to race relations and intends to do the proper thing in accordance with the general trend in the nationl [sic].⁸⁷

In 1952 as the City continued to build public housing, and while the lawsuit was still pending, there was great debate over whether the newest Edward J. Jeffries Housing project would be designated for white, black, or mixed occupancy. The location of the projects in a neighborhood that was white and black occupied called for a mixed housing project. According to the Detroit News, “the project...will eventually provide housing for 2,168 families. The [housing] commission reports that only 372 white families are on the eligible list for low-rent housing. There are 4,288 Negro families on the list of eligible applicants.”⁸⁸ In terms of the length of the waiting list it also made sense that the project be designated for mixed occupancy. In the face of the

⁸⁷ Memo to Albert Cobo from George Schermer, June 21, 1950, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights, Box 42, Folder 19, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁸⁸ Hushen, Wallace. “Problem of Racial Division at New Jeffries Project Confronts City’s Housing Officials,” *The Detroit News*, September 7, 1952, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 69, Folder Clippings, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

lawsuit and the reality of the need for housing the housing commission released new motions on its prior policy of occupancy.

On April 10, 1952 the Detroit Housing Commission adopted two motions pertaining to racial occupancy. The first was a motion to rescind the policy statement of April 1943, committing the Housing Commission ‘not to change the racial pattern of any neighborhood.’ The second motion provides for a new policy statement as follows: ‘In the selection and removal of tenants of housing projects, the Commission will be guided by the best interests of all the people of the City for the purpose of protecting their rights and interests and the promotion of harmony amongst them, all in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the United State and of the State of Michigan.’ The real significance of the policy statement is not yet apparent. The Detroit News in reporting the action implied that the policy would be applied first to the Jeffries area ‘where the racial pattern of the neighborhood is reported to be changing.’ ‘Thus,’ said the News, ‘the Jeffries project may be the first interracial public housing in Detroit.’ The Michigan Chronicle hailed the action as ‘the end of segregation in public housing.’ The Pittsburgh Courier was more cynical, headlining the move ‘DHC Stands Pat on Segregation—Jim Crow Projects Upheld.’ Referring to the action as ‘one of the most extravagant cases of double talk in a long time’ the Courier reported Mr. Herley as saying that it meant no change in policy at all.⁸⁹

On June 22, 1954 the final decision was handed down that the Housing Commission’s refusal to lease certain units of public housing to blacks and their perpetuation and maintenance of a strict policy of racial segregation was in direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, particularly the Fourteenth Amendment. According to the judgment,

The Court concludes that in public housing the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate housing facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, the Court holds that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the

⁸⁹ Memo to Members, Mayor’s Interracial Committee from George Schermer re: Public Housing and Racial Occupancy Policy, April 21, 1952, Mayors Papers 1952, Box 3, Folder Interracial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.⁹⁰

While this was the law, and the legal ramifications of the court, the implementation of both a policy statement and a court order was differently enacted in the day-to-day lived reality. This was clear in the reality that fully seven years after the Housing Commission's policy statement and the court decision, the desegregation of public housing was still not a reality. In a letter written to Mayor Miriani dated October 28, 1959, the Detroit Chapter of the Howard Alumni Association called for the resignation of Harry Durbin as the Director of the Detroit Housing Commission. They wrote, "to express its deep concern about the general housing situation in Detroit and specifically about the placement practices of the Detroit Housing Commission."⁹¹ The housing commission was still at this point maintaining a system whereby tenants could choose which project they wanted, in order to maintain a de facto policy of segregation.

As this chapter looked at the beginnings of government intervention in public housing, the 1949 Taft-Wagner-Ellender Housing Act closed out the "beginning" of public housing and ushered in the policies and precedents that are often associated with the mega-block, fortress-like projects of the 1950s and 1960s. In Detroit in particular, the 1949 legislation had the ability to change and impact the City by building from the laws and policies of the 1930s and early 40s. What began with the earlier policies continued even more aggressively in Detroit's aggressive slum

⁹⁰ Letter and attachment publicly issued by Arthur Johnson of the NAACP, June 24, 1954, Citizens Housing and Planning Council, Box 71, Folder Race Relations, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁹¹ Letter to Honorable Louis C. Miriani from Andrew Foster, October 28, 1959, Mayors Papers 1959, Box 3, Folder, Housing Commission, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

clearance program and its decision by the early 1950s to not build any new public housing. Primarily, it was the 1949 Housing Act's provision for slum clearance that had the broadest impact not just in Detroit, but for cities across the nation. While the bill was positioned as a housing bill,

The urban redevelopment provision had the greatest immediate effect, whereas the public housing thrust of the legislation lagged... The 1949 urban redevelopment legislation authorized 810,000 new public housing units over the next 6 years, but by 1960, only 320,000 had actually been built. In reality considerably more housing was demolished under the redevelopment provisions of the 1949 law than was built under the public housing provisions.⁹²

With the passage of this act, the slum clearance program in Detroit and in cities across the country sped up incrementally while the public housing program slowed to a virtual halt. The impacts of this particular bill and the relocation and slum clearance will be explored more completely in the next chapter as Detroit's Gratiot Project became "the nation's pioneer effort in urban redevelopment under the Housing Act of 1949."⁹³ Even as public housing from the beginning embodied the contradictions of "brick city" and "heaven" to residents up through the 1950s, by the end of the 1950s the intent of the projects were clear as they began to be under and defunded. It was intended that those who remained in the projects were to be bound by the walls and confined within the limits of brick city.

As the next chapter shows, the passage of the Housing Act of 1949 cemented the fate of those in public housing and in neighborhoods that would soon be cleared

⁹² Mohl, Raymond. 1993 "Shifting Patterns of American Urban Policy since 1900" in *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Arnold Hirsch and Raymond Mohl. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp 1-45. P. 15

⁹³ "An Evaluation of the Urban Renewal Program in Detroit," 22 February 1962, City Plan Commission Papers, Detroit Manuscript Collection, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library.

under the auspices of “slum clearance.” Importantly though, it was the Housing Acts of 1934 and 1937 that initiated the public housing program both nationally and for the City of Detroit. It was through the City’s enactment of those national pieces of legislation that their first official policy on race and public housing emerged, institutionalizing and enacting a policy of separate and unequal both in terms of unit size and location. However, as the testimony from the archives and oral history reveals, for many people of color public housing provided access to clean, modern, and sound housing, something that was not readily available in the private housing market. However, this does not mean that it was without contradiction and without critique from its residents and constructors—the crisis itself lay in the containment philosophy of public housing generally and its creation and maintenance of publicly enforced racial borders.

Chapter Two: eRazing Race: Slum Clearance and the Mapping of Displacement

Our city has successfully completed the first of many projects which will ultimately eliminate existing slums and blighted areas. This achievement is the first great milestone in our full commitment to the renewal and revitalization of Detroit.

The Gratiot Redevelopment Project means more to Detroit than the demolition of a slum section and the erection of new buildings. The total achievement cannot be measured solely in quantitative terms by the hours of labor, the tons of brick and mortar, the sums of money. Urban redevelopment is, rather, successful to the degree that it meets the needs of our people. We shall always be far more concerned with the human spirit of the city than new buildings or tax revenue.

*-Jerome P. Cavanaugh, Mayor of Detroit
Gratiot Redevelopment Project Final Report
June 30, 1964*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 1949 Housing Act was a pivotal moment not for its new policies, but for cementing, and increasing funding, to already existing policies of slum clearance and mortgages for private homes and businesses. The quote above begins the open letter “To the Citizens of Detroit” that introduces the Gratiot Redevelopment Project U.R. Mich 1-1 Final Report. Detroit’s Gratiot Redevelopment Project was the nation’s pioneer effort in urban redevelopment under the provision for slum clearance under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949.¹ While discussions of its architectural achievement and the elimination of “existing slums and blighted areas” were touted as prime examples of slum clearance and urban development locally and nationally, this project represents locally and nationally the way in which the promise of “homes for all,” while variously accessible for some is completely razed by a bulldozer for others. In this chapter I revisit and echo

¹ “An Evaluation of the Urban Renewal Program in Detroit,” 22 February 1962, City Plan Commission Papers, Detroit Manuscript Collection, Burton Historical Library, Detroit Public Library.

arguments made in the previous chapter to draw parallels to the way in which this location, sited for redevelopment was intentionally and purposefully created as a race-based “slum” through both institutional practices—lending, restrictive covenants, failure to provide basic city services, unenforced codes for landlords to maintain property. These institutional practices worked in connection with de facto segregation practices such as violently enforcing the racial and class borders of “white” and “middle class” neighborhoods through personal and property violence or vocal opposition.² Together, the institutional and de facto practices produced the neighborhood as always ready for attack whether ideological or material, and a target for “blight” removal and clearance. I bring the aforementioned arguments together and use the intersections of Titles I, II, and III of the Housing Act of 1949 to show how the interlocking forces of private and public policies and practices attempt to control the movements, containment, and ultimately demolition of racial and to an extent, classed space. This is to say that these explicitly racist practices over time created a space that was by all accounts falling apart, in great disrepair, and extremely overcrowded due to a set of structural forces, dispelling the repeated belief that slums are slums because of personal irresponsibility, laziness, and immorality. These conditions were primarily created due to landlords who refused to make improvements, a racist city housing system that intensified overcrowded conditions, and lack of basic city services such as garbage removal. However, oftentimes

² See for example historian Kevin Boyle’s 2004, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*, Dancy, John C. 1966. *Sand Against the Wind: The Memoirs of John C. Dancy*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press and Levine, David Allen. 1976. *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit 1915-1926*. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut.

residents were blamed for the condition of the neighborhood, and the condition of the neighborhood frequently became synonymous with the people who lived in the neighborhood. Therefore, the conditions produced by racism in the end became the rationale to target this space for redevelopment, clearance, and removal. And I look to the imminent slum clearance of Detroit neighborhoods, much like neighborhoods across the country, as a moment in the long and continued history of displacement for poor, working class, and people of color, echoing the containment of poor and people of color through the institutions of segregation, public housing, and incarceration. In so doing, the narrative of continued displacement is mapped onto and within the landscape itself and as such the materiality of the landscape, even after its attempted disappearance holds the vestiges of racially biased spatial practices. And it is in the celebratory message that opens the chapter from Mayor Cavanagh that the attempted permanent displacement of the Black Bottom community and their non-priority as citizens is revealed. When Cavanagh states, “Urban redevelopment is, rather, successful to the degree that it meets the needs of our people. We shall always be far more concerned with the human spirit of the city than new buildings or tax revenue,” he clearly draws a picture of “our people” and the needs and human spirit he is concerned with. As this chapter will show, the attempted erasure of the Black Bottom community both in the text of the final report that opened this chapter as well as the control and production of the urban material landscape, as an analysis of policy reveals the intent to produce landscapes of difference and exclusion.

The 1949 Housing Act as a whole, and its slum clearance provision in particular mark a pivotal juncture between the historically condoned forms of blatant structural racism and the more contemporary realities of hidden, yet still prevalent institutional racism. The shift between the overt and “hidden” racism can be seen clearly in the seemingly race and class neutral policies and priorities of the Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* and the Federal Housing Act of 1949 in comparison to earlier moments like the FHA Underwriting Manual of 1938, policies on racial covenants, and the willful building of public housing as segregated housing. However, as this chapter and the dissertation as a whole reveals, just because policies and laws indicate neutrality and equality, the day-to-day reality as well as the formal City policy often exposes the not so hidden, yet unacknowledged, racism. It is through the initial “naturalization of difference” that the space emerged as both “black” and “dilapidated.” According to McKittrick, “this naturalization of “difference” is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of transparent space, the idea that space “just is,” and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true.”³ As the previous chapter engaged the ways in which Black Bottom neighborhood clearly was not “just is,” but willfully created and constructed through policies of segregation and containment, this chapter will show the ways in which Detroit carried out the priorities of Title I and to a lesser extent Titles II and III of the 1949 Housing Act with clear intent to create a middle-class urban landscape. This enactment of the legislation clearly marked a

³ McKittrick, xv.

fragmentation between the National rhetoric of democracy and equality and its actual enactment as already bound to willfully created spaces of difference. The shift into “race neutrality” and rhetoric of “clean up” and “betterment” that is marked in this chapter can be seen as completely manifested in the ideologies exposed in Part II. Scaffolding onto McKittrick’s argument about space and race and focusing on the clearance of Detroit’s Black Bottom, I argue that Detroit’s enactment of the Housing Act of 1949 served as a means through which the naturalization of “black” spaces as always already debased and ready either for “clearance” or ultimate neglect was solidified to rationalize its clearance. This “naturalization” then goes beyond the legislated and quantifiable ideas of housing covenants, redlining, and zoning, and underscores the relationship between race-making and place-making in order to reveal the ways in which productions of racial difference structure and shape the urban landscape.

1949 Housing Act: “Every American deserves a Decent Home”

In the years following the end of World War II, pent up demand for housing was palpable in all sectors and cities across the United States. While the Depression and then the war had put a stop to building in the United States, the post-war economy geared up to meet decades old demand. The Federal government on its part passed the 1949 Housing Act. The Housing Act of 1949 has been widely studied by historians, housing experts, urban studies scholars, city planners and others since its passage for its literally groundbreaking impact on the shaping of cities and suburbs across the

country. To many this represented the first instance of direct federal involvement in shaping the landscape of the local municipality. Passed in 1949 in a declaration that “every American deserves a ‘decent home and suitable living environment,’”⁴ that act was comprised of five primary titles; Title I financed slum clearance via redevelopment programs, Title II increased FHA mortgage insurance, Title III committed the government to building public housing, Title IV emphasized research in housing and city planning, and Title V provided aid to Farm Housing.⁵ What the work of this chapter and to a smaller extent, Part II of the dissertation, does is to attempt to understand the ways in which Titles I, II, and III were enacted by the Federal government as legislative ideal, and if enacted as written would have provided the “decent home for every American” that was oft-quoted as the heart of the Housing Act of 1949. The Housing Act of 1949 presents an example of race neutral urban policy,⁶ wherein the idea of race is neutralized in the policy’s call for “every American,” despite the reality that “every American” does not have equal access to the protection and sponsorship of the government. Important however is the race neutral language that appears both in the policy itself and the enactment and reports of the policy. It is through the lack of acknowledgement of differential access that race-based policies created initially cannot be disappeared simply by not mentioning race.

⁴ Housing Act of 1949.

⁵ Wheaton, William L. C. 1949. “The Housing Act of 1949.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 15:3, 36-41 and Lang, Robert E. and Rebecca R. Sohmer. 2000. “Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949: The Past, Present, and Future of Federal Housing and Urban Policy.” *Housing Policy Debate* 11:2, 291-298.

⁶ See for example Saito, Leland. 2009. *The Politics of Exclusion: The Failure of Race-Neutral Policies in Urban America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

While Title II, in its role of increasing funding for FHA backed mortgages to enable more homeownership is often talked about in its ability to make the “American Dream” a possibility, the reality of the enactment of Title I and virtual disregard of Title III ensured again, that “decent homes for every Americans” had limitations based on class, race, and citizenship that extend far into today in terms of housing and generational wealth, not to mention stability versus instability in housing. Title I focused on “attacking” slums and blight of cities. “Slums” and “blight” had been long-identified social ills in the cities of the United States, but again, the dual forces of the Depression and the war had stymied efforts to “eradicate” these areas due to lack of funding and resources. But with the end of the war, this fight could begin. In particular the ideas and notions and goals of a “decent home and suitable living for every American fueled the rhetoric of battling these places and conditions.

By the end of WWII Detroit was not by any means the only city in the United States in a housing crisis in terms of available units and the extreme housing unavailability for people of color. As discussed further in Chapter Four, what is most interesting in terms of the divide between the historical context of the moment and the ideological context of the moment is important to note. In terms of legislative and historical moment, May 1948 marked the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which also represented the companion case *Sipes v. McGhee* that originated in Detroit. The Supreme Court at this moment made the pronouncement that it was illegal to enforce racial covenants, but did not take the extra step to make the covenants themselves illegal. This is an important distinction that all too often is not

made in the discussion of equal access to housing and is an important moment to illuminate the fissure in legislated notions of justice and the ideological reality. Although the court's intent could be interpreted to make housing equally accessible regardless of race, the ideological practices of the time ensured that developers, individuals, and corporations could still segregate housing and be within the letter and limits of the law.

What is evident from the logics of the time period, is the sense that blight and slums grew up out of nowhere, or in the words of a Detroit News story, "Detroit, like Topsy, 'just grewed.'"⁷ This descriptive phrase chosen to describe the growth of Detroit, much like its references to a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's infamous anti-slavery narrative, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is clearly, not from nowhere. Much as Topsy does not know her history or family story, not because of benign circumstances, but because of the reality of the racist and dehumanizing process of family break up created by the institution of slavery, the ramshackle way in which Detroit's slums grew were a direct effect of discriminatory zoning and housing practices, both formal and informal, that created the growth of slums in the first place by restricting locales where people could buy and rent and simultaneously failure of private owners and the public city to maintain decent standards of living for its properties and city services. So, clearly, despite all other indications, the city and the "slum" in Detroit, just like Topsy in Stowe's infamous novel, did not "just grewed," but was planned, zoned, and restricted to grow in very particular ways.

⁷ Hayden, Martin S. "Detroit's Master Plan: A Detroit News Public Service Booklet," July 1947, United Community Services Central Papers, Box 18, Folder, Citizen's Housing and Planning Council Publications 1930-40s, Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Demolishing Communities to “Make Them Better”

An important intervention that must be read within the context of this study, aims to shift notions that urban renewal and slum clearance are projects to make communities better. On the one hand there is always already the assumption that urban communities where primarily people of color live and reside are always ripe and ready for “renewal” despite the reality of communities that exist already. This assumption and presumption of community renewal and redevelopment is not limited to the historical context but can be seen throughout the last half of the twentieth century well into the current day in terms of urban redevelopment and renaissance programs, as will be discussed further in Chapter Four. The modern and current notion of redevelopment and renewal still finds roots in these first programs of the 1930s and 1950s.

There is a fine balance between understanding the Black Bottom community in Detroit as both center of black community, of black businesses, and thriving social connections and romanticizing the reality that many families wanted to get out of the neighborhood since so many were doubled and tripled up in apartments and homes meant to house a fraction of current inhabitants and were made of the oldest housing stock in the City. As Michelle Boyd’s *Jim Crow Nostalgia* (2008) on Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood reveals, the reimagining and nostalgia of and for a segregated past is embraced not only by whites, as shown in Chapter four of this dissertation, but also by black community leaders and preservationists in their “sanitization of brutal life under Jim Crow” to forward a collective black identity as

well as influence redevelopment agendas.⁸ Boyd's work represents an important contribution in the remembering of the *northern* Jim Crow past and the ways in which the current focus on ethnic historic and heritage tourism frequently not only relies upon, but requires an ethnic space of community unmarked and undivided by class, gender, and racial differences. This dissertation reveals not a sanitized memory and specifically shows the productions on Jim Crow housing policies in Detroit. Due to the reality that the available stock of housing was so old and the lack of most landlords to address basic maintenance issues, many of the structures in the area marked for redevelopment were in fact dilapidated, lacked heat—regardless of brutal and snowy winters, tended to only have running water in a face bowl and/or a kitchen sink, as discussed by Deanna Neely in Chapter One. The crucial factor here is that many of the people who were living, working, and owning businesses in the area, were interested in finding adequate shelter under less crowded circumstances but were unable to access and/or locate such housing due to extreme overcrowding as well as racist policies of the time.

Therefore, a program of slum clearance to demolish and clear an entire neighborhood reveals itself as both irresponsible and an act of environmental racism through its creation and its enactment. This is clearly in line with another important intervention this work makes in its attempt to highlight the ways in which race neutrality becomes a central figure in the enactment and production of the Housing Act of 1949 and the attendant Federal and Local policies produced in its spirit and

⁸ Boyd, Michelle. 2008. *Jim Crow Nostalgia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

shadow. Through an understanding that color-blind Federal policies, created and passed in a vacuum of idealized legislative “justice” cannot work in the actuality of a historically and contemporary enactment of structural and institutional racism.

This chapter focuses on slum clearance for the city of Detroit and argues that slum clearance cannot be separated from earlier moments that created a climate whereby large-scale removal is an acceptable form of government policy. Linking Detroit’s interpretation of the 1949 Housing Act and the provision of Title I for its first slum clearance project to its simultaneous disavowal to build public housing under Title II of the Act, provides a clear attempt to unbind the related and simultaneous policy of what was in fact “Negro removal,” pushing many residents into even more tenuous living situations. This chapter relies on archival sources such as the Housing Commission’s long process of enacting and then implementing policies on relocation, slum clearance, and project approval. The narrative of the racial shift in the post-war city is then revealed not as a narrative of white flight, but as the cementing of racial naturalization that enables the movements of the some people and requires the increasing physical isolation for others, as well as the privatization of home ownership, and the increasingly public involvement in both suburban and urban housing, which will be discussed more in depth in Part II of the dissertation. As such, this continues to be a simultaneous narrative of containment and displacement while, increasingly elucidating a policy of wide and large-scale removal.

Mapping the Construction of Difference

Housing conditions around the city as a whole were exacerbated during the Great Depression and continued to decline throughout the 1930-40s. It was during the end of the Depression that the wheels of housing reform shifted into gear with the Wagner-Steagall Federal Housing Act of 1937, which, through its mandate for improved quality, not quantity, of housing through its subsidy for public housing construction and slum clearance became impetus for Detroit's 1938 Real Property Survey. The Real Property Survey of 1938 was undertaken to define and delineate specific areas for slum clearance under the federal program for federal housing. The Detroit Housing Commission, along with six other city departments—Departments of Building and Safety Engineering, Police, Fire, Public Welfare, Health, Public Works—all targeted and recommended the clearance of the lower east side slum area. The reasons for these agencies to identify this site included the oft-cited incidents as

A breeding spot for crime...areas in which contagious disease flourish...unhealthfulness and insanitation...cost of government services rendered is out of proportion to the taxes levied—areas that are maintained at the expense of the taxpayers as a whole...areas in which private industry has done next to nothing for over a twenty year period...likelihood that these areas can be rehabilitated for anything but low rental housing.⁹

The departmental reports, pulled initially from the commission's Fifth Annual Report, never once indicated that it was in fact city and social policy that created the conditions, which it then used as rationale for slum clearance. It blamed the residents and the outcomes of years of forced ghettoization, for the lived reality of space. This

⁹ Text for Gratiot Redevelopment-DMI Application for Final Advance from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Under the Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment Program, December 1950, Box 12, Folder 37, Carl Almlad Papers, WPR, WSU.

same 1938 survey also indicated “an acute housing shortage for low income families” and “a particularly difficult problem in housing for the Negro families of city.”¹⁰ This acknowledgement of difficulty of finding housing occurred at the same time that slum clearance was proposed. What then was to happen of the low income and black families who were displaced and removed by renewal? This is the question that will continue to echo throughout this examination of Detroit’s urban renewal program. This plan as set forth on the heels of the Real Property Survey was stymied when federal fund allocations were reduced and the proposed clearance of the Lower Eastside was put on hold. In 1944 the Detroit Housing Commission prepared its first studies for development of the Lower Gratiot Avenue area that culminated in the Detroit Plan of 1946. It is important to make note that the characterization of the neighborhood as “a slum” is derived not from one single local government agency, but represents the intersections of seven different social agencies. As the work of Natalia Molina and Nayan Shah illuminates, racial common sense about populations and social geography are frequently produced and created by and for social agencies who have the institutional ability therefore to create, define, and maintain the ideological discourse on the racial relationship between contagion, crime, sickness, creating and producing a narrative of racialized space as dirty, diseased and dysfunctional.¹¹

The Detroit Plan, announced in 1946, was intended to be enacted using local funds. Initially this plan called for selling cleared land to Detroit builders to develop

¹⁰ Text for Gratiot Redevelopment-DMI Application for Final Advance from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Under the Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment Program, December 1950, Box 12, Folder 37, Carl Almlad Papers, WPR, WSU.

¹¹ See Molina’s 2006 *Fit to be Citizens?* and Shah’s 2001 *Contagious Divides*.

low and middle-income housing. However, this plan lay dormant primarily due to lack of funding and to the difficulty in obtaining the land from private owners and businesses disinterested in selling to the city. However, after the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, Detroit saw its chance to begin its program of clearance and Detroit's Gratiot Redevelopment project has the unique distinction as the nation's "pioneer" effort in urban redevelopment under the Housing Act of 1949. With the financial backing of the Federal government, the Michigan State Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the city's right to condemn land for resale to private developers, after the landowners contested the use of eminent domain. In March 1950, the Detroit Common Council requested that the Federal government designate Gratiot as an official "Title I" redevelopment project.¹²

In the prior chapter I outline the formation of Black Bottom, the area identified for slum clearance in 1946 part of which would become U.R. Mich 1-1/Gratiot Redevelopment Project after the passage of the 1949 Housing Act, and the Lafayette Development in the 1950s and thereafter. As argued earlier this district specifically reveals the ways in which increasing racial segregation, hostility by whites, and violence to blacks in the interwar years produced the rapid growth of the black bottom neighborhood as well as its extreme overcrowding. The same logics also governed the availability of access to property either through restrictive covenants, restrictive lending, or interpersonal violence. As shown, in Figures 2 and 3, absentee landlords cared little for their renters and unabashedly violated housing codes and kept much of

¹² "Renewal and Revenue: An Evaluation of the Urban Renewal Program in Detroit" compiled by the City of Detroit, 22 February 1962, City Plan Commission Papers, Box 12, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

the housing stock in such disrepair that it indeed was blighted housing that did not meet minimum safety and sanitation standards. However, due to the incredibly tight housing market for blacks and whites during the war years and the even tighter market for blacks in the racially divided housing market—Black Bottom proved for most to be the only option. As the maps prepared by the Detroit Real Property Survey of 1938 Indicate, the area of Black Bottom is identified in the maps (marked roughly by a thick black line in the maps below)¹³ as an old, dilapidated, and falling apart area.



Figure 2. Owner Occupancy Map, Detroit Real Property Survey of 1938

¹³ In the electronic version this area is bounded roughly on the west by the line that runs from the Detroit River north to Highland Park, on the north by W. Grand Boulevard, on the East by Hastings, and the South by Monroe.

In Figure 2 it is evident that the area of Black Bottom is occupied by an overwhelming majority of non-owner occupied renters. Only between 0-19% of the dwellings are occupied by owners per the map, as can be seen from the map of Detroit as a whole the majority of the owner occupied units exist on the outer edges of the City. And, as Figure 3 reveals, the condition in which many of the units existed were in substandard condition in need of major repairs.

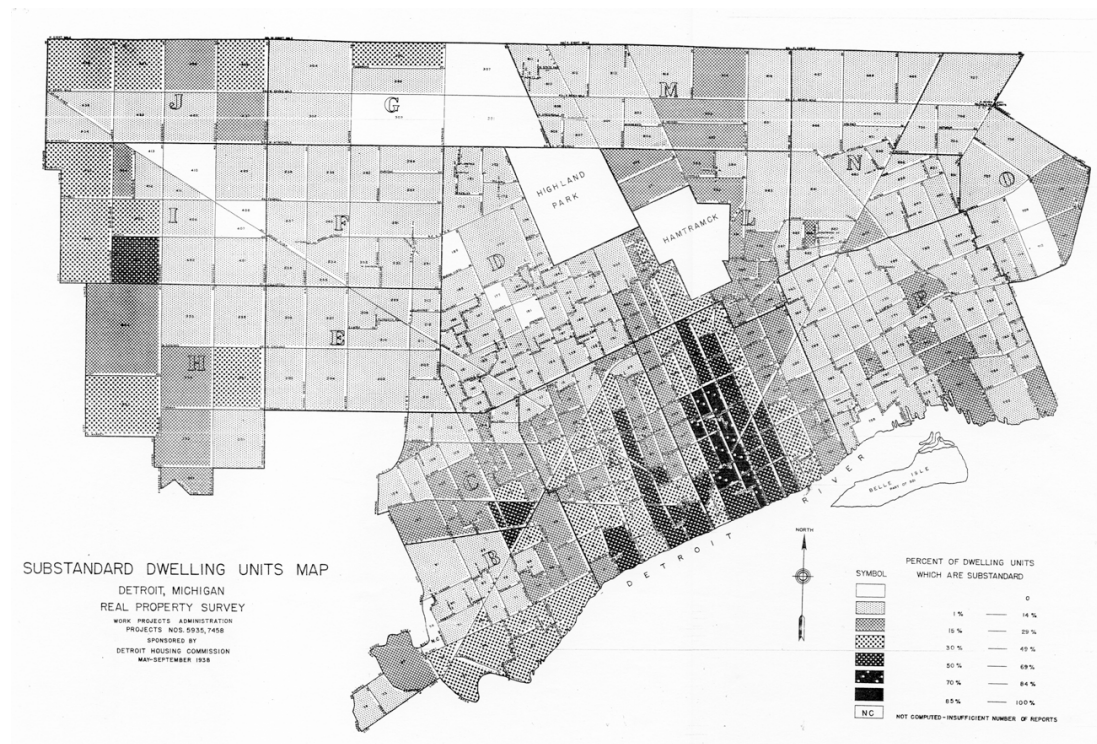


Figure 3. Substandard Dwelling Units, Detroit Real Property Survey of 1938

When looking at Figures 2 and 3 side by side the patterns of non-owner occupancy and substandard units emerges around the central core of the city. And the shaded area to the right of the major perpendicular line (Woodward Avenue) that begins at the Detroit River in Figure 3 is the Black Bottom neighborhood.

The Black Bottom neighborhood was one of the oldest neighborhoods in the official city of Detroit, its name and its oldest structures dating back to the French settlements. In the late 1800s the area's large wooden frame houses were carved into multi-family apartments as housing for primarily German immigrant laborers to live within close proximity to the docks and the river for work and at the time of the 1938 survey many of these homes were still being lived in and occupied.¹⁴ Like countless neighborhoods in cities across the country—Black Bottom was not unusual in its trajectory—serving as first homes to successive groups of European immigrants—following the Park and Burgess cycles of assimilation for European ethnics.¹⁵ And like many other neighborhoods in urban centers this was continually the oldest and cheapest of the housing stock in the city—the price point that best suited many laboring immigrants. However, after European immigration to Detroit was halted as a result of the (anti) Immigration Act of 1924 and the Great Migration of the African American population into urban centers, this neighborhood began to grow as a hub for African American migrations, despite the fact that many migrating to Detroit were not only of laboring class, but also middle and upper class. Implicit in the notion of the Park and Burgess cycles of assimilation is the supposition that movement out of the center city tenement neighborhood is predicted on change in class status, moving into a more stable income with more earning power. In this cycle, change of class status is often associated with generational associations of “Americanness.” As argued later in

¹⁴ See for example “Age of Structure Map” Detroit Real Property Survey of 1938, Detroit Housing Commission.

¹⁵ See for example, Park, Robert Ezra and Ernest W. Burgess. 1969. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. 1921. Reprint. Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Park, Robert E., Ernest W. Burgess, Roderick D. McKenzie. 1925. *The City*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Part II, many blacks were unable to follow white ethnics out of the center city not because of lack of education, income or identification as “American,” but because of the limitations of racism. Yet, the image shown in Figure 4, the map showing the race of household across the City of Detroit is telling when looking at the other maps, Figures 2-3 in conjunction and the interlocking landscape of race, owner occupancy, and substandard structures.

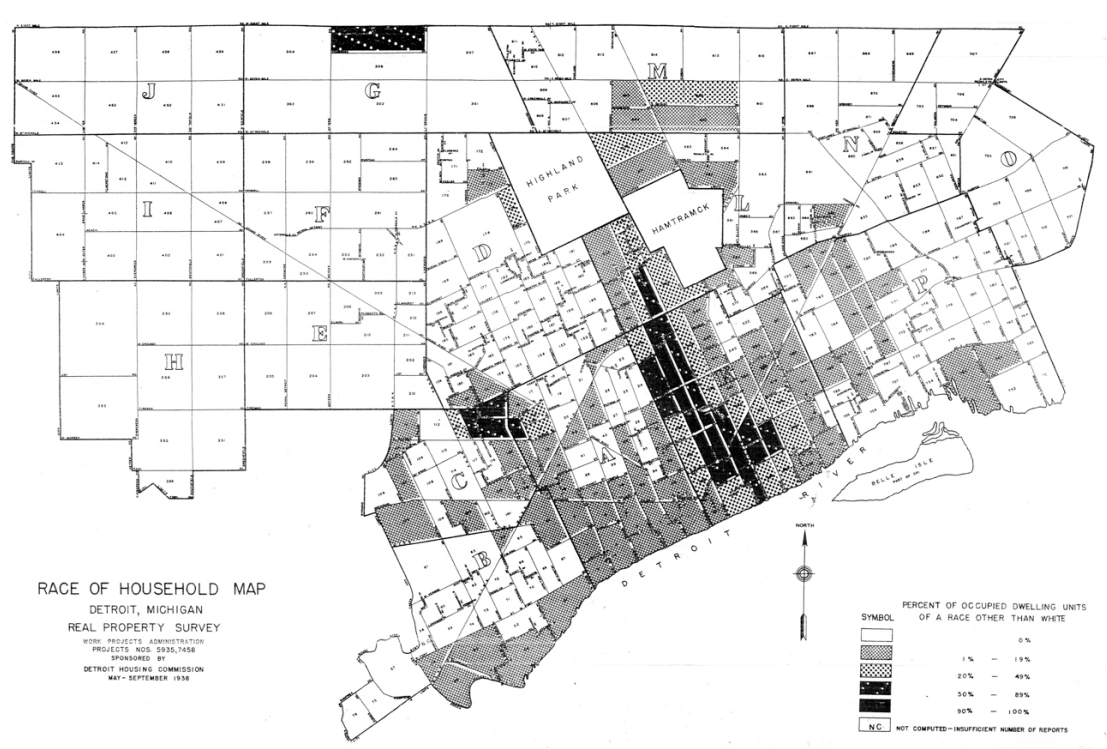


Figure 4. Race of Household, Detroit Real Property Survey, 1938.

It is in the combination of all three of these maps from the 1938 Detroit Real Property Survey that meaning and significance of the racialization and spatialization of the area is clear. Without the “Race of Household Map” the non-owner occupancy and the substandard dwellings maps elucidate the old housing stock, primarily for renters, and

in varying state of disrepair in the central city. However, it is the “Race of Household Map,” Figure 4, that makes visible the spatialization of whiteness and “non-whiteness.”¹⁶ The starkness of the boundaries of segregation are made visible in this map with the zones of “nonwhiteness” and the zones of “racial transition” clearly highlighted. It is then however, through a mapping of the three Figures in combination that the structural work of racism is made visible—through the inability of “nonwhite” people to buy or own the structures in which they live, the inability of “nonwhite” people to live outside of three specific neighborhoods in a city of over 130 square miles, the linkages between the substandard conditions and the areas of residence of “nonwhite” people, and the substandard conditions by which Detroit and absentee landlords are allowed to keep the residences of “nonwhite” people. Although the City of Detroit would never publicly admit to the racial bias it enacted in its housing policies, the documents it produced, mapping the spatialization of race and the racialization of space speak volumes. The spaces outside of the Black Bottom neighborhood where owners occupy their homes, where dwelling units are primarily not substandard, and where the occupants are white elucidate the interlocking forces of

¹⁶ It is an important note that the Detroit Housing Commission after the mid-1930s begins to use “non-white” in many of its documents in lieu of “black” or “negro” in its public documents, although internal documents rely on the usage of “negro” or “black”. This varying language is interesting, particularly in light of a twenty first century reading of the texts, and in a post-Prop 209 climate in California, from where I write this dissertation. Following as well from the attempt to pass Proposition 54, which would ban the collection of data by state government. Proponents backed it under the guise of “colorblindness” while opponents urged its failure due to the inability to track statistics in health, education, and imprisonment—thereby attempting to make invisible the structures and frameworks of structural racism. This shift in language in Detroit in the 1930s is something that needs further research as I wonder about the intent behind the shift and also then the obstruction of data and information.

access to home financing for white to purchase home, access to neighborhoods with better housing stock, and access beyond the borders of the neighborhood.

Demolition, Displacement, and Relocation

When the Detroit Plan was announced in 1946, it outlined the ways the city both anticipated and planned its future growth. It was intended to stem the movement of its middle class residents to the suburbs and outlying areas of the city through policies of slum clearance and development of the current Eastside slum area into middle class housing. Despite the fact that there was widespread “blight” throughout the City, not surprisingly, the first area slated for clearance was the lower east side Black Bottom neighborhood as first identified in the 1938 Survey results. The boundaries of the location were marked by Gratiot Avenue on the north, Hastings Street on the west, Riopelle Street on the east, and Lafayette Avenue to the south. See Figure 5 below for a map of the area of the Gratiot project. This map unfortunately is from a later era, 1959, but the initial plans of the Master Plan can be seen from the ways in which the area has been reshaped by redevelopment. The Gratiot Project, marked as #1 on Figure 5, was an approximately 120 acre area, and although by no means the entirety of the Black Bottom neighborhood it was a large section of primarily residential structures. However, the map itself maps the mapping the future plans for the neighborhood. The dotted line representing the proposed expressway that was eventually built, ran down the central north-south artery of Black Bottom.

The changes in the twenty years from the release of the Detroit plan and the 1959 map show an entirely new community.

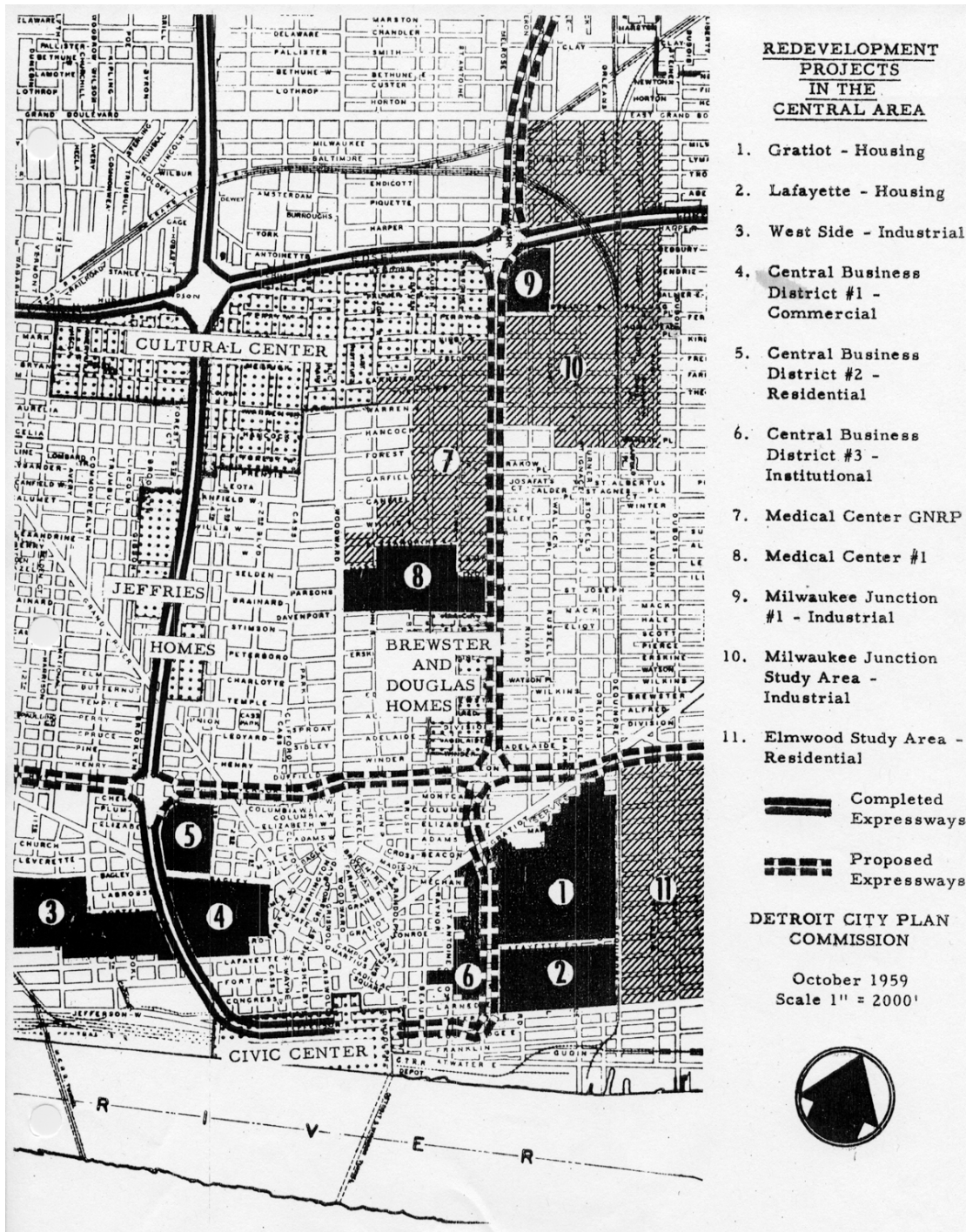


Figure 5. "Redevelopment Projects in Central Area," Detroit City Plan Commission, October 1959

At the time of the Detroit Plan release, the overcrowding already documented, the City's plan predicted that approximately 2000 families and 1000 single people would be displaced by the clearance which the city publicly rationalized through the twin ideas of improved housing and cleaning up the city of its slums. However, as will be shown, improved housing was realized, but not for those displaced by the redevelopment. This "cleaning up" had implications far beyond the notions of clearing city streets.

The large-scale clearance of the Detroit Plan was hampered primarily by the enormity of funds required to implement the project. While this site had long been earmarked for clearance since the Real Property Survey of 1938, the Housing Commission did not have sufficient funds to clear the site until the passage of Title I of the Housing Act of 1949. The 1940 "Sixth Annual Report of the Detroit Housing Commission" describes the Commission's decision to build an extension to the Brewster Public Housing Project (known as the Frederick Douglass Homes) and clearing the small area of land for the Douglass Homes, rather than enact its entire program of clearance as first developed as an outcome of the Real Property Survey of 1938.

With this amount of money [approximately \$12,000,000] it was felt unwise to develop a project in the lower Gratiot Avenue Negro area, as had been previously recommended. A project limited in size to 5 or 6 blocks could hardly be expected to exert much stabilizing influence on the surrounding neighborhood, and would, unless augmented, be too small in size to bring about much civic planning improvement.¹⁷

¹⁷ Sixth Annual Report of the Detroit Housing Commission, 2 December 1940, Box 8, Folder 6, George Edwards Papers, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Here is a case wherein the City's double-talk about housing and "civic improvement" can be seen. As the neighborhood was in desperate need of new, decent, and accessible (i.e. public, even though segregated) housing, five or six blocks of improved housing would in fact be an improvement for the residents, despite the City foreclosing this possibility due to its belief that this improvement, while citizens would benefit, would not "bring much civic planning improvement." Herein is a clear moment that elucidates the conversation as not one about improved housing, but about "cleaning" (and clearing) the City.

In Detroit's application for the Federal Title I funds, the City Plan Commission indicated that the proposed Gratiot Redevelopment Project area is a 119.3 acre area of mixed commercial, industrial, and residential uses, "most of which are in poor physical condition due to age and improper maintenance, are detrimental to human habitation due to construction, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, and are aesthetically repulsive because of association and environment."¹⁸ In so stating, in one swift line the City demarcates the Gratiot area a slum, a space unrecoupable and so vile that it is repulsive and the only answer to this problem is to clear the land. In the exact same document the City tells the Federal government that 7,460 people, comprising 1,953 families and 989 single live in the approximately 1228 dwelling units that constitute this "repulsive" area.¹⁹ In so doing, the slippery line between the

¹⁸ Text for Gratiot Redevelopment-DMI Application for Final Advance from the Housing and Home Finance Agency Under the Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment Program, December 1950, Box 12, Folder 37, Carl Almlad Papers, WPR, WSU.

¹⁹ The number of families and single people is widely published in the data. The number of individual people not as widely publicized and is found in the already cited 1951 application. The number of dwelling units, also less widely publicized, is found in the following source Detroit Urban League's

space marked as detrimental, unsanitary, improper, and repulsive and those who inhabit the space is nearly merged. Although the City's plan does state that the area is primarily inhabited by "non-white" people and "minorities" nowhere does it state how that habitation came to be and the process by which the area came to be "in poor physical condition." Nearly 8,000 people lived lives, worked, went to school, and played in this neighborhood that they called home.

In preparation for this application and to obtain the number of housing units and people, and in order to assess the conditions of the neighborhood, the Detroit Housing Commission planned and undertook a survey of the proposed clearance area in May 1950. The aim of the survey was to canvas every household to find out who lived there, what their income was, the status of their tenancy, size of household, years of residence, and other statistical information. In advance of this interview-based survey of the area, the DHC sent a letter "To Families Living in Gratiot-Orleans Redevelopment Area." While the document itself is undated, the content implies that it was written and sent in April 1950 in advance of the survey. The letter is useful to understand the complete removal the City has from the reality that their plan impacts thousands of *people* and their everyday lives. That regardless of if the area is deemed slum or not, a home is a home, and the City in no way seems to understand this or extend compassion toward its occupants. The letter begins,

This is to tell you that you are living in a part of Detroit which has been chosen for rebuilding in the near future. Plans are now being made to

tear down the buildings in your neighborhood and to put new housing in their place.

Very soon someone from the Detroit Housing Commission will call on you to get facts needed so that the city can move ahead with its slum clearance program.

Before new houses can be built, old ones must be torn down, but before old houses can be torn down the families living in them must find another place to live.²⁰

For most people receiving this letter this is the first communication they received notifying them of the redevelopment. While the Detroit Plan for slum clearance was first announced in 1946, the legal wrangling and lack of financial backing had left the matter up in the air for years. Regardless, the casual way the DHC tells the residents that their homes will be torn down and is primarily focused on the new housing that will be built speaks to the disregard the City has for the impacts not only on the family in terms of having to find a home and move, but also the trauma involved in the idea and process of an entire community being razed to the ground.²¹ This reveals the priorities of the City, as enacted by the DHC. As the agency charged with housing the City's residents, the casual and insensitive way in which the Commission announces the planned demolition of housing for 2000 families and 1000 individuals, not to mention area businesses, shows wanton disregard for the community. The letter goes on to indicate:

²⁰ "Letter to Families Living in Gratiot-Orleans Redevelopment Area" from Harry Durbin, Director-Secretary of the Detroit Housing Commission, No date April/May 1950, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 41, Folder Detroit Housing Commission, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

²¹ See for example Jordan Mechner's 2004 film *Chavez Ravine*, about the impact of complete demolition of a Los Angeles community on its residents.

The city will help as much as possible in finding new places for the families who must move, but it will be easier to do so if the number of children, income and other facts are known ahead of time. For this reason and also so we will know what kind of new housing to plan, our interviewers will ask you certain questions. Whatever you tell them will be used only by the Housing Commission and all Housing Commission records are private records, you may talk freely with our interviewers and we hope you will do so.

Please remember: No dates have been set for the moving of families from your neighborhood. We do not yet know what those dates will be, but you will be told in writing about any plans which are made.²²

In short, the letter was telling the families they are about to be removed, their neighborhood will be demolished, and the City wants to survey and interview them under the auspices of “helping.” This appears to be a prime case of double-talk, from an agency that has rarely had the best interests of the working class residents and residents of color as motivating factors. Additionally, the fact that no dates are shared and the process is hidden, just adds to the disregard that the agency has for the citizens to be removed and cleared from the area.

The survey itself seemed to yield a lot of compiled data²³ about both the area and its residents. Again, however the results need to be taken with some skepticism in that the willingness of the residents to participate in the survey seems to be surprisingly overwhelming and some of the categories of analysis are not clear in terms of intention and even interpretation. Additionally, as can be seen even in survey

²² “Letter to Families Living in Gratiot-Orleans Redevelopment Area” from Harry Durbin, Director-Secretary of the Detroit Housing Commission, No date April/May 1950, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 41, Folder Detroit Housing Commission, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

²³ It would seem fruitful if the original surveys, rather than only the compiled data outcomes, could be located, the understandings, biases, and even perhaps empathy of the interviewers could be seen from the notes on the survey instrument. It is not clear who administered and coded the survey as methodology is missing from the application document. Primarily the 1951 application lists a copy of the survey as well as data that was coded and compiled.

data today, populations that are continually forced to relocate due to job loss and/or unstable housing conditions are consistently undercounted and underreported, as well as the reality that many were unlikely to be entirely forthcoming and/or open to an agent of the government. Finally, according to the survey itself, “it did not appear that plans for redevelopment had progressed far enough to result in any feeling on the part of the residents that clearance was imminent. Many families did not know that the area was under condemnation, or at best had heard only vague rumors.”²⁴

On April 14, 1951 William L. Price, Secretary of the Community Organization Department of the Detroit Urban League composed “A General Outline of Steps Exercised by the Detroit Urban League to Provide Decent Housing for Families in the Detroit Community” which outlined the ways in which the DUL met with local and federal agencies overseeing the redevelopment area in order to meet the needs and address the problems of families facing displacement by urban renewal. Price indicated that, “We repeatedly made the Housing Commission aware of the needs and hardships encountered by the families. In spite of this, the Housing Commission publicly expressed that the program was operating smoothly, hardship was at a minimum, and that families were being satisfactorily relocated.”²⁵ Already there was a division in the interpretation of the housing act and how to uphold the principles for which it was implemented. After requesting a hearing before the common council and the Mayor, the council agreed to hear recommendations the week of May 1, 1951.

²⁴ Goldsmith, Arnold. 1966. “Urban Renewal in Detroit: A Comparison Between Elmwood I and Gratiot.” Masters Thesis, Political Science, Wayne State University p. 56.

²⁵ A General Outline of Steps Exercised by the Detroit Urban League to Provide Decent Housing for Families in the Detroit Community, 24 April 1951, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

The reality of the situation lies in the logic that if people could not find alternate housing *prior* to the planned clearance and relocation, why then would housing be obtainable *following* the announcement that thousands of people would need to find new housing.

Forced Removal with Nowhere to Go

Relocation of those to be impacted by slum clearance was supposed to be addressed as a provision and part of any City's plan to apply for Federal funds to carry out a clearance and redevelopment program. One of the main provisions of Title I of Housing Act of 1949 stated that,

Federal aid could not be secured for slum clearance, "unless there be a feasible method for the temporary relocation of families displaced from the project area, and...there are or are being provided, in the project area or in other areas not generally less desirable in regard to public utilities and public and commercial facilities and at rents or prices within the financial means of the families displaced from the project area, decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings equal in number to the number of and available to such displaced families and reasonably accessible to their place of employment."²⁶

In this way then the Federal government purportedly secured that those most impacted by the slum clearance provision would be ensured and guaranteed access to safe and decent housing. As will be seen below however, the separation between the federal intent and the local application was willfully disregarded at the city level and to some extent the Federal agency funded the Detroit program, despite reservations.

²⁶ Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commissioners, October-November 1949, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

In order to receive federal funding under Title I of the 1949 Housing Act, the Detroit Housing Commission had to outline the Commission's plan for relocation. And in its February 1951 application to apply for Title I funds from the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA), the City of Detroit attempted to make the argument that the nearly 2000 families and 1000 individuals in the redevelopment area would be relocated to available public housing if they qualified, and if not would be able to either purchase a home or find a rental unit in the private market. However, all of these proved to be inaccurate in terms of actual availability of housing.

The reality of the housing market was clearly evident in late 1949 to most in the City, including Housing Director, James Inglis. In a report dated November 2, 1949 from then Housing Director-Secretary Inglis to the Detroit Common Council, Inglis indicated that,

The most serious obstacle to the "Detroit Plan" would appear to be the problem of rehousing the families that are now living on the site. Under present conditions this would appear to be even more difficult than the problem of finding a developer for the site.

Under the terms of the new Federal housing act it appears unlikely that the City will be able to demolish any of the structures in the 'Detroit Plan' area before July 1, 1951.

It would therefore appear logical that during the twenty months between now and July 1, 1951, the Common Council should devote serious consideration for the construction of new housing for the families now living in the "Detroit Plan" area.

The provision of good housing for displaced families is one of the requirements for receiving Federal assistance for slum clearance projects.²⁷

²⁷ Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commissioners, October-November 1949, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

In the months after the passage of the Housing Act, the City's then-director of Housing attempted to make clear the limitations of Detroit's current plan as evidenced above. As the Housing Director, Inglis articulated the logic of more housing needed before current housing could be demolished. However, as will be discussed later, then-Director Inglis's concerns were not taken into serious consideration as the City wanted to push this program through. As Inglis began to raise continuing concerns he and Mayor Cobo increasingly butted heads over direction of the housing program for a variety of reasons. Eventually by the end of 1949 Director Inglis resigned out of a sense of impasse and Mayor Cobo was able to appoint a successor who was a member and favorite of the downtown business community. After the appointment of Director Harry Durbin very little disagreements arose between the Mayor's Office and the Housing Commission and very little opposition to the Mayor's program also arose as a result.

In a report of recommendations made by the Detroit Urban League to the Detroit Housing Commission as to how to alleviate the difficulties of relocation, the DUL outlined the current difficulties faced by the families living in the Gratiot Redevelopment area and warned of the increasing difficulties as more areas were slated for clearance. It also called into question the ill-enforced procedures and policies set forth under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 that specified that families impacted by slum clearance should be relocated to housing that meets minimum standards of health and safety as set forth by local guidelines.

The Detroit Urban League worked hard to help displaced families locate housing and to raise awareness of the negative impacts on the relocation program. In a widely released report that the Housing Commission was in receipt of as evidenced by its appearance in the archival collection of the Housing Commission itself, the DUL publicly announced the Housing Commission's refusal to change, stop, or shift the policies of relocation despite the hardship of the families being relocated.

As the relocation program was accelerated, the needs and problems of the families increased. This acceleration of program occurred in the absence of a documented relocation plan... We repeatedly made the Housing Commission aware of the needs and hardships encountered by the families. In spite of this, the Housing Commission publicly expressed that the program was operating smoothly, hardship was at a minimum, and that families were being satisfactorily relocated.²⁸

It is in this difference between the "public opinion of the Housing Commission" and the first-hand and documented hardships recorded by the Detroit Urban League that is important. Despite multiple warnings from then Housing Director and Detroit Urban League, the City continued to push the program through in its attempt to attract the middle-class back to the city center. In so doing it willfully created a production of difference in the understanding of and public rhetoric around the program as it repeatedly indicated that displaced people would be placed in public housing if they qualify and would find private housing if they did not qualify for public housing.

While the relocation solutions for slum clearance often used public housing as a fail-safe depository for families, this was problematic given the already impacted

²⁸ Price, William L., Secretary of the Community Organization Department, "A General Outline of Steps Exercised by the Detroit Urban League to Provide Decent Housing for Families in the Detroit Community," April 24, 1951, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 41, Folder Detroit Housing Commission, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

wait for public housing, with many in the relocation area already on waiting lists for housing. There were also a fair portion of over-income families that did not qualify for public housing, but were unable to find private housing. According to the Detroit Urban League's study regarding the Gratiot relocation, "approximately 800 families of the 2000 total located on-site are ineligible for public housing."²⁹ This created problems, given the lack of decent and accessible housing to rent or to buy, given racial restrictions. Therefore, the segment of the population that was over-income often faced the greatest challenges in finding appropriate housing and in many situations ended up in worse housing conditions than the "slums" that they were in prior to slum clearance, thereby defeating the goal of "better housing for all."

The Detroit Housing Commission under Director Inglis, well aware of the housing shortage, commissioned a brief survey in November 1949 to assess the availability of property in the rental market for potentially relocated families. While some were eligible for public housing, "the average ineligible family, as of November 1, had an annual income of \$3,971—an average of \$656 over the eligible limits for public housing." The Commission sought to find out what was available in the private market for the estimated 1,237 families who were "over-income" but still in need of housing. Utilizing the "Want Ad" column for Sunday, November 6, 1949 and its 298 listings, the commission was able to find precisely 2 units available for rental that "were below \$70 a month, took children, and seemed to be suitable and available for

²⁹ "Recommendations Submitted by the Detroit Urban Leagues as to How Hardship Incurred in the Present Relocation Effort can be Alleviated by the Detroit Housing Commission," April 20, 1951, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers, Box 59, Folder Detroit Urban League, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

the type of family assumed in the survey.”³⁰ It is in the language here, of “the type of family assumed” that the idea of race is both engaged, yet hidden. The Detroit Housing Commission in this statement tacitly acknowledges the racial restrictions in finding and housing families, yet will not state explicitly that the race of families is one of the largest blockages to accessing private market housing. Again and again from this type of data and survey it is clear that the city and its agencies are acutely aware of the housing crisis both in terms of units available and the necessity to improve the overall quantity and quality of housing stock. It also is clear from this information that a policy of demolition and removal at that time, while it would remove families from “slum conditions” it would also clearly result in an increasingly impacted housing market and demand.

Detroit’s 1951 Housing and Home Finance application itself acknowledged the limitations for the relocated prospective buyer and the lack of available homes for those who had the financial ability and desire to purchase a home as well as the lack of homes available for rent. In the application the City wrote,

Although Negro families have bought many thousands of used homes in Detroit during the past ten years, very few new homes have been built for sale to Negroes. Since the war, a total of not more than 1,200 such new homes has (sic) been built, with less than a hundred under construction at the present time. No new rental housing for Negro occupancy has been completed, although one project of fifty or sixty units is now under construction.³¹

³⁰ Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commissioners, October-November 1949, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

³¹ Addendum C to the HHFA Project Number DM-1 Report, 26 February 1951, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

For a total citywide population of 1.8 million in 1950, and an African American population of 300,506 the number of units is extremely low. The fact that no new rental housing had been completed is perhaps the most compelling evidence of the split housing market—in the six years since the war, not one single unit was completed and only fifty to sixty units were in the works. The reality that the City knew this and was also in process of planning other clearance projects for highway building and future clearance and redevelopment, the idea of an intentional attempt to contain and raze particularly racialized communities is even more compelling. It is unclear as to where the 2,000 families and nearly 1,000 single people to be impacted by this clearance project will go. This is especially clear given the reality that the construction of new public housing was also halted around the same time that the slum clearance programs were in full swing. Although the ramifications of slum clearance programs of the 1950s are well studied and documented,³² the intent here is to reveal the wanton disregard and negligence that the City of Detroit demonstrated towards its Black citizens.

In his inaugural moment Mayor Cobo indicated very clearly his position on public housing and in particular he seals his program of private development of federally and publicly funded land that was cleared. It seems counterintuitive that

³² See for example Hirsch, Arnold. 1983. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Anderson, Martin. 1964. *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949-1962*. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press; Mitchell, J. Paul, editor. 1985. *Federal Housing Policy and Program: Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey; Thomas, June Manning 1997. *Redevelopment and race: planning a finer city in postwar Detroit*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Bauman, John F. 1987. *Public housing, race, and renewal: urban planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Cobo so vehemently approved federal monies to build public housing yet in the same address indicated that,

Early in this administration recommendations will be made to this body which are designated to meet the conditions imposed by the so-called slum areas. I feel that we must acquire the land in these backward sections, that we must remove the buildings there-from, and sell the property back to private individuals for development.³³

Cobo's commentary of the "backward" and slum areas of the city seemed to accept them as already constructed as such, without the reality of the factors that created a neighborhood that because of extreme overcrowding and absentee landlords fell into such disrepair. The areas most discussed in terms of clearance were the areas that most African Americans were contained within due to legal and de facto practices of segregation.

Most indicate that because of the small size of the black population before the large migration of African Americans during the interwar years, there was relatively little racial segregation as the size of the population allowed for small "clusters."³⁴ However, others dispute this as historian David Levine indicates, "Detroit before 1915 was hardly an integrated community. Long before the onset of the Great Migration, most blacks were clustered in a clearly defined residential area on the city's near east side."³⁵ Professor Levine's assertion is also backed by a 1917 document entitled,

³³ Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commissioners, December 1949, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

³⁴ See for example Zunz, Olivier. 1982. *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁵ Levine, David Allen. 1976. *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit 1915-1926*. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 50.

“Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan”

which indicates clearly:

The majority of the colored people live in the district which is bounded on the North by Rowena St., on the South by Macomb St., on the East by Hastings and on the West by Brush St. They share this district with Jewish people in the proportion of about 70% Negroes and 30% Jews. As one goes North from Macomb St., it will be found that the numerical preponderance of the colored people decreases and that at Rowena St., the proportions are slightly in favor of the Jews.³⁶

It becomes clear from this document then that the African American population was heavily segregated to the east side neighborhood. While not mono-racial at the time of the 1917 document above, it was continuing to transition from a primarily Jewish neighborhood to a majority black neighborhood. This shift is largely a result of the increase of the population as a whole as well as what the same document indicates is a tripling of population, “since the 1910 census it [the colored population] has increased from less than 6000 to considerably more than 20,000 at the present time. The greater part of this increase has occurred (sic) during the past twelve months.”³⁷ Therefore, indicating that the increase in population occurred since 1915, straining the available housing in Detroit. Additionally, the reality of the segregation of the black population is the statement that, “15,000 of the 20,000 Negroes now in Detroit are living in the district bounded by Macomb, Rowena, Hastings and Brush Streets”³⁸ indicating that

³⁶ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

³⁷ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

³⁸ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

fully 75% of the black population lives in one district, thereby underscoring the reality of racial segregation. This is exacerbated by the reality that, “Negro immigrants are arriving at the rate of 100 per day. They are crowding, jamming, packing into this one little oblong adjoining the main business section on the East.”³⁹ It is clear from documentation that this East side area was already overcrowded in 1917 and by the late 1940s the neighborhood was literally bursting at the seams. Much like the narratives of immigration that fuels the national rhetoric of movement and migrations, African Americans sought refuge from the legal limits of citizenship and racial terror in the South in the hopes of finding Detroit and other northern cities as zones of opportunity, social mobility, and access to citizenship. Black migrations to the city however, upset the notions of ethnic immigrant accommodation and assimilation into American nationhood through the tenements and ethnic ghettos of the cities. For African Americans, Robert E. Parks “race relations cycle” and Ernest Burgess’s “concentric zone model,” were just ideas on paper as the “outer rings” of citizenship and single family homes were always bounded by race.

The November-December 1949 report of the Detroit Housing Commission to the Commissioners lead off with news about the DHC luncheon hosting newly elected Common Council members and Mayor-Elect Cobo of December 14, 1949 “followed by a presentation of Detroit’s housing and slum clearance problem.” At that event,

Hugo Schwartz, Director of the Detroit Field Office of the Public Housing Administration explained the provisions of the Housing Act of 1949 as they affected Detroit, pointing out that in virtually all major cities which

³⁹ Brief Outline of Housing Conditions Among the Negroes of Detroit Michigan, 2 May 1917, Box 69, Folder Housing 1917, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

have so far applied for Federal aid under the Act, the first projects are slated to be built on vacant land sites. Mr. Schwartz made it clear, however, that each site proposed would be considered on its own merits and that if relocation problems could be solved, public housing could be built in areas now occupied by slums.⁴⁰

However, for Detroit, public housing was not built in the outlying areas of Detroit, or rebuilt on the post-removal area as the site was redeveloped for middle class housing. Combined with the slum clearance philosophies, this was where the conspiracies about large-scale removal come in—the idea that the City wanted to actually have citywide “Negro removal” back to “where they came from,” typically referencing a return to the South. Logically, if there is nowhere for people to live, where will they go? And more tellingly perhaps it speaks to the idea of the relationship between spatialization and racialization. The ideology of the 1940s relied on the idea of the agrarian African American lifestyle still-rooted in slavery and in this “removal” of African Americans from the central city and the exclusion of African Americans from the outer ring of the city, naturalizing the idea that black space was not cityspace. The irony of course is in the current naturalization of black space as entirely urban space.

In the Detroit Housing Commission’s plan to the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) Dated February 26, 1951 the commission traces the city’s housing shortage back to at least 1929, and the Detroit Urban League Brief discussed in the last chapter pushes that date even further back to 1917, and that “approximately 11,300 families-2,500 white and 8,800 Negro-will face displacement in the next few years, in addition to the approximately 2,000 Negro families on the Gratiot

⁴⁰ Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commissioners, November-December 1949, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

Redevelopment site.”⁴¹ The narrative simultaneously acknowledges the lack of housing and the continual displacement of people due to urban renewal. How does the city proceed with urban removal in the face of the serious housing shortage? This estimate for future/continued displacement is already on top of the approximately 5,300 families displaced since WWII for expressways (3,900 families) and two public housing sites (1,400 families).⁴²

In many cases what did happen was the continued doubling up of families into apartments and homes intended for only one family, not two or three. Additionally many of those removed by the clearance projects of the early 1950s found shelter in the Virginia Park area of the City. This is the same area that in 1967 was the center and starting point of the 1967 Rebellion. “Surveys made by the Detroit Housing Commission and the Detroit Urban League of families that have ‘relocated’ themselves into other areas indicate a transfer of the same over-crowding and sharing pattern that existed in the project area.”⁴³ Many historians of the 1967 rebellion argue that one of the prime factors for the conflict was housing conditions—extreme overcrowding and lack of housing. Many of those removed for the Gratiot Redevelopment Project moved into the 12th Street neighborhood in the early 1950s. Fifteen years later this where the 1967 Rebellion sparked. In effect directly linking the 1950s urban renewal program to the 1967 Rebellion through a crisis of spatial

⁴¹ Addendum C to the HHFA Project Number DM-1 Report, 26 February 1951, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

⁴² Addendum C to the HHFA Project Number DM-1 Report, 26 February 1951, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan.

⁴³ “Report of the Housing Situation as it Affects the Community it the Gratiot Redevelopment Area” prepared by the Detroit Urban League, 20 March 1951, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights Papers, Box 26, Fold 12 Citizens Housing and Planning Commission, Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

concentration and condensed population crowding that fomented and erupted into a rebellion.

Another difficulty with the City's relocation plan had to do with the notion of placing the relocated families into public housing. As chapter one revealed, the construction of and controversy over public housing administration, definitely revolved around a racist framework and created a lack of public housing available for eligible black families. The City, in its attempt to keep in line with the provisions of the 1949 Housing Act, tried to use its public housing projects to relocate those displaced by clearance. However, due to the extreme desirability for public housing, as well as the city's refusal to integrate housing and make one waiting list for all families regardless of race, the impact of the slum clearance relocatees meant that they were given priority as soon as a vacancy opened up in the housing. This resulted in the rightful questioning of the Housing Commissions by Detroit Urban League. They pointed out that the City's relocation plan subverted policies that were set out by the Federal government in terms of housing priorities. In an already impacted housing market, the addition of thousands more people wreaked havoc on the DUL and for those already on the list. They remind the City that their current practice,

Granting preference for placement of displaced eligible families from the project area only into public housing presently designated for Negro occupancy is in violation of Section 302 of the Housing Act of 1949... require that the public housing agency...shall extend the following preferences in the selection of tenants:

'First, to families which are to be displaced by any low-rent housing project or by any public slum-clearance or redevelopment project ...and as among such families first preference shall be given to families of disabled veterans... and second preference shall be given to families of

deceased veterans and servicemen...and third preference shall be given to families of other veterans and servicemen;

‘Second, to families of other veterans and servicemen and as among such families first preference shall be given to families of disabled veterans...and second preferences shall be given to families if deceased veterans and servicemen whose death has been determined by the Veterans’ Administration to be service-connected.’⁴⁴

With these stated priorities and preferences, the way in which the City automatically places any Veteran and Veteran family, regardless of status into the public housing for veterans violated the policy. The DUL continues on to state:

This practice exercised by the Housing Commission granting first preference to veteran families displaced from the project area into war housing, is not in compliance with Federal regulations governing eligibility of veterans seeking admission. Moreover, this practice imposes an undue hardship on more than 3000 other eligible veteran families who are now on the Housing Commission’s waiting list for accommodations, and who are denied them because of the pseudo-advantages given to veteran families displaced from the Gratiot Project Site.

While this condition exists among Negroes, a totally different situation exists for white applicants. This is illustrated by the Housing Commission’s own records that over 1000 white families eligible for public housing have been placed from the waiting list during the last six months, whereas no Negro family on the waiting list for public housing has been placed with the exception of those families displaced from the Douglas and Gratiot Project Sites.⁴⁵

And because of segregated public housing there was disproportionate impact for those who were displaced from the Gratiot Site, as 95% were classified as “non-white”.

⁴⁴ “Recommendations Submitted by the Detroit Urban Leagues as to How Hardship Incurred in the Present Relocation Effort can be Alleviated by the Detroit Housing Commission,” April 20, 1951, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers, Box 59, Folder Detroit Urban League, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁴⁵ “Recommendations Submitted by the Detroit Urban Leagues as to How Hardship Incurred in the Present Relocation Effort can be Alleviated by the Detroit Housing Commission,” April 20, 1951, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers, Box 59, Folder Detroit Urban League, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

This was despite the fact that openings in the public housing projects deemed “white” were rapidly increasing due to availability of new housing and old housing stock as whites began to move into the newer homes due both to new construction and the increased money available for FHA mortgages.

This is an important point of clarification and as was shown in Chapter One, at this point the families that were eligible for public housing, particularly African American and other families of color, found public housing to be one of the few options for newer housing that were structurally sound, had heat in all the rooms, and indoor plumbing in a designated kitchen and bathroom—all of which were vast improvements over much of the rental housing available to people of color. This was before the massive defunding of public housing in the late 1950s and 1960s, during the time when public housing was seen as a positive factor for housing.

The failure to place as many families as was projected into public housing manifested. In a document by the planning department in advance of the application for the 1953 redevelopment extension research reveals,

Relocation experience in the Gratiot Redevelopment Project indicates that not all of these eligible families will be rehoused in public housing. In the Gratiot Project, in which 95 percent of the families were Negro, 860 families were determined to be apparently eligible but only 526 have been rehoused in public housing, to date. Another 30 families will be moved to public housing units in the near future. It appears that only about two-thirds of the ‘eligible’ families from the Gratiot Project will be relocated in permanent public housing.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ “Gratiot Redevelopment Project Lafayette extension Planning Application,” February 1953, Carl Almlad Papers Box 12, Folder 44, Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Given the racially separate policies of segregated public housing, there were simply not enough available units in black housing projects. Despite the reality that there was not enough public housing to house those already removed from the area, and the City of Detroit's refusal to build any more public housing, despite its ability to do so under the provisions of Title III of the Housing Act of 1949, the City continued to apply to increase the redevelopment area, thereby initiating more money to carry out still more slum clearance.

The Detroit Housing Commission approached the Detroit Real Estate Brokers Association for help in finding housing for the families to be relocated. The Detroit Real Estate Brokers Association, an organization formed by and for black realtors as the other Real Estate Brokers Association would was for whites only,⁴⁷ broke with the Housing Commission in their letter dated May 6, 1950. In the letter to all members of the Housing Commission as well as the press they wrote:

Our organization is deeply concerned about bad housing conditions in Detroit as well as the lack of housing, particularly for minority groups. There is nothing that would give us greater satisfaction than to participate in a feasible program for improving housing conditions and increasing the supply of both low-rent public housing and adequate private enterprise housing for minority groups.

However, the relocation job that you have given us is an impossible one. We simply do not have the available vacancies. We not only do not have listings to make available to families displaced by slum clearance, we do not even have listings to take care of our own regular applicants who have been waiting for vacancies for many months....

⁴⁷ See brief testimony of John Humphrey, a Detroit Real Estate Broker Association member in regards to continuing segregation in the 1960s in Paul Dimond's 1985 *Beyond Busing*. Dimond writes, "Humphrey began by explaining that the he had long been a 'realist,' a member of the 'Detroit Real Estate Brokers Association,' an all-black group. Humphrey had never been a 'realtor': "When I joined the Detroit Real Estate Brokers Association, the 'realtors' was a white organization that did not allow black membership," p. 50.

It would appear to us that the only sound answer to the problem is to expand the total supply of housing available to minority groups so that reasonable vacancy factor can be established....

It would be foolish and hypocritical for us to pretend that we were assisting the Housing Commission in this relocation job when, in fact, we find it impossible to do so....

Therefore, we are forced regretfully to disassociate ourselves from the Housing Commission's slum clearance program as long as the practice of segregation is sustained and to announce publicly that we will bear no responsibility for the relocation of displaced families.⁴⁸

This letter represents an important public break from the City of the role of private real estate agents and an articulation of the reality of the limitations of what is actually possible. This is an important statement that was released and sent to all the major news organizations in the City and to all members of the Housing Commission. In so doing, the City can no longer say with any measure of credibility that there are private housing options for the families and individuals to be resettled and that they are working with local realtors to ease this transition. However, even in the face of this public statement, the City still maintained that they would be able to rehouse those displaced by clearance into private and public housing.

The relocation plan prepared in February 1951 for the federal government in regards to the Gratiot area indicated that,

It was likely though some difficulty was to be encountered in meeting federal standards, there was enough housing available. Those who wanted public housing were given priority and some 659 families from the Gratiot area were permanently relocated in public housing. For the remainder, it was suggested that enough housing would trickle down in both rental and

⁴⁸ Letter to Mr. Allen Finley from Detroit Real Estate Brokers, 6 May 1950, Mayors Papers, Box 4, Folder Housing Commission, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

purchase property availability. When the Detroit Housing Commission indicated that there was housing available, the big stumbling block that remained was the race issue. Much of the available housing was in white areas. The 752 families who had to rent private housing found the situation discouraging. A Negro real estate group said that there just were not enough private rentals available to Negroes to satisfy the need created by the redevelopment project. The Housing Commission continued to maintain that those ineligible for public housing could find private rentals in new rental housing, conversion of existing housing and leads from friends and relatives. This reasoning satisfied the Housing and Home Finance Administration.⁴⁹

As the agency charged with overseeing the Housing Act of 1949, the Housing and Home Finance Agency of the Federal Government communicated its own concerns for Detroit's slum clearance and development plans and in particular its relocation plan. In a letter from Raymond Foley, the HHFA Administrator received by Mayor Cobo on January 21, 1952, Foley expressed the agency's concern.

As you well know, the clearance of slum area usually involves serious and difficult problems in the rehousing and relocation of families who may be displaced, particularly in the project areas occupied by families of minority races in communities in which there are serious housing shortages, especially insofar as minority group families are concerned...

The achievement of these goals will require, without doubt, the expansion of housing facilities and living space, particularly in such cities as Detroit *where the clearance of slums will displace large numbers of Negro families who do not enjoy free access to housing accommodations in all neighborhoods of the City* (italics my emphasis).⁵⁰

This letter addressed to Mayor Cobo clearly expressed the concerns of the Federal government as represented by Raymond Foley, Administrator of the Housing and

⁴⁹ Goldsmith, Arnold. 1966. "Urban Renewal in Detroit: A Comparison Between Elmwood I and Gratiot." Masters Thesis, Political Science, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Letter to Mayor Albert Cobo from Raymond Foley, Administrator, Housing and Home Finance Agency, 21 January 1952, Mayor's Papers, Box 3, Folder Housing Commission, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

Home Finance Agency in regards to the displacement of families, and the importance of not creating new areas of overcrowding. As such, the administrator acknowledged the reality that not all groups, and “Negroes” in particular in the City of Detroit do not have “free access to housing accommodations in all neighborhoods of the City.” In the acknowledgement on one hand, the Federal government at this moment presented itself as a real force to persuade public opinion and practice vis-à-vis the financial backer of the renewal programs. However, the City, maintained that it was exercising a good faith effort to place those displaced by renewal into homes. And it is in moments like this that the Federal government, in turning a blind eye and continuing to provide funding for the project, and the City government in maintaining its status quo on public housing and private housing enforcement, that the systemic and institutional racism not only continued but was exacerbated. Yet, it can all be deflected under the supposition that both the Federal and local government were operating under the rubric of legislated equality, despite the actual practice. By doing so, I believe the government was not practicing a type of benign or colorblind racism but was in fact actively enforcing a rigid racialized history and policy of segregation that placed African Americans in a continued vulnerable social and institutional position that reifies their status as inherently moveable and containable subjects.

Gratiot Redevelopment Project: Black Bottom becomes Lafayette Park

The relocation effort to clear the site began even before Federal approval of the project was given. The first people were relocated beginning September 1950 and the

first demolition on the site began in November 1950. Relocation and demolition continued on at a brisk pace and by the end of 1952 nearly all of the relocations had been made, with only 196 of the nearly 2,000 families remaining. According to the Housing Act, “single people need not be rehoused”⁵¹ and therefore were not counted in the final relocation numbers. Additionally, what is often not revealed in the discussion of relocation is that many of the families and individuals who were relocated were often placed into temporary relocations, oftentimes even within the area that was slated for clearance with the expectation that they would be moved again once actual demolition began on the area. In a letter written to families living in the Gratiot area the Housing Commission indicated:

Everyone will be provided with a place to live but it must be remembered that temporary relocations which may mean relocations for as long as a three-year period, need not meet the same requirements as permanent relocations. Tenants who are offered places to live are urged to consider them carefully before turning them down, since in most cases it will not be possible to make more than one offer. Many families will be able to rent or buy places without assistance and are urged to do so.⁵²

In the rush to get the land cleared it often meant placing families in blighted and run-down housing into other blighted and run-down housing, completely ignoring the goal of a “decent house for every American family” which the law intended.

The Gratiot Site was officially 75% cleared by September 1953 and in nine months 90% of the structures were demolished; yet there was still no approved development plan or developer. Not until July 1956 did the developers, City, and plan

⁵¹ Memo “To Families Living in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area” from Harry J. Durbin, 27 November 1950, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁵² Memo “To Families Living in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area” from Harry J. Durbin, 27 November 1950, Box 41, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

all receive approval and ground was finally broken in October 1956 a full six years after the first residents were moved removed. And two years later, October 1958 marked the official opening of the middle-income development program, Lafayette Park. Even though the City in the beginning maintained that the site would be cleared and redeveloped with the intent that some of the displaced families could return, the majority would not qualify due the income bracket of the buyers and renters of the new Gratiot-Lafayette Park development.

This disconnect though was apparent as the City began to look for developers who were interested in developing the land. In a reply to Mayor Albert Cobo about the lack of interest in purchase of the cleared Gratiot land, the President of the Builders Association of Metropolitan Detroit wrote to Mayor Cobo telling him that, “the city has taken the position that it desires to clear out the slums. We agree wholeheartedly. But, we believe that it is also important to re-build those former slum areas with low cost housing.” The letter goes on to stress that the need for low-income groups is severe and that the city-planned high rent apartments for this area is not a good risk for banks or builders.⁵³

However, this was not the case. There was housing built on the area cleared for redevelopment but it was by no means low cost. The documents discussing the planning and preparation indicated that “old” homes would be demolished to build better and new housing. What they did not indicate was that the new housing was not likely accessible to the displaced families. Additionally the stoppage of the project

⁵³ Letter to Mayor Albert E. Cobo from M.M. Robinson, January 27, 1953, Mayors Papers 1953, Box 4, Folder Housing-Gratiot Redevelopment, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

indicated that the land was cleared and laid vacant, undeveloped for nearly five years until groundbreaking ceremonies for the project took place on October 16, 1956. And the first “home” wasn’t ready for occupancy until 1959, nearly nine years after the first demolition began. As a 1966 study reveals, “Critics point out, in no case, in Detroit, have those who originally lived on the site been returned to it after it has been renewed. They contend that total demolishment of an area results in pushing Negroes into more crowded and equally poor housing.”⁵⁴ In the end it appeared that the City’s primary goal not of improved housing, but “negro removal” was in fact accomplished. The final strategy was the renaming of the area and the neighborhood, from Black Bottom or the Eastside ghetto—both names that were associated with its prior inhabitants—to Lafayette Park, a name meant to evoke the tree-lined cul-de-sacs and greenspace in the new housing development. In effect then, the (re) naming of place serves as powerful evidence of the place, race, and class-based associations that Black Bottom evoked in the middle-class white citizenry that Lafayette Park hoped to attract. It reveals the attempted disappearance of the Black Bottom community, which can’t even live on in name.

Mapping the Production and Disappearance of a Black Community

On a map the dividing lines along the boulevards and streets are very clean and specific and the reality of any urban renewal/demolition project is that the neighborhood exists just across the street from where the dividing line ends, that

⁵⁴ Goldsmith, Arnold. 1966. “Urban Renewal in Detroit: A Comparison Between Elmwood I and Gratiot.” Masters Thesis, Political Science, p. 36.

removal, clearance, and relocation while bound in the finite of the borders of the street does not represent a finite or bordered existence. Just as the borders of cities, states, and nations are simply there until they are enforced, policed, or maintained—typically by violence—the lines of relocation are just lines on a map until the removal, the displacement, and the demolition begins. When it begins, the fabric of the community, the home, lives, and everyday patterns of thousands of people are disrupted, disjointed, and severed. The Housing Commission and the City realized that this was a sure outcome of the clearance and as early as 1951 wrote, “redevelopment of an area of this size involves breaking up a whole complex of neighborhood relations and institutions.”⁵⁵ This is what is often lost in discussions of slum clearance and renewal, the loss of the neighborhood and all that entails in terms of not only homes, but networks, jobs, and community relationships.

An August 21, 1953 news article in the Detroit Free Press entitled, “Any Home Looks Good to Evictees,” featured the stories of those who were evicted from their city-owned residences. Much as the 1935 experience of Mrs. Jackson, discussed in Chapter One, revealed the limited places for displaced individuals to move to, in 1953 much of the same lack of options still existed. In the context of both the 1953 and 1935 articles the city maintained that they were building better housing for the citizens of Detroit. However, the stories of the families featured in the article outlined the reality of those evicted from City owned housing. The first is the story of Robert Lee Jones, his wife and two kids who were evicted from the Douglass Housing Project

⁵⁵ Addendum B to the HHFA Project Number DM-1 Report, 19 February 1951, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 41, Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan, p. 21.

after his \$2.05/hour job put them in the “over-income” category and disqualified them from public housing. When the family was evicted they, “moved into four rooms of an old frame building that only has running water in the kitchen sink, has a toilet, but not bath and so they bathe in a washtub. They now pay \$50/month for this accommodation.”⁵⁶ In the same article, the trials of those who live in the city-owned Gratiot Development area and are about to be evicted are also outlined. Truly the families do live in rotted out old building, with no or only one source of heat, neither is a sufficient match for Detroit winters. However, the families who were about to be evicted for redevelopment maintained that if there was somewhere for them to go they would have moved long, long ago.⁵⁷

In light of Cobo’s vocal opposition to building on vacant land sites, and his administration’s desire to move forward with the slum clearance program, he received much vocal opposition from constituents and citizen groups. In a confidential memo from George Schermer to Mayor Cobo dated April 3, 1950, Schermer talked about the opposition in the Negro community especially in regards to the clearance program and the hardship faced by those facing displacement.

As you know, there is vigorous opposition to the administration’s housing program in the Negro community...No matter how a slum clearance program is approached there would be resistance from the property owners and residents of the clearance areas. After all, these people have known little security. Losing a home, no matter how poor, is a hard experience. It would be inevitable that owners and tenants would mobilize to protect themselves... There is strong suspicion among

⁵⁶ “Any Home Looks Good to Evictees” by Bud Goodman, Detroit Free Press, 21 August 1953, Mayor’s Papers 1952, Box 3 Folder Housing, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

Negroes that the whole program is aimed at promoting racial segregation.⁵⁸

George Schermer, Director of the Detroit Interracial Committee, continually butted heads with the Cobo administration's policies toward urban renewal and its non-policy toward building public housing. The opposition to the housing program was mostly invisible within the archival record beyond the scope of the Detroit Urban League's papers, which is what makes Schermer's record of the opposition in this confidential record so important. At a street-level understanding, the ways in which the trauma and stress of moving and having one's home demolished is not accounted for or adequately explored in the archive, in secondary texts, and within this chapter as well. Although out of the scope of this project, the impacts both in terms of community relationships as well as family history are important pieces of the relocation story. Projects interviewing and recording the experiences of those displaced and relocated, as more than numbers on charts or maps are essential interventions that must be made.⁵⁹

This work however, reveals the changes in the landscape and the attempted erasure of the material and ideological significance of Black Bottom. The landscape itself and the mapping of a location can powerfully tell the tale of relocation, clearance, and removal. Although the maps and figures are but stand-ins for real lives

⁵⁸ Memo to Albert E. Cobo from George Schermer, April 3, 1950, Detroit Commission on Civil Rights, Box 27, Folder 7 Correspondence, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁵⁹ See for example Jordan Mechner's documentary film *Chavez Ravine* (2004) that looks at the clearance of a Los Angeles neighborhood purportedly for the building of public housing. In the end the site was used as the location of Dodger Stadium. Utilizing archival photographs and interviews from former residents, the real life impacts of relocation and clearance are clearly legible.

and people, Figures 6 and 7 show the production of the space and reproduction of the space.



Figure 6. Building Fabric Rendering of Black Bottom/Lafayette Park reproduced from Charles Waldheim's *Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit*.⁶⁰

Figure 6 maps the space of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project—of its reproduction as the Lafayette Park development and its prior production as Black Bottom. The side by side figures show two completely difference spaces. The grid streets of Black Bottom are disappeared in Lafayette Park as the planners followed in the trend of super block structures in order to maximize open space. In so doing addresses and street names

⁶⁰ Waldheim, Charles. 2004. *Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, p. 131.

through this and other processes of development are completely disappeared from city maps and records—made invisible by their infill with grass in this case and with freeways in other cases. The idea that each of the red structures that existed in 1949 was a home, a business, an apartment building—that the area was so thick with people and life that the Lafayette Park building fabric looks stark and barren in comparison. The wide open space of Lafayette Park is jarring in its juxtaposition with the density of Black Bottom.

Aerial photograph of previously existing Black Bottom street grid and residential housing stock with site limits of Gratiot Redevelopment (Lafayette Park), Detroit, 1944

Aerial photograph following demolition with site limits of Gratiot Redevelopment (Lafayette Park), Detroit, c. 1950

Aerial photograph of first phase construction with site limits of Gratiot Redevelopment (Lafayette Park), Detroit, 1959

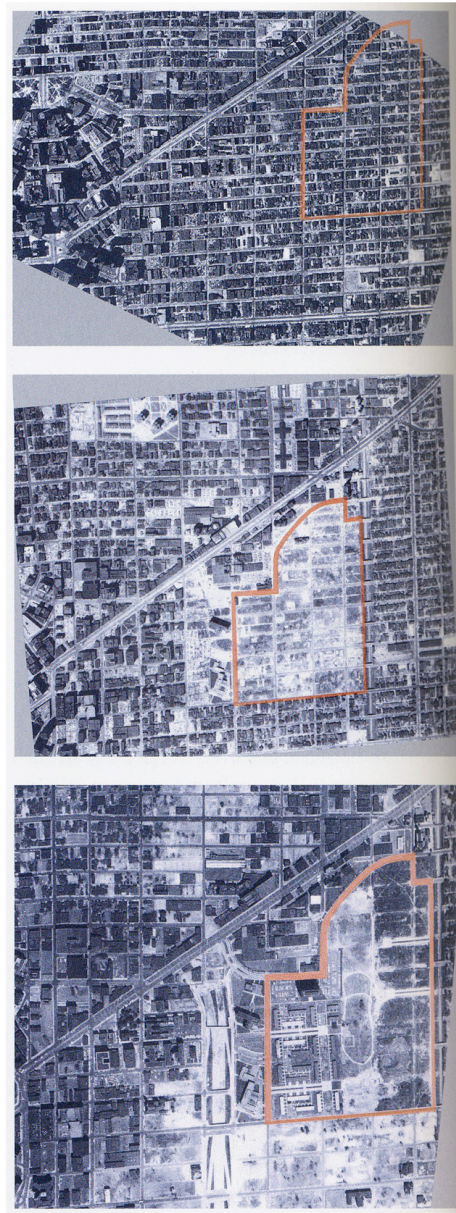


Figure 7. Aerial Photos of Black Bottom/Lafayette Park reproduced from Charles Waldheim's *Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit*⁶¹

Figure 7 illuminates the actual topographical changes in the area from the density of the neighborhood in 1944 to the complete clearance and leveling of the neighborhood

⁶¹ Waldheim, Charles. 2004. *Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, p. 68.

to its reproduction as a sparsely developed middle-class housing community. The landscape itself is willfully changed by the redevelopment, the demolition of one community to build another. The difference in the priority of open space for the new community and the non-priority of quality homes for the old community is there—in the open spaces, parks, schools, and landscaping prioritized for the new community and the lack of basic city services for the old community. Figure 7 clearly reveals the mapping and production of difference in the city space.

What is most striking in both Figures 6 and 7 is the loss of density, the loss of streets, the loss of the neighborhood. Whereas the Black Bottom renderings reveal the grid pattern of the center city full of homes, businesses, lives, and daily interactions, that occupied and represented an overcrowded area, bursting at the seams everyday life, the Lafayette Park renderings are so startling for the amount of open space they illustrate. And that open space—those acres of land that is jarring for its uncrowdedness represents the displacement, movement, and attempted disappearance of the 2,000 families and 1,000 individuals who used to live, love, and exist in the very same space.

Conclusion: Mapping the Landscape of Institutional Racism

This chapter marks a time in the history and practice of institutional racism that is often bigger and more complicated than individuals. While on the one hand there are individuals in powerful positions who dictate and determine policy, not all the people in power or all the government agencies are implicated and intent in carrying

out these goals and priorities. This may be seen in the work of the Detroit Interracial Committee, the work of powerful business leaders and community organizations like the Detroit Urban League, and the work of individuals throughout various Government agencies like the Housing Commission and Planning Department. However, this is how and why racism becomes harder and more difficult to acknowledge and pin down as racist policies and practices become increasingly about individuals who are blamed for their problems, rather than a system that has been built on decades of discriminatory policies and procedures. This is seen in the ways in which the area targeted for the Gratiot Redevelopment Project was never on the surface targeted because it was a black area, but because it was a “slum” area and the further link needs to be made as to *how* it became a *black slum* area. As the pull quote opening this chapter, reflecting on the success of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project, indicated the City and the Government believed or at least publicly believed that the slum clearance and redevelopment boost the human spirit of Detroit, that the project met the needs of the people. Three years later the City of Detroit would erupt in a rebellion that of all the long, hot summers of the 1960s would be infamous in its statistics as the most violent, with the most death, the most destruction, and the most heinous crimes by “law enforcement.” While redevelopment and slum clearance were not the sole reasons behind the rebellion they were important reasons.

The critical moment in the double-talk of equality and the policies of the Housing Act of 1949 ushered in a period of activism and revolution known as the Civil Rights movement. While much was gained during that period in terms of

legislated rights and access, even now in 2011 we are still in the period marked by the hidden institutional racism in the face of legislated equality. The themes of this chapter and the dissertation more broadly are topical for today given the opening context of the National financial Depression, the record foreclosures, and the continued “revitalization” of downtowns in the 1990s and the 2000s. It is more than coded language that so many of those foreclosed are “risky” or “high-risk” borrowers and that many blame the current housing crisis on the Community Reinvestment Mortgages that made lending more accessible to those that were *still* being shut out of the system. Even in the face of the Nation’s “first Black President,” we are a Nation built on the continued displacement of the poor, the working class, immigrants, and people of color, while simultaneously spouting the promise of the American Dream, continually relocating it and us to the other side of the American neighborhood.

Part I has worked to show the institutionalization of racism in Detroit during the “peak” of the City as it planned for its future growth and prioritized business and middle class interests over the people of color and working class people that populated its center city. Part I revealed the ways in which the logics of race become imbedded and materialized in the built environment and the razed landscape. This serves as a historical backdrop and foundation to Part II, which will reveal the ways in which the racialized history of Detroit has impacted its contemporary image and imaginary in the ways in which the City is produced materially and in the imaginary as a place of violence, decay, and post-industrial death.

Part II:
Reproducing Race On and Off Screen

Chapter Three:
Detroit's Post-Industrial Frontier:
***Gran Torino* as Lens into Masculinity and Property in the Post-Industrial City**

The late twentieth-century history of Detroit is frequently marked by the rebellion of 1967 as a “tipping point” in the narrative of the City. This moment typically marks its transition from “Model City” as delineated by President Johnson in 1965 to its narrative through the last three decades of the twentieth century as “Murder Capital, USA,” ground zero for the end of the U.S.’s stand as a great industrial power, and shorthand for the impacts of outsourcing and “out of control” workers (in the form of the “over powerful” unions). More recently depictions of Detroit push the emphasis on the emptiness of the City, of Detroit as a City that is no longer *feeling* the impacts of de-industrialization, but a City that *is* de-industrialized and subsequently left as decaying, dead, and done. People utilize Detroit to postulate about the death of modernism, industrialization, and the demise of American industry. I posit that Detroit embodies the idea of post-industrial frontier, a space that used to be center of industry but is now recalled for its emptiness and abandonment of industry. In that abandonment of industry, capitalism, and people there is the perception of a near return to a “state of nature” where the urban prairie begins to physically overtake the industrial past and the government and institutions left behind are not able to control or serve the population left behind—representing the spatial and racial frontiers of industrialization taken to its most extreme.

This chapter positions the film *Gran Torino* (2008) as a frame to illustrate both the broader cultural representations of Detroit and as an alternative form to understand

the lasting impacts of housing and city policy. While the chapters in Part I of the dissertation focus on the role of public policy in the creation of Detroit and housing in the spatial imaginary, the chapters in Part II provides a reflection of how those policies impact the cultural imaginary long after their implementation. As such, *Gran Torino* is a cultural document that reflects historical reality, and is a byproduct of Detroit's role in the spatial imaginary. *Gran Torino* serves as a reflection of the cultural imaginary produced about Detroit, linking notions of racialization and spatialization not only in the production of policy and spaces, but utilizing the space of film as a window to understanding the representation of Detroit through a cultural artifact produced in and representing Detroit.¹ While at once the film is both Detroit-specific, it—much like the city itself and its representation as quintessential post-industrial American city—serves as a larger frame for regional and national ideas.² Filmed and set in Detroit, *Gran Torino*, a box office success³ was released on December 12, 2008; the same day that the Bush White House announced that, “it was prepared to intervene to prevent the collapse of General Motors and Chrysler after Republican senators

¹ The usage of film to analyze the discursive production of the city follows along the lines of Steve Macek's work in *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic Over the City*, 2006, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

² Important to note here that the film's writer, Nick Schenck wrote the screenplay in Minnesota and set in Minnesota. Eastwood's production team decided to move the film location both in terms of actual filming and narrative setting to Detroit according to http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/01/08/nick_schenk/ The moving of the film setting from Minnesota to Detroit serves to perpetuate the idea that Detroit has long-served as archetypal post-industrial city and that many of the tropes that Eastwood's *Gran Torino* engages link to a larger cultural imaginary of the post post-industrial Midwest.

³ It earned a domestic box office gross of \$148 million, spending five weeks in the box office Top 5, ultimately screened on over 3,000 screens and remained in theaters for 27 total weeks. <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=grantorino.htm>

blocked a compromise proposal to rescue the automakers.”⁴ As the signature industry of Detroit was in dire circumstances, *Gran Torino* flashed on the screen revealing the after-effects of the long road to Detroit’s demise. Set in a present-day dystopia where immigrant youth of color roam the streets in gangs and “native” Detroiters’ resort to vigilante justice, *Gran Torino* becomes a stand-in to understand the local, national, and global processes that simultaneously produced Detroit as a global city and global graveyard. In its haunting allegory it ignores the social and governmental processes that led to Detroit’s depopulation and the broader institutional processes that ghettoizes poor and working class people of color and instead sees race, racism, and deindustrialization on a personalized level. As such, the symbolic characters in the film represent both personal failure and achievement neutralized from the institutional structures that provide for the economic, historical, and ideological investment in whiteness as discussed and developed in Part I of the dissertation. The film relies on tropes of the individual and as such ushers in a perception of a post-racial America, where individuals are equally mocked for ethnic difference and make their own fortune through hard work.

At *Gran Torino*’s helm is Clint Eastwood as both actor and director. In this role Eastwood as both cultural icon and auteur imprints the film itself nearly as much as the script. In Eastwood’s Detroit frontier landscapes—as evoked by the emptiness of the city—and vigilante justice ring through in what many have deemed “a story of

⁴ Labaton, Stephen and David M. Herszenhorn. “White House Ready to Aid Auto Industry,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2008. This was one of the last major fiscal decisions that the Bush White House made as a lame duck. According to a later *New York Times* article, December 19, 2008, by Labaton and Herzenhorn, “Bush Aids Detroit, But Hard Choices Wait for Obama,” by mid-January 2009 13.4 billion dollars would be injected into the auto industry.

redemption”⁵ through the reform of a lifelong racist. But it remains the story of Dirty Harry’s redemption, not the redemption of the City of Detroit. In his last stand for justice Eastwood leaves behind a filmic city of abandonment in a continuous cycle of violence—a city now for young youth of color—as his final showdown marks the representative abandonment of the last white man standing.

As Part I of the dissertation deconstructed the building of the black-white spatial imaginary vis-à-vis institutional processes of slum clearance and public housing, Part II of the dissertation provides a methodology to look back at the processes from the perspective of the after-effects of those policies. Taking a cue from Robert G. Lee, this chapter “takes up popular culture as a process, a set of cultural practices that define American nationality—who “real Americans” are in any given historical moment.”⁶ This then is not a filmic analysis, but utilizes a filmic representation of popular culture to provide a genealogical analysis of the ontology of the post-industrial frontier. As others have linked both the crisis of housing and slum clearance to the “urban crisis” in Detroit in the late twentieth century⁷, Part II begins not with post-industrial Detroit, but the representations of the post-industrial frontier as embodied by Detroit. In so doing, the “crisis” of the City, while linked to globalization as invoked by post-industrialism, is more than loss of jobs or industry—

⁵ See for example Harti, John. “Gran Torino: Dirty Harry’s Redemption.” *Seattle Times*, December 25, 2008. http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/movies/2008558008_mr25gran.html

⁶ Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 6.

⁷ See for example Sugrue, Thomas J. 1996. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press and Capeci, Dominic J. Jr. 1984. *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

but the crisis produced by longer trajectories of the mobility and immobility of populations in regards to access to home and property. *Gran Torino* then works not to deconstruct de-industrialization, but to construct narratives of the cultural imaginary that result and impact the spatial imagining of Detroit. As such, I argue that *Gran Torino* illuminates the tropes of the post-industrial frontier and provides a methodology to link housing policy to processes of globalization and imperialism. In particular these links are made through my analysis of a crisis of white heteronormative masculinity produced by deindustrialization that historically relied upon both work and property to be productive. In so doing I argue that the characters, plot, and narrative of *Gran Torino* under gird a more symbolic representation not of interpersonal racism and reform, but of a City that has been “left behind,” a post-industrial frontier, representing a globalizing racial frontier defined by the anxieties and crisis of white masculinity. And at its core is a Detroit whose most meaningful symbols—homes and property, future/frontier, social mobility, and defense of home and homeland provide allegories of the post-industrial frontier.

Masculinity of the Motor City: Dirty Harry’s Post-Industrial Frontier

WALT

“I worked in a Ford plant for thirty years and my son sells Japanese cars.”

Detroit is symbolic as the historic center of the automobile industry and the epicenter of demise of not only that industry, but of U.S. industrialism as a whole. Detroit grew because of consumer demand for automobiles and the workers needed to produce those automobiles. Detroit’s identity has long been linked to both the

production of automobiles and the workers who worked on the line for hours at a time, making cars on the assembly line day in and day out. The shift that happened in the automobile industrial production was not also a shift in terms of design, marketing, research—as those functions still very much take place at the Global Headquarters of the Big Three,⁸ which are still located in the Detroit area. It was the shift that happened in terms of *production* that most impacted the men working on the line and the working class men in particular. As production and manufacturing continually moved overseas—those are the jobs that were lost, that are not coming back, and that are represented as the loss of “American” jobs to foreign competition from Asian countries like Japan. The anger of the lost jobs has been placed and targeted towards Asian car manufacturers as well as Asian workers who work for considerably less than unionized American workers.

To engage and trace Detroit’s shift from a national center to a post-industrial frontier, one must also understand the parallel shift of the automobile industry. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Detroit grew in population and prominence largely due to the automobile industry. In the last forty years, Detroit’s reversals in population and prominence have also mirrored the change in industrial production. The displacement is impacted by the United States’ political and economic commitment to neoliberalism, which privileges the free market and produces an increasingly privatized public sector with overall emphasis placed on market gains.⁹ For example

⁸ Big Three is commonly understood industry and Detroit-area shorthand for: GM, Ford, and Chrysler corporations.

⁹ See for example Lisa Duggan, 2003, *The Twilight of Equality?* for a discussion of how neoliberalism not only privileges the private sector, but emerged in and through cultural and identity politics.

U.S. automakers, in order to gain industry-wide global dominance focused on increasing production of its product beyond a domestic market and decreasing its commitment to U.S. autoworkers. These themes are important, as tropes of manufacturing and capitalism are often the primary rubric to understand the changes in Detroit and its shifting role within the auto industry from a place of industrial production to mainly a location of research and development.

Detroit is significant for the ways in which its rise to national prominence in the twentieth century is a marker of the modern industrial moment of Fordism, Taylorism and a perfection of the growth of capitalism. Fordism and Taylorism, techniques that prioritize the fragmentation and disembodiment of work into particularized processes to increase profit through the automation of tasks, were perfected on Detroit's automotive assembly lines. Globalization uses similar techniques—the fragmentation of research, development, manufacturing, and marketing to increase profits. This project is significant for the ways in which understanding local and global identity emphasizes and helps to understand the deep ideological investments involved in not only producing American identity, but also providing rationale for modern day globalization.

This work uses the perspective of one post-industrial city, Detroit, to map the regional, national, and global processes at play and the ways in which globalization works specifically in a localized context that relies on local understanding, but cannot be separated from particular global realities. For example within the Detroit region although the Big Three's leadership wants local/national consumers/workers to believe

that they are losing profits due to increased domestic competition from Toyota, Honda, and others, there is the reality that the corporations choose to move production to places where labor is available at lower costs and to court the expanding consumer markets of China and India. As Saskia Sassen points out, “as Detroit has lost jobs to overseas factories, New York and Los Angeles have gained jobs managing and servicing the global network of factories.”¹⁰ On the one hand there are popular political, corporate and media tropes of American jobs and American workers; and on the other there is the reality of processes of consumption and production that produce and create global expansion that relies on an economic colonization and new industrial sites mediated through supra-national economic organizations and policies such as the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement.

I see the ways in which I posit Detroit in direct relation to Saskia Sassen’s (2001) formulation of “global cities.” Sassen’s work forwards the idea that as manufacturing and production become increasingly dispersed, the financial and corporate infrastructures that support that dispersion are increasingly located in and continue to develop existing global cities. In this framework Sassen acknowledges, “cities such as Detroit, Liverpool, Manchester, and now increasingly Nagoya and Osaka have been affected by the decentralization of their key industries at the domestic and international levels.”¹¹ Sassen’s work explores the growth and emergence of global cities and my work understands the processes at work in

¹⁰Sassen, Saskia. 1998. *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York: The New Press, 46.

¹¹ Sassen, Saskia. 2001. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 7.

producing what I might posit as global cities left as *post-industrial frontiers*—emphasizing the role of globalization in creating these cityscapes as well. Post-industrial frontiers exist as the remnants of global cities—as urban behemoths made and unmade by the shift in industrial productions.

As Sassen hints, thriving global cities, centers of financial and corporate infrastructure, would not exist without their counterparts—the Detroit's or Tijuana's, the shop floors of the world. As production and manufacturing increasingly is spread to locations where labor can be hired and resources exploited at ever-lower rates, the global cities grow bigger and more powerful as the finances and associated people, products, and services that motor these global relocations are increasingly located in centralized spaces. And as production and industry keeps moving—the global cities grow and revolve around this movement, ever increasing. While the reverberations of this movement are felt in those places slated to become the next global graveyard, and stillness comes to these cities that have been mined and exploited to the limit—the world structure leaves these places as good as dead. And in their demise there is a refusal to acknowledge these spaces also as global cities manifested as the after-effect of industrial production.

I grapple with the complex identity that is produced not only within Detroit, but for the ways in which Detroit on some level represents an “every-city” version of the demise of the manufacturing industry and shift in production. In this rendering I recognize the deep and complex identity fluctuations at play that not only rendered Detroit “sacrificable” in the context of global industrialization, but also at the same

time the identities that allow for its resiliency against all odds. Despite its intentional and willful relegation to a slow death, propped up by statistical discussions of its decreasing population, per capita income, mayoral ethics, it still motors along.

Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* gets its name and narrative device from the 1972 Ford Gran Torino, a muscle car of the era. The film itself is less about the car itself and is actually more about home, house, and neighborhood as symbolic of Detroit's struggle to identify itself in the post-industrial moment as in the context of the new American frontier of globalization. The narrative that the car engenders about race, masculinity, and Detroit working-class identity—can all be tied to and typified vis-à-vis the American automobile and the city and workers that produced it. The film's central protagonist, Walt Kowalski, played by Clint Eastwood, represents much of what Detroit historically was, but is not part of the its twenty-first century present. Walt Kowalski, retired autoworker, by all accoutrement a working-class, Korean war veteran, whose last name underscores his Polish immigrant heritage, begins the film at his wife's funeral surrounded but clearly separated from a family who is bored by him and doesn't understand why he continues to remain in his Detroit neighborhood, while his children and grandchildren are happily living in large suburban homes. Walt embodies a particular Detroit narrative—European immigrant roots, job on the line making cars, working man, service to Ford, country, and home. In Clint Eastwood's Detroit those jobs, like the one that he had, working on the line, producing *something* are long gone.

Instead, this movie is about the *new* city and its denizens. In the film Eastwood plays protagonist Walt Kowalski, a cantankerous and racist elderly Korean War veteran who buries his wife in the opening scenes of the film and is secretly living with an unnamed illness that results in him coughing up blood. The film pivots around the emerging relationship and interactions between Kowalski and his teenaged Hmong neighbors Thao and Sue Lor. Eventually the Lors and Kowalski form friendships as they both navigate the post-industrial Detroit landscape. Many reviewers discuss this film through the reform of a lifelong racist who makes the ultimate sacrifice for his Hmong American neighbors. However, this film may be most aptly read less as commentary on racist reform, and more as “proof” of the post-racial rhetoric and ideas that simultaneously flooded mainstream media during the historical campaign and election of Barack Obama to the White House.¹² And *Gran Torino*’s final scenes, in the death of the elderly white man who represents older forms of racism, as he passes on his most valued possessions to the youth in the film—his car, dog, and house—represents a symbolic passage from the racism of old, to the post-racial racism of new.¹³ This chapter goes beyond a reading of reformed racism

¹² *Gran Torino* was released December 12, 2008, a month after the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. For more information on post-racial and colorblind American in the Obama era see for example Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists* (2010) and Tim Wise’s *Colorblind* (2010).

¹³ Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation* (1994) trace the rise of political universalism in regards to race to the Clinton administration’s policy in conjunction with the neo-conservative move towards color-blind policies that treat *all* as equal—understanding and articulating white victims of racial policy. Nikhil Pal Singh’s *Black is a Country* (2004) positions the rise of color-blind universalism during the Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidencies. The impulses of multiculturalism, color-blind universalism, and post-racialism pivot around the idea of present equality of the *individual* despite the systemic and institutional historic and contemporary biases that have been and continue to be racialized and rest upon a division from historical and institutionalized discrimination in order to forward the false promise of equality.

and its attendant slippage into post-racial equality through the linkage of the institutionalization of race and masculinity that produced the city-space that Walt Kowalski and his Hmong neighbors inhabit. As such, it offers a critique of the redemption of Walt Kowalski and the Hmong neighbors he both verbally abuses and “saves” in the course of the film, and positions this film as less about a positive reading of the “promise” of the future, and more about an allegory of the spatial imaginary of the post-industrial frontier of Detroit. Detroit simultaneously represents the industrial promise and the industrial demise of the United States. In the words of the *New York Times* review, *Gran Torino* is, “a sleek, muscle car of a movie Made in the U.S.A., in that industrial graveyard called Detroit.”¹⁴ And as such it’s a movie both about the tropes of Detroit and of America. The Detroit of *Gran Torino* is the Detroit of a left-behind time and place and is some ways in less about the ideas of redemption, but provides a commentary on the perceived crisis of the working-class white man, and the longing for a racially separated society whereby the inherent possessive investment in whiteness and maleness is what guaranteed for jobs and an industrial outlet for “good jobs” that root the American Dream. The film registers a longing for the “good old days” of steady work at a good wage for working class whites while simultaneously serving as a portent for the future—that those days, that City is forever gone as represented by the death of Walt Kowalski, the last representation of that time, in the closing scenes of the film.

¹⁴ Dargis, Manohla. “Hope for a Racist, and Maybe a Country” December 12, 2008. *New York Times*.

Therefore, the film can be used to think through specifically the perceived crisis not of de-industrialization per se, but the idea of “crisis” of masculinity¹⁵ as evidenced by the loss of jobs for white men and the fact that these jobs are being performed not even domestically, but abroad by a highly feminized workforce of people of color. In particular the perceived “threat” to the automobile industry jobs in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the perception of Asian dominance of first the industry and then of the cheaper means of labor production.

“[Would it] Kill you to buy American?”

Walt under his breath after son drives away in a Toyota Land Cruiser.

Walt Kowalski and his son Mitch represent different modes of production and time periods of the auto industry. Walt’s character, represented as honorable and hardworking, also represents the industrial worker of the past—the white, working class man who was able to provide and buy a home for his family with a high school education through a job on the line at Ford. And Mitch’s character, represented as a self-involved middle-class professional, disinterested in his aging father, also represents the shift of Detroit from center of auto production to center of auto research and development. As such, the jobs for the working class continue to disappear, regardless of the fact that Detroit is still center for automobile research and development as Ford, GM, and Chrysler all maintain their global headquarters in the Detroit area. Detroit, long the center of the Big Three, has a company town ethic which means since many people either work for the auto industry or work for an auto

¹⁵ The “crisis” that I delineate here is akin to the “crisis” that Gail Bederman posits in her 1995 monograph, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, wherein threats of job and political dominance of middle-class men by working class and immigrant men served as a threat to white middle-class notions of masculinity.

supplier, there has long been a cultural resonance to “Buy American,” not simply as a nationalistic impulse, but from an economic perspective. This fear of both the Japanese auto industry and the cheaper, more productive workers in Asia led to a hate-crime murder in 1982 that intimately links together both the automobile industry and the construction of Asia as the foreign, enemy, “other.”

In June 1982 during a widespread recession and amidst massive layoffs and cutbacks within the Detroit auto industry, there existed a particularly regional and national animosity towards Japanese automakers as the Big Three blamed competition from Japanese automakers as reasons for declining profit and U.S. market share. This atmosphere was particularly heightened in the Detroit region as the world headquarters of GM, Ford, and Chrysler. On the night of June 19, 1982 Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American man, was at a strip club on the eve of his wedding when an altercation broke out between Chin and two laid-off autoworkers. During the altercation one of the assailants yelled, “It’s because of motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work,” mistakenly assuming that Chin was Japanese. Regardless of the mistaken identity—the racialized intent of bludgeoning an Asian American man to death with a baseball bat was clear. The final sentence for the assailants was probation and a fine and they never served a day in jail for the murder of Vincent Chin.¹⁶ As Walt mutters to his son, “Kill you to buy American?” there is evidence in

¹⁶ This event became a point of solidarity and pan-Asian activism in Detroit and nationwide. For more information on the incident please see Tajima and Choy (1987) *Who Killed Vincent Chin*; Helen Zia (2000) *Asian American Dreams*; Amerasia Journal. 2002. Special Issue, “The Politics of Remembering.” Vol 28 (no 3).

the local historical relevance of Chin's murder that in fact, Chin was murdered not because he didn't *buy* American, but because he was *perceived* as not American.

Not only does this event mark a moment that links together the idea of Asian-bodies as representative of the economic "threat" from Asia, but also the crisis of white masculinity brought on by globalization. In addition to understanding Chin's murder from the narrative of him as an Asian American body, the event needs to be read through the lenses of manhood, masculinity, sexuality, and the ways in which the event underwrites a narrative and sensibility about racialized white heterosexual male sexuality. The Chin murder was entirely about Chin not performing ideas of socially constructed and expected Asian American male gender and sexuality and is in fact about him performing and asserting his heterosexual male privilege in a strip club.¹⁷ As Japan's dominance over U.S. automakers left the Detroit economy in a state of impotence and Chin asserted his sexual dominance over Ebens in securing the attention of a female dancer and then his physical dominance over Ronald Ebens as a fight broke out stemming from Ebens reaction to Chin's assertion of masculinity. Ebens and Nitz reacted to these dual assaults of their subject position and beat Chin to death with a symbolic phallus—a baseball bat—to reassert their white male dominance. This event positions the Detroit crisis of white masculinity in the height of the globalization of the automobile industry and the murder of Vincent Chin becomes symptomatic of the loss of power of workers—not just as a racial hate crime.

¹⁷ In my analysis of the film, the interviews with the dancers Starlene and Racine are particularly interesting in what they reveal about gender relations and the assertions of male dominance present preceding the moments of violence.

Although the murder of Vincent Chin occurred almost thirty years ago, many of the same anti-Japanese, anti-Asian sentiments abounds in the Detroit area. In April 2006, during an intermission of a hockey game at Joe Louis Arena, home of the Detroit Red Wings, a Toyota sport utility vehicle took center ice and the hometown crowd booed the automobile, not Detroit's opponent, the Edmonton (Canada) Oilers.¹⁸ In regards to this show of anti-Japanese behavior, Ford's Chief Executive Officer, William Clay Ford Jr., warned that, "blind patriotism to Detroit's old ways is dangerous," grappling with the reality though that, "this is an insular industry and an insular town."¹⁹ As Ford acknowledges, the old attitudes are hard to break, yet at the same time, "union members at Ford's local plants decided...to kick everything but Ford vehicles out of the choicest [parking] spots." As Michelle Maynard, then Detroit Bureau Chief of the *New York Times* noted, these ideas are not new. While employees and supporters of the Big Three are no longer, "taking sledgehammers to foreign cars at special events," like they were in the 1970s and 1980s, there still exists animosity towards foreign (Asian) automakers, despite the local hiring by Toyota, Nissan, and Hyundai.²⁰ Even still the union members at Ford's local plants voted to ban non-Ford cars in the prime parking lots. Now, " 'non-Ford-family' cars and trucks are relegated to far-off parking spaces."²¹ The animosity presents a very local application and understanding of the processes of globalization—revealing it simultaneously as an intimately local process. It is through this understanding of the *local* that the

¹⁸ Maynard, Michelle. 2006. "Detroit Grapples With a New Era: The Not-So-Big 3." *New York Times*. May 11, 2006. Late Edition - Final, Section A, Page 1, Column 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

particular crisis of work, nativism, and masculinity in Detroit becomes symptomatic of the larger national and global processes, demarcating the borders of the post-industrial frontier.

“Is you a boy or a girl, I can’t tell.”
Latino Driver to Thao Vang Lor

Asian American masculinity in both history and popular culture has long been considered a site of contested masculinity. From the early configuration of Asian “bachelor communities” to the later portrayal of Asian men as sexually deviant, as Yen Le Espiritu writes, “the material existence of Asian American men has also been historically at odds with the traditional construction of “man.””²² Espiritu and others posit that the construction of Asian American men (and women) has much to do with both immigration policies and the labor functions that Asian American men performed.²³ David Eng’s *Racial Castration* (2001) at its center, “insists that sexual and racial difference cannot be understood in isolation.”²⁴ As such, he centers cultural productions to, “consider from numerous angles the impact of gender and sexuality on the racial formations of Asian American men.”²⁵ Both Espiritu and Eng yield the conclusion that the enfiguring of Asian American men as emasculated serves both a political and labor function of maintaining Asian Americans as differently included in labor and culture. As Robert G. Lee’s *Orientalism* (1999) further shows, “The ‘common understanding’ of the Oriental as racialized alien...originates in the realm of popular

²² Espiritu, Yen Le. 1997. *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 111.

²³ Ibid, 111-12.

²⁴ Eng, David L. 2001. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

culture, where struggles over who is or who can become a “real America” take place and where categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race are defined.”²⁶ Lee’s distinction begins to open up the idea and difference between *citizenship* and *nationality*, which are not mutually constituted categories. Devon Carbado’s conceptualization of “racial naturalization”²⁷ provides a model by which to understand how citizenship and inclusion in the nation-state differs from social belonging in the nation-state. The line between what he terms “formal citizenship” and “social citizenship” is drawn along the naturalization and denaturalization of American identity based on race.²⁸ Carbado employs the examples of black contemporary identity, black slave identity, and Japanese internment identity to illuminate the shifting context of citizenship and American identity. Conceding that all three of these identity groups do not have equality within the nation-state, Carbado notes that while Japanese internment identity and Contemporary black identity both have/had formal citizenship, Japanese are seen outside of American identity. And that while black slave identity had no formal citizenship, had American identity.²⁹ These are the underlying tropes of both Asian American identity and Asian American masculinity that underlie the film’s representations and ideas.

Walt’s narrative is that of a working class sensibility made good. While Walt’s embodies the working class male narrative of thirty years on the assembly line and hard work and service to country—comfortable existence without the college

²⁶ Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 5.

²⁷ Carbado, Devon W. 2005. “Racial Naturalization.” *American Quarterly* 57(3):633-658.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 640.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 642.

degree. During the scene where Walt reveals his specific relationship to the Gran Torino, he tells Thao that, “I put the steering column in the Gran Torino when it rolled down the line in 1972.” In the same scene, as Thao works in Walt’s garden, Thao tells Walt that he might be interested in a job in “sales” as Walt reveals that his son sells Japanese cars. In this scene the idea of “sales” is entirely abstract and seen as separate from the actual *production* of cars, as evinced by the fact that Walt inserted the steering column—the mechanism by which his Gran Torino is able to be driven—in his own car, in contrast to his son’s car not produced by Walt or even *Americans*, but *sold* to Americans. As such Walt emphasizes the nostalgia for that job on the line and also evokes the notion that men build things with their hands, that men make things. And while Walt’s son doesn’t produce anything, “sales” clearly represents itself financially in the son’s large suburban home. The shift from one generation to the next marks the shift of labor performed by white men in the U.S. College-educated personnel perform the “sales” and intellectualized functions of jobs and the production jobs are increasingly not performed in the U.S. but by a globalized workforce of people of color.

As mentioned above, in this scene Thao is gardening and talking to Walt from his position on the ground and Walt is standing up so by virtue of camera angles Thao is looking up and Walt is looking down. As the camera moves back and forth Walt, standing tall, erect, smoking a cigarette even though he has been coughing up blood, is juxtaposed to Thao, crouched on the ground in a small compacted form, weeding the garden. This is the second time that Thao is seen gardening in the film after being

chastised the first time by the Hmong gang for performing “women’s work.”³⁰ This time the gardening conversation with Walt revolves around getting a “real job.”

While Thao initially expresses interest in school and sales, the result of this conversation is Walt securing for Thao a job in the construction trade. This is a job that is typically gendered as male and also increasingly performed by immigrants and undocumented migrants and presents an interesting choice for Thao.

THAO

“Yeah, but I don't have a job or a car or a girlfriend.”

When Walt decides that he can use his connections to try and get Thao a job in the construction industry, he tell him, “We have to man you up a bit,” and the next scene shows Walt and the barber, Martin, trying to “man up” Thao. After Thao’s first attempt to, move from some, “pussy kid” to talking, “like a man,” Walt and Martin give Thao some advice on what to say:

MARTIN

“Be polite, but don't kiss ass.”

WALT

“Or, even better is act like you just got off a construction job. Or bitch about your girlfriend or getting your car fixed.”

MARTIN

“Right. Son of a bitch, I just got my brakes fixed and those sons a bitches really nailed me. Screwed me right in the ass.”

And it is at this juncture that Thao states that he’s got none of these things. As Ly Chong Thong Jalao comments on this scene, Thao “has none of the trappings of

³⁰ At an earlier moment in the film, Smokie says to Thao: “I mean, look at you, out here working in the garden like a woman.”

successful American masculinity.”³¹ This scene is evocative for its multiple registers of meaning. First, the idea that “manliness” and “masculinity” is about a job, a girlfriend, and a car—the ideal working-class heterosexual male. Yet, at the same time it also falls back on the trope of Thao, not just as a kid that needs mentorship, but as Martin says, “a nip kid.” It is in Thao’s second attempt to “talk like a man” that the idea of Thao not just as a kid, but an Asian American male are most clearly revealed.

WALT

“Just go back outside and try it again. And don't mention you're a pussy with no car, girl, job, future or whatever. Come in and act like a man, Toad.”

THAO

“Excuse me, sir, I need a haircut, if you ain't too busy... you Italian son-of-a-bitch prick barber.”

Walt and the Barber laugh...

THAO

“Boy does my ass hurt from all the guys at my construction job.”

Walt and the Barber laugh harder.

In this dialogue, the culmination of the teachings of two (white) men on how to be a man, Walt tells Thao not *to be* a man, but to, “act like a man.” Far from getting the dialogue and banter, Thao clearly mangles his attempt to mimic Walt’s performance of masculinity. And it is the enfiguring of Thao’s mangling of idioms that has him making a statement about his emasculated sexuality—as David Eng states in regards to his analysis of *M. Butterfly*, “in...narratives of penile privilege, the Westerner monopolizes the part of the “top”; the Asian is invariably assigned the role of the

³¹ Jalao, Ly Chong Thong. “Looking Gran Torino in the Eye: A Review.” *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*, Vol. 5 (2010).

“bottom.””³² Therefore the trope of Thao as both foreign and in particular *Asian* is important to Thao’s failure to perform masculinity and evoke his penetration by other men. Walt, as a character, and as the symbolic referent of Clint Eastwood as character, captures and performs the ideal of masculinity, while Thao’s character is the “side-kick” almost masculine, but not quite. As such, his failure is necessary to affirm and uphold Eastwood as preeminent example of masculinity.

As Thao calls Martin an, “Italian son-of-a-bitch,” to mimic Walt’s performance of masculinity, it provides an opportunity to think through the positioning of the three older men in the film—Walt, Martin, and Mr. Kennedy, Thao’s boss at the construction site. They are all read as white men—but through Eastwood’s “manly banter” with each, they are also constructed as ethnically white men, Polish, Italian, and Irish respectively. It’s unclear if these ethnic assignations were made in order to show the “pervasiveness” of racism—the ways in which Eastwood and the other white men throw racial slurs at one another—or if these ethnic categories were used to harken back to the unstable relationship to whiteness each of these three ethnic groups had nationally and locally up through the mid-twentieth century. Alternately the referent to these men—hardworking business and property owners could be read as a model of successful immigrant narrative—the proven success of the American dream ideology vis-à-vis ethnic acceptance into whiteness. In fact, access to property and housing covenants were ways in which “whiteness” was solidified for ethnic groups.

³² Eng, David L. 2001. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1.

Neighborhood Frontier: Whiteness as Property

GRANDMOTHER

“Why does that old white man stay here? All the Americans have moved out of this neighborhood. Why haven’t you gone?”

The neighborhood where Walt and the Lor family live is never named. But the location of the filming is in Highland Park, a community that is completely surrounded by the City of Detroit.³³ Regardless of where precisely the film is set, the film itself takes place in the neighborhood. The majorities of the scenes take place in homes, on porches, in back and front yards, at the neighborhood bar, church, and barber shop. From a point of nostalgia this film is all about the moments when our cities and neighborhoods were part of something great. These places that make (or made) the American City great, are the places that Walt frequents, the spaces that Walt moves in and around in the City. They are the spaces that make the City like a small neighborhood for some, the eyes and ears of the streets. These spaces are directly oppositional to the suburban living that many Americans currently live where folks rarely know their neighbor. But in fact, as Part II of the dissertation reveals, this nostalgia for what once was in the city, is itself mediated by particular memories of the city. As Walt’s gaze is the gaze of the film, the audience is made to see the world

³³ Some read the location as an inner ring suburb and others as an older outlying neighborhood of the City proper. Detroit is 138 square miles large, and as a City of single family homes as discussed in chapter 1, the neighborhood itself looks much like any other neighborhood of bungalow homes built in the 1910s-1920s. Of note, Highland Park is the location where Ford operationalized the first assembly line after trials at his Piquette Avenue plant, the location of the Ford Motor Company’s \$5 day, as well as the City in which Vincent Chin was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat. While some consider Highland Park a suburb, it is in fact completely surrounded by the City of Detroit. It has an independent government for its 2.9 square miles, but is often grouped into the local and area realities of Detroit. Highland Park in recent years was under state control due to fiscal concerns and recently returned to local government.

through Walt's eyes and vision, which is also the vision of Eastwood as both actor and director. The vision of small town life, "safety" that Walt lives is directly mediated by his race. Walt's life, although taking place in the landscape of post post-industrial Detroit, feels more like a film taking place in a small town rather than the 11th largest city in the United States.

Walt looks around with disdain at his neighbors' houses.
Walt's property is perfectly kept, whereas his neighbors' houses are rundown.

Walt's eyes linger on every defect, gutter hangs, ripped screen doors, peeling paint.

Walt looks down at Daisy –

WALT

"Damn chinks let their yards go to hell. Polarski would turn over in his grave if he could see what they did to his lawn."

WALT

"I don't know why these goddamned slopes had to move to my block. This used to be a nice neighborhood."

Walt's house and the Lor's house are shown most frequently within the film. One reviewer, Francesca Tognetti, positioned the opening of the film as such, "this film works as a looking glass, reflecting two houses and the worlds living inside them: only separated by a...fence and by two adjacent gardens, two twin buildings mirror each other, by shaping their inhabitants' identities."³⁴ As such the establishing opening shots showing two parties in the neighboring houses—one celebrating birth, one celebrating death, and both showing the two male centers of film looking alienated within their own homes. As Tognetti goes on to argue—the houses and inhabitants,

³⁴ Tognetti, Francesca. "Gran Torino: a foreign neighbourhood" in *Other Modernities*, No. 2, 10/2009, 378-381.

while seemingly opposites at the beginning of the film emerge as mirrors for one another.³⁵ While the neighborhood initially serves as a point of contention for Walt, eventually it is the neighborhood and the work and effort that Thao puts into improving the neighborhood—as his unpaid labor is in service of debt to Walt and restore honor to his family—that brings Walt and Thao together as Walt serves as a mentor to Thao. And it is partially through Thao’s ability to “improve” the property in the neighborhood through hardwork that Walt sees Thao’s ability and commitment to maintaining property. As property forms so much of the backbone of the ideology of the American dream, it is central to analyze the historical significance of Walt’s investment in property and the idea of Thao’s learning to improve property as a symbolic attempt to mimic white masculinity.

Critical race and ethnic studies scholars have long established the relationship between race, citizenship, and gender to property in the United States.³⁶ As critical legal scholar Cheryl Harris so eloquently outlines the racial logics of property in her foundational text, “Whiteness as Property,” race becomes a historical dividing line between the ability *to own* property and the ability *to be* property.³⁷ Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro conceptualize the “racialization of state policy” which links historical government policy that barred African Americans from citizenship, occupations and contemporary welfare state policies that discourage wealth

³⁵ Ibid, 378.

³⁶ See for example Harris, Cheryl. 1993. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 106 (8): June 1993; Lipsitz, George. 1998. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; and Hong, Grace Kyungwon. 2006. *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

³⁷ Harris, 1993.

accumulation to slavery.³⁸ As Part I of the dissertation shows, these policies and practices impacted Detroiters as well. The ways in which citizenship and property has been applied to groups results in difference in terms of racialization and understanding. On the one hand, after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, African American men were supposed to have legal access to citizenship and property. However, as Part I shows, even in the face of legislated equal access, the reality is that decades of formal and de facto laws barring access to both social citizenship and property occurred in both the South and the North.

The United States' relationship to property and its articulation of an American identity are intimately linked. From the first conception of both the United States as frontier to be settled and the forcible removal and claiming of land as property from the indigenous population, along with the enslavement of people as property to build and grow the land, are some of the most powerful historical narratives in regards to citizenship and property in the United States. For example in the California State legislature a law was introduced in 1907 and passed in 1913, "declaring unlawful the ownership of 'real property' by 'aliens ineligible to citizenship.'"³⁹ Although the wording was vague, the law was intended to prohibit primarily Japanese, but also Chinese, Korean, and Asian Indian immigrants from owning land. It is interesting to note however, that the provision of the law stated more specifically prohibition to,

³⁸ Oliver, Melvin L. and Thomas M. Shapiro. 1995. *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge, p. 4.

³⁹ Takaki, Ronald. 1989. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books, 203.

“buy agricultural land or lease it for more than three years,”⁴⁰ thereby implying that it is okay vis-à-vis this “alien land law” for “aliens” to work the land, but not to claim ownership. From the 1878 act barring Chinese immigrants from naturalization until the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act whereby Japanese, as the last Asian ethnic group, are finally considered eligible for naturalization, “aliens ineligible for citizenship” primarily referred to Asian immigrants. However, many immigrants circumvented this restriction through their children, who being born in the United States were granted birthright citizenship, and therefore not considered aliens ineligible for citizenship. The Japanese were the most successful Asian group in establishing families, primarily due to less restrictive immigration requirements for men and women until 1917 and also the class-based restrictions that privileged educated and wealthy Japanese immigrants over those of the laboring classes. Therefore those who were able to immigrate were much better able to establish and form families because of the class and gender ratio of the immigrants. In doing, the leasing and purchase of land was enabled through the birth of an American son or daughter in the United States.

This right to property and citizenship however, did not in fact translate to rights or even citizenship or the permanence of property for Japanese Americans in particular, when Japanese Americans on the west coast were forcibly interned and pressured to sell or lose property because of internment. Therefore, property and its place in a community or neighborhood symbolizes much more than a marker of

⁴⁰ Chan, Sucheng. 1994. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. New York, Twayne Publishers, 46-47.

economic prosperity but becomes illustrative of the very idea of property as a right of the American born citizen, yet the property is contingent upon the current definition of citizen within the historical context. It is through this linkage of property ownership to citizenship that home ownership and property ownership become so contested when those seen outside of social citizenship attempt to access land and home as this is viewed not simply as an affront to the neighborhood, but to the existing racial, class, and gendered hegemony.

I revisit the historical significance of property and its link to citizenship to contextualize the relationships of property presented in *Gran Torino* as a way to understand the post-industrial frontier. Before understanding Walt Kowalski's relationship to his home and property, it is necessary to take a look back to the history of home ownership. By the early 1900s the United States began to be a nation of homebuyers and homeowners. As access to credit increased access to homes increased. The Federal Government in its role made large contributions and measures to ensure by the time the Great Depression began that most Americans would be able to hold onto their homes, ensuring that home ownership was and is a government priority. The creation of the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 was the federal government's attempt to reduce the rate of foreclosures, which by some estimates reached 1,000 per day in 1933.⁴¹

In Detroit in particular, long a cities of single family homes the increased accessibility of government backed mortgages served to further enable home

⁴¹ Collins, William and Robert A. Margo. August 1999. "Race and Home Ownership, 1900 to 1990." *National Bureau of Economic Research*. Working Paper 7277 <http://www.nber.org/papers/w7277>

ownership among the workers in the plants and industries that were building the nation's war munitions and automobiles. However, it is Detroit in particular that was ground zero in the contestation of homeownership for whom and in its city limits the bounds of home ownership were laid. While there were two cases of housing discrimination that reached national prominence in the 1920s and 1940s and pushed both public opinion and legislative policy on housing, it was the everyday battles for housing that most people of color and working class people faced. If one of the primary tenets of the American dream includes a home and family, then the limiting of access to the dream limits access to the social inclusion of citizenship.

In terms of this larger discussion and idea of property, it becomes most interesting that at the end of the film, after Walt has been killed that Walt's house does not go to his family or to his Thao, but to the church. I posit that this action can then be read in a few ways. First, the decision to not pass on his property to his children and increase their accumulated wealth, as white men have been doing in this country for centuries, becomes a deliberate disassociation from himself and his children—in effect cutting them off in the end for their behavior and greed. However, Walt, who took on the role of a father figure to Thao, did not leave his house to Thao either as a way for Thao and his family to accumulate wealth. Instead Walt leaves Thao the Gran Torino, a car. Basic economics tells us that a car, while an asset, is a depreciating asset. So while Walt Kowalski had the opportunity to pass on his house—his most tangible investment in whiteness and generational wealth—to Thao, he does not. So the second reading of this moment, I posit is about a clear and intentional denial and

prohibition of the passage of wealth onto not only Thao, but the significance of property to many immigrants and refugees and to the Hmong in particular, as a group that has historically been a stateless and migrant population—often pushed out because of ethnic persecution. While Walt will leave Thao his car, his dog, and some tools—it is the ultimate symbol of the property of whiteness that he does not give to Thao.

Defense of the Home Front: White Men with Guns

SUE

“So, what's with you, you have some sort of savior complex or something?”
(Sue to Walt after he breaks up the harassment of Sue by “the three black guys”)

Sue’s question to Walt resonates for more than his involvement in breaking up the harassment of Sue and her “wigger”⁴² boyfriend by the three young black men. It provides a segue into the conversation that Sue talks about Hmong involvement in Vietnam and settlement in the United States. The question and scene itself also sets up Walt as a protector and “savior” of the Lor family—now having “saved” both Sue and Thao from the young men of color who are present on the street. This scene with Sue and her boyfriend being harassed visually echoes the scene where the Latino gang harasses Thao and the Hmong gang steps in to “rescue” Thao. Both scenes take place

⁴² “Wigger” is commonly used as shorthand for “white nigger” or the presentation of white youth who mimic a representative style commonly associated with black urban youth. Nicola Rehling cites David Roediger’s research, “exploring early usages of the term “wigger” in Detroit, where it functioned as a derogative term for whites that were “overly” influenced by black culture, a meaning it has accrued elsewhere in the U.S. The term has also been deployed as a classist slur from white suburban kids to white working-class Detroiters. Yet “wigger,” Roediger notes, has also become a term of affection from blacks towards whites who seriously embrace black culture rather than being mere wannabes,” in *Extra-Ordinary Men* (2009), Lanham: Lexington Books, p. 194 note 2.

during the middle of the day on empty streets as Sue and Thao both walk past empty lots and vacant houses in completely empty cityscapes. Present day Detroit is peppered by images of abandoned lots and vacant homes. The emptiness of the landscapes make for Walt's entrance in the scene with Sue, riding in on a trusty steed represented by a white 1972 Ford F-series pick-up truck and the entrance of Hmong gang in the scene with Thao, arriving in a tricked out 1992 Honda Civic all the more visual. The cars symbolically work to represent and racially and ethnically mark their inhabitants as well as mark and punctuate the emptiness of the city streets. In the city that was built by the automobile industry—the lone automobile serves as an eerie haunting of the post-industrial landscape.

In these interactions the streets themselves are stark contrasts to most representations of inner-city streets—with a bustling street life, in that they are vacant and empty, surrounded by overgrown lots and empty plots where presumably houses and businesses once stood. In these scenes the only signs of life are the activities of the youth of color who drive and walk up and down these streets—with no clear destination—not a corner store or a central place to hang out or a job. These youth seem to be roaming the streets because that's all there is—no places to work or to consume, just the emptiness of the post-industrial frontier. However, Walt both consumes (in the bar, barbershop, haberdashery, and hardware store) and drives around the city with sense of destination. And in his comings and goings he witnesses the activities of the youth-filled city. And it is as these moments that he assumes “savior” role in relation to Thao and Sue.

It is in the relationship of both empty streets and the internal war between youth of color that Walt's Kowalski's subject position as a veteran of the Korean War provides a symbolic commentary on the twentieth century wars in Asia. Both the Korean and Vietnam Wars were Civil Wars that the U.S. entered to help the "good" side of a national conflict. The U.S. involvements are seen as wars for imperialism and the economic opening up for foreign markets for production, materials, and consumers. The Lor's presence in Detroit is a direct result of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam; Walt's fractured-self and anti-Asian sentiment is also a direct result of the U.S. involvement in the project of imperialism. An important piece that links the globalization of Asia-U.S. is the U.S. involvement in the wars in Asia. It was the U.S. involvement and attendant imperial relationship that opened up markets and produced the new American frontier, enabled by the labor and outsourcing of labor and capital into Asia and Southeast Asia. While soldiers and citizens are taught that wars are about the protection of the home front and to curb Communism/dictatorship, what is less frequently made clear is that wars are often about breaking open new markets for labor and capital. As such, Walt's crisis is not only the crisis of the "enemy" moving next door—in fact encroaching on the literal home front—but his dual crisis over his actions in war—a war that is less about democracy and more about capitalism.

SUE

"It's a Vietnam thing. We fought on your side and when America quit, the Communists starting killing the Hmong, so we came over here."

Many of the critical engagements of *Gran Torino* were written by scholars of Hmong Studies who questioned the presentation and representation of Hmong culture,

people, and tradition in the film. The presumed gaze of the film is Walt's gaze and like Walt many of the viewers likely saw the Lor Family as Chinese as he comments in an early scene, "What the hell did Chinks have to move into this neighborhood for?" Sue's quote above about the Hmong involvement in the Vietnam War is, as much of the "historical" and "cultural" information in the film, only partially true. The Hmong are considered a stateless people who, "migrated from southern China to Southeast Asia beginning in the early 1800s."⁴³ Although today a significant number of Hmong live in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, all of those who came to the United States as refugees were from Laos."⁴⁴ And while it was true that Hmong served on the side of the United States in Laos, the context of that service is a little more nuanced than simply, "we were on your side."⁴⁵ From 1961 to 1973 over 30,000 Hmong fought the "secret war" in Laos on behalf of the United States.⁴⁶ The Hmong involvement in the war had significant consequences on the population, "before the fall of [the capital of Laos] about a third of the Hmong population had been uprooted by combat, and their casualty rates were proportionately ten times higher than those of American soldiers in Vietnam."⁴⁷ After the U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam in 1975 the Hmong became direct targets of persecution by the newly established Lao People's

⁴³ I would like to thank Ma Vang for pointing me toward sources to aid my understanding of Hmong history in Southeast Asia as well as in the United States.

⁴⁴ Vang, Chia Youyee. 2008. *Hmong in Minnesota*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1.

⁴⁵ Kolyk, Jo Ann. 1998. *New Pioneers in the Heartland: Hmong Life in Wisconsin*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 3. The Hmong were, "recruited by the U.S. Army as a special force of guerilla fighters to control the mountainous border regions between Laos and North Vietnam and to block the movement of Communist forces and supplies. Funds from the Central Intelligence Agency supplied arms, ammunition, and food to the Hmong for their alliance and support."

⁴⁶ Vang, 2008, 1.

⁴⁷ Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2000. "Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian American," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, edited by Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood. New York: New York University Press, 178.

Democratic Republic. Physical and genocidal attacks against the Hmong caused many connected to U.S. military operations to flee into Thailand for their safety.⁴⁸ Although the Hmong were among the first to arrive in refugee camps in Thailand, “they were the least likely to be resettled by Western countries at the time. Most were to languish in Thai camps for years.”⁴⁹ And it is in this context, after years in camps, that the Hmong were eventually resettled in the United States.⁵⁰

In the context of Asian American panethnicity, and the tendency of many Americans, not only Walt Kowalski to assume that any person of Asian ethnicity is Chinese, or even that most Southeast Asians are Vietnamese belies the specific differences among Asian ethnic groups. While the model minority myth⁵¹ hangs heavy over the heads of Asian Americans and other racial minorities in the United States, it also serves to obscure the differences in statuses of economics, migration, education, and poverty between Asian Americans. For example, “some groups—Laotians, Hmong, and Cambodians—are still struggling at the very bottom of the social ladder, facing the risk of being trapped in the urban underclass.”⁵² For Hmong

⁴⁸ Kolyk, 1998, 3-4.

⁴⁹ Rumbaut, 2000, 178.

⁵⁰ And as Yen Le Espiritu pointed out, this resettlement is politicized, particular, and willfully located in urban centers marked by increasing poverty, deteriorating infrastructure, and declining significance to politicians.

⁵¹ Sucheng Chan states that the model minority thesis, “first surfaced in the mid-1960s when journalists began publicizing the high educational attainment levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, and absence of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems among Asian Americans. This publicity served an important political purpose at the height of the civil rights movement: proponents of the thesis were in fact telling Black and Chicano activists that they should follow the example set by Asian Americans who work hard to pull themselves up by the bootstraps instead of using militant protests to obtain their rights.” Chan 1991:167.

⁵² Zhou, Min and James V. Gatewood. 2000. “Introduction: Revisiting Contemporary Asian American,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, edited by Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood. New York: New York University Press, 29.

in particular, poverty rates hover at “more than 60 percent.”⁵³ In Minnesota for example, “Hmong refugees were concentrated in poor, urban neighborhoods...from the late 1970s throughout the 1990s Hmong refugees dominated the public housing complexes that were previously occupied primarily by African Americans, Latinos, and low-income whites.”⁵⁴ As such, for many Hmong their urban resettlement and their existence in spaces that have been racially marked as spaces of blackness result in their status as the “Asian underclass” and some, like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have gone on to posit that Hmong are part of the “collective black.”⁵⁵ And as discussed above—the role of the specter of “collapse” of American supremacy in Southeast Asia hangs heavy over the understanding of Hmong in the United States. As Robert Lee writes,

In the contemporary dystopian narratives of post-Fordist urban America, the Asian American is both identified with the enemy that defeated the United States in Vietnam and figured as the agent of the current collapse of the American empire. The Vietnam War story, told as the tragedy of America’s lost innocence, works as a master narrative of national collapse while defining the post-Fordist crisis as a product of invasion and betrayal.⁵⁶

In so doing, the Hmong doubly represent not only the United States failure in Southeast Asia, but also its failure as an industrial powerhouse in the United States. Thereby, the portrayal of Hmong Americans as neighbors to the ultra American Walt

⁵³ Zhou and Gatewood, 2000, 17.

⁵⁴ Vang, Chia Youyee. 2008. *Hmong in Minnesota*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 14.

⁵⁵ See for example Bonilla-Silva 2010 and his discussion of the new triracial order in the United States pp 179-188.

⁵⁶ Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Orientalisms: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 190.

Kowalski represents an affront both in terms of jobs and the defense of the home front/homeland.

Walt's home is his castle and in it, the achievement of the American Dream. The narrative of the film hints at the working class veteran's narrative—after the Korean War, Walt returns home a veteran, begins work in the Ford Factory for the next thirty years, and buys his home, which is his domain. It represents his piece of land where he raises his family, takes care of his lawn, and as the narrative shows, watches his other, presumably white ethnic working class neighbors die and move away. Walt's narrative—his ability to access home and property ownership is rooted in the racially biased housing subsidies that prioritized homeownership for veterans.

As I discussed in Part I of the dissertation, the Post WWII 1949 Housing Act in cooperation with Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Veterans Administration truly propelled many working class and middle class whites into single-family homes.

By 1950, the FHA and VA alone insured half of all new mortgages even as they, and other government agencies, standardized and rationalized real estate and financial practices for the market as a whole. Lengthened amortization periods, mortgage insurance, reduced monthly payments, lowered interest rates, and substantial tax benefits all brought homeownership within the grasp of the middle class for the first time. Ultimately, homeownership became more than an expectation for vast new segments of American society; it became an entitlement as well.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Hirsch, Arnold. "Choosing Segregation: Federal Housing Policy Between *Shelley* and *Brown*" pp. 206-225 in Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylyan, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 208.

In particular this was due to not only the access to financing for new homes, but also the freeways and infrastructure to support new housing communities were mainly underwritten by local, state, and federal governments. Explicitly at first, and implicitly after the passage of *Shelley v. Kraemer* government and private financing decided what and how communities would be built and occupied.

The FHA-VA did much to dictate what sorts of communities the fast-spreading suburbs of the postwar era would be. Drawing on America's wealthy and exclusive neighborhoods as models, Washington's vision of the ideal society emphasized privacy and homogeneity rather than diversity. Both agencies strongly favored single-family dwellings, with none of the small-scale rental housing traditionally intermingled in U.S. neighborhoods.... The FHA *Underwriting Manual* emphasized that suburbs must be arranged to promote strict separation of land uses.

(T)he FHA-VA ideal of homogenous communities included blatant discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and class. For many years, FHA did not approve mortgages for female-headed households. The *Underwriting Manual* required developers to guard against 'invasion' by lower-income residents or minorities. Builders were explicitly advised to write restrictive covenants into all deeds, legally blocking purchase by specific groups. 'If a neighborhood is to retain stability,' the manual stated emphatically, 'it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.' Between 1945 and 1959, less than 2 percent of all federally insured home loans went to African Americans.⁵⁸

As numerous scholars have written elsewhere and I discussed earlier in the chapter, the ramifications of this blockage of access to housing is felt for generations in terms of wealth accumulation as well as access to basic housing. In looking at *Gran Torino* to understand this narrative it is implied in ideas of the film, particularly the idea that Walt Kowalski, as a veteran, had access to VA mortgage loans.

⁵⁸ Hanchett, Thomas W. "The Other 'Subsidized Housing': Federal Aid to Suburbanization, 1940s-1960s" pp. 163-179 in Bauman, John F., Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, eds. 2000. *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p 166.

Urban Frontier: Youth of Color and the “New” Western

WALT

“Get off my lawn...In Korea, we stacked fucks like you five feet high and used you as sandbags.”

Clint Eastwood as both actor and director has built a career on the conceptualization of the “west”, vigilante justice, and the hero as ultimate symbol of masculinity.⁵⁹ Detroit is often represented as a masculine space, much like Eastwood’s filmic presentations as actor and director—a space of individual interpretations both of “justice” as well as redemption. Clint Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski as a modern cowboy, as “Dirty Harry” seeking “justice” as he knows how. Eastwood as a white, working class, Catholic man finds resonance with the hardscrabble identity that many whites in Detroit hold as their own. In this sense, Eastwood means for this particular audience to identify with Walt Kowalski.

Many reviewers and early buzz around the film speculated that *Gran Torino* represented the last stand in Dirty Harry’s long career of vigilante “justice” and the long shots that the film used to echo the filmic and photographic representations as Detroit as empty and desolate. In the film the city streets are a place of abandonment and emptiness. In the scenes that happen “on the street” rarely does a car pass by, a person pass by, or any other indicator that there is anyone else in this post-industrial landscape. In the film there is the saloon (represented as a VFW bar) and also hardware store, church, barbershop, and construction site. There are no schools, no institutions besides the Catholic Church (and the police who arrive near the end of

⁵⁹ See for example Engel, Leonard (ed). 2007. *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press.

film), no grocery stores, no internet, no cell phones, no computers. All at once the landscape is either part of the past or some kind of apocalyptic future. Machines and technology are represented by guns, cars, hand tools—a working past, rather than contemporary representations of electronics. Authority figures—police, priest, and lawyer are all weak in comparison to the strength and masculinity of Walt.

Clint Eastwood rose to fame as a film and television actor in the genre of Westerns and continued to be seen and celebrated as a solitary figure enacting a particularized notion of justice through his acting roles. As an actor and director, a double auteur, he grapples intimately with issues of white masculinity and in many ways, a fractured masculinity.

Eastwood takes us through some of the great images and symbols of American life through his engagement with classically American film genres from cowboy movies to police thrillers to boxing heroics...[his] films work with fragmented symbols that remain in order to engage masculinity with the most profound moral and ethical issues facing us today. Over and over again he returns us to that simple question: what does it mean to live a life as a good man in a complex and violent world?⁶⁰

Many of his characters, films, and roles depict a scarred masculinity and the challenge to “do what is right” in the face of adversity. Eastwood’s films are primarily male spaces whether they take place in “the West” or in the City with its main characters and scenes taking place among and between men. *Gran Torino* follows this formula in that the primary characters are men (and boys), and women play primarily plot

⁶⁰ Cornell, Drucilla. 2009. *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity*. New York: Fordham University Press, ix.

centered roles in the film with the exception of Sue. The Western imagery is there, of solitary men and groups of men. As Robert Lee writes:

Western imagery is often described as homosocial—that is to say, dominated by same-sex relations (like male bonding)... To describe the West as homosocial is not to deny its sexuality. The land itself was feminized in the metaphor of the virgin land, and the westward movement was imagined in terms of masculine penetration and conquest. In Western frontier imagery... the land may have been a woman, but it was a place where boys could be boys.⁶¹

In the film-space of *Gran Torino* this proves true as men are men, and boys are boys and the workings of masculinity continually play on-screen. Schein and Thoj present an apt critique of the role of Sue in the film. They write that on the one hand Eastwood presents Sue as a strong, fearless and, “coded as an anti-racist, proto-feminist consciousness fused with a street savvy that is undaunted by taunts and threats.”⁶² At once then Sue’s character represents a strong womanhood—protecting her family and herself. That is until the pivotal scene in the film where Sue is raped and beaten as retaliation by the gang against Thao and/or Walt. In that respect, what could be read as a strong representation of the film results in the reality of Sue’s role as that of narrative device and as the ultimate affront to masculinity—the rape of women as means of retaliation and as assertion of violence. In this sense the frontier violence is real as the “war” comes home in the form of sexual assault. As Schein and Thoj continue, “[Sue] is, in the end, reduced to a voiceless vehicle for struggles

⁶¹ Lee, Robert G. 1999. *Orientalisms: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 87-88.

⁶² Schein, Louisa and Va-Meng Thoj. “*Gran Torino*’s Boys and Men with Guns: Hmong Perspectives” in *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 10: 1-52, p. 26.

between men,”⁶³ and as such invokes the role of women in Westerns and Eastwood’s own filmography.⁶⁴ What *Gran Torino* and Eastwood continue to portray is that the post-industrial frontier, much like the western frontier is a space for men and boys to fight it out, in a war of all against all, where boys learn to be men.

To complete *Gran Torino*’s resonance and position in a context of the Western genre—the spaces of the film run parallel spaces in Western narratives. The VFW bar takes place of the saloon, the Hmong gang represents the outlaws, Father Janovich represents the town Priest or Reverend, and the barbershop exists as a barbershop. In fact the final barbershop scene in *Gran Torino*, when Walt asks Martin for a straight shave, evokes the razor shave that of the Western—often occurring as the hero prepares for the final gun-battle. At this moment the audience knows that Walt is preparing for a gun battle and his last stand against the Hmong gang. Although Detroit is not “the West” and *Gran Torino* is not a classic Western, in some respects it mimics elements of the Western genre of film. According to film theorist, Sue Brower,

The main project of the classic Western was to dramatize the settling of the West, a story animated by the figure who embodied both civilization and savagery, engaged in a conflict set on a territorial border between the two. Since the days of the classic Westerns, that terrain, both geographical and cultural, has also suggested a border dividing not just territory but also people who have a “right,” who “belong,” and those who do not.⁶⁵

⁶³ Schein and Thoj, 28.

⁶⁴ See for example *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976).

⁶⁵ Brower, Sue. ““They’d Kill Us if They Knew”: Transgression and the Western,” *Journal of Film and Video*, Volume 62, no. 4, Winter 2010, pp 47-57. (p. 50).

And as such, the film showcases the borders and boundaries of neighborhood. But the battles that happen in the neighborhood between neighbors is about *who* will inherit the city. In this it becomes clear that it is increasingly Walt Kowalski, the elderly white man who is out of place in the terrain—despite his preeminent “right to belong” as a property owner. Therefore home ownership becomes a clear symbol of right to the land. However, his murder in the form of self-sacrifice makes clear that he no longer belongs and is attempting to pass the city onto his friends, the Lors, rather than their dysfunctional cousins.

The far more interesting theme of *Gran Torino* is white displacement. Walt Kowalski is part of Harry Callahan’s America—white America—but that America is gone...But Walt, too, now faces a force he cannot control: demography. His house will pass from the white world to the non-white world. No white family will live in it after he’s gone...Since he can’t make his neighborhood more white, he tries to make his neighbors more white, and that is what the film is really about: white America graciously giving way to its non-white future. This is clear at the beginning, as Walt buries his wife while the Vang Lors welcome a new baby into their home.⁶⁶

While this review clearly dramatizes the sentiment as Walt Kowalski can be seen as anything less than gracious throughout the film—there is much in the film that can be read as Walt “teachings” as a form of assimilationist ideology. However, the America that is depicted in *Gran Torino* is devoid of white America and clearly has a non-white future—but it’s not about displacement. The whites have not been displaced—they have been given and maintain privileged access to capital and property in other suburbs and neighborhoods as can be seen from the narrative arc of Walt’s sons and grandchildren.

It is in the passing of the white man from the earth, from the city, that under girds this narrative of the urban frontier and the “new” urban city. Continuing along the lines of the “urban nightmare” and moral panic of the city developed in the 1980s and

⁶⁶ Webster, Stephen. 2009. “Elegy for the White Man,” in *American Renaissance*, September 2009: 10-12.

1990s⁶⁷ the post-industrial frontier shows the after-effects of those decades of criminality and lawlessness in the city. I posit that the filmic imaginary of Detroit's city-space is so empty because of the increase in incarceration rates of men of color.⁶⁸ The city that Thao, Sue, and the other youth are set to inherit is not the City of the past—founded on solid jobs for working people, homeownership, and the promise of the future. Instead the Detroit that remains has been beaten down by decades of government mismanagement, corporate abuse, and overall disinvestment—both fiscally and in the imaginary of the city. In *Gran Torino* Thao inherits not the property or the wealth, but the frontier. Contrary to popular imaginary, the City is not an urban wasteland—there is a marked shift in capital reconfigured toward service and urban farming. So perhaps Thao's ability to garden and to farm translates into the growth areas of urban farming in the City of Detroit.

In the final shot, just before the credits begin to roll on the screen, Thao is filmed driving the inherited Gran Torino, Walt's dog, Daisy, at his side. The shot begins with a close up of Thao and Daisy, inside the car. As the camera pans out the viewer sees that they are driving north down a long stretch of Lake Shore Drive, a street that runs the length of the exclusive and exclusionary route of the Grosse Pointes, the small village enclaves east of Detroit. Lake Shore Drive, long an address of wealth and prominence, includes the residence of Edsel and Eleanor Ford.⁶⁹ This scene can be interpreted in multiple ways. Is Thao driving away and out of Detroit,

⁶⁷ See for example Steve Macek, 2006. *Urban Nightmares*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶⁸ See for example Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

⁶⁹ Edsel Ford, only son of Clara Bryant Ford and Henry Ford. In 1919, at the age of 25 became President of the Ford Motor Company. Edsel and Eleanor Ford's Lake Shore Drive home was designed by famed architect Albert Kahn and is currently a privately run historical site.

now that he has the trappings of masculinity? Is he driving into his future? Is he just out for a drive? Regardless of the end point of Thao's drive, the use of the lens and the filmic strategy of moving from close up of Thao's face to long shot of the car speeding northward into the horizon, tells the view that he is clearly driving away from the City into something else—into an area of exclusivity, wealth, and prominence. This then asks the question of what does happen to the post-industrial frontier? Does it always look toward suburban settlement? The landscape around Thao and the Gran Torino shows the trees and wooded section of the drive, and although the grand homes and displays of wealth of Lake Shore Drive are hidden from the viewer, the Detroit viewer recognizes that landscape as geographically close, but worlds apart from Detroit.

In this chapter I have argued that the post-industrial city set for people of color to inherit has long been ravaged by acts of institutional and systemic racism. In the analysis of one particular film I attempt to draw parallels between the limits of the narrative of reform for an individual racist and the limits of an ideology of the color-blindness and equality of the twenty first century. Through the frame of the film *Gran Torino* the institutional and systemic impacts of racism on the landscape of Detroit are evident. Even as the central character overcomes decades of personally racist behaviors and actions, the larger work of the chapter reveals the need for an institutional understanding of racism in order to understand the long-lasting legacies of the possessive investment in whiteness.

Chapter Four: Digital Discourse and Memory of the City

“In reading your posts, I get the feeling that you felt gangs of ‘blacks’ were justified marching into peaceful neighborhoods inflicting unspeakable destruction and horror against the innocent residents. While agreed, the black residents did suffer from unfair racial prejudices,¹ violence was not the way to solve the problems. Violence, or the fear of it brought a once great dynamic City to its knees. Dr. Martin Luther King knew that violence was not the way. Too bad not enough people listened to him.”—SCBaker²

“What happens to race on the World Wide Web? And why should we assume that anything at all happens to race on the web? Many proponents of cyberutopia claim that the Internet is inherently democratic and color-blind because its users can engage with it anonymously. Because their race...need not be known to others when they engage in web chat, post texts to websites or news groups, or send e-mail, some believe that users’ identities can be “freed” from race when on the web.”—Lisa Nakamura³

This chapter utilizes the user forums on www.city-data.com, a website primarily focused on distributing and providing information on housing, homebuying, rental markets and relocation, to locate and analyze the production of contemporary ideas of race, place, and memory in and of Detroit. As the chapter shows, while on one hand the space of the Internet is different from the material spaces of the street, the ideas that flow between the “virtual” and the “real” recycle, reaffirm and mimic ideologies that produce and perpetuate the built environment and its racial imaginary. While Part I of the dissertation traced the rhetorical disassociation from race in policy formation, despite the intent to continue to create and destroy neighborhoods based on

¹ I am reproducing all user posts from the [city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com) forum as written including spelling and typographic errors throughout the chapter and for ease of reading have chosen not to mark each error with (sic). Additionally, I accessed the www.city-data.com/forum/detroit threads during January and February 2011. Each post in the threads are numbered in numerical sequencing beginning with #1 and extending as new posts are added.

² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #83

³ Nakamura, Lisa. 2002. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Routledge: New York and London, 101.

a racialized logic of separate and unequal, Part II seeks to understand how the possessive investment in whiteness is disappeared from the historical understanding of the trajectory of Detroit. We live in an era that uses the rhetoric of color-blindness rooted in a consensus memory⁴ that presupposes the Civil Rights Era and accompanying Movement achieved race equity in the United States. The institutionalization and production of the memory and narrative of Dr. Martin Luther King has been used to justify everything from the end of racism to the end of affirmative action and the work of the Civil Rights Movement more generally has been used as a redemptive narrative and consolidation of the United States racist past through the notion of one American nation.⁵ The rhetoric of “color-blindness” in America presupposes that each individual American has equal access to work, education, and housing in the United States. An analysis of City-data.com indicates that despite the rhetorical push that we are in a post-Obama era of “colorblindness”—the perceived anonymity of the website seemingly allows users to unleash their continuing investment in not only the meritocracy of the American dream, but more importantly, a continuing and perpetuating investment in the consensus memory of the City’s failure due to its increasing crime, disinvestment, and moral decay and its racialization as “black” in the late 20th century. At stake is the production of the narrative of Detroit’s past, present, and future. This work analyzes how the Internet,

⁴ Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford in their edited collection, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (2006) talk about consensus memory as related to the Civil Rights Movement as “a dominant narrative of the movement’s goals, practices, victories, and of course, its most lasting legacies” (p. xiv).

⁵ See for example Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 2010, *Racism Without Racists*, Nikhil Pal Singh 2004, *Black is a Country*, and Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford 2006, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*.

much like other forms of media, has the potential to create and maintain an investment in the discursive production of Detroit's failure and depravity as individualized and racialized. This continues to be the dominant narrative despite voices that aim to articulate a fuller understanding of the institutional investment in racist policies and practices.

The goal of this chapter, much like the rest of the dissertation, is to provide a site through which to analyze the discursive production of race in the urban spatial imaginary. As the locations in Part I focused primarily on "real" sites—brick and mortar locations, physical spaces that could be pointed to or produced on a map (until of course the map changed as streets were erased and filled in—disappeared from "the real"), the locations in Part II focus in particular on sites that are located primarily in the imaginary, but I argue no less "real" in the production of race than the sites and locations discussed in Part I. As such, the linkage of these two locations—the real and the imaginary work hand in hand to produce, enforce, and maintain the imaginary of race, memory and space in Detroit. The production of the cyber-spatial imaginary—the linking of race and space, much like the Internet itself happens everywhere and nowhere. This makes the city-data.com website itself an interesting site of analysis as its main purpose and objective is to specifically link users and information together about specific geographic places—creating and exposing the liminality of the borders of the virtual and the real as evidenced through the threads and content of the site. This analysis follows the trajectory of scholars of cyberspace who position the Internet and cyberspace, as one of Foucault's "other spaces." As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

states, “cyberspace lies outside of all places and its location cannot be indicated definitively, yet it does exist.”⁶ City-data.com exists not only within the Internet itself—but centers the existence of actual city-spaces, like Detroit.

This work methodologically follows the cyber-trails of Juana María Rodríguez’s *Queer Latinidad*, which analyzes the fluidity and instability in identity formation and representation, both on and off-line, as her methodology and sites of analysis “are both situated in a specific localized time-space framework and cognizant of the fact that each new combination of circumstances and readings will yield different interpretations.”⁷ Similarly, my analysis of the city-data.com/Detroit forum relies on my own situatedness with a particular eye towards understanding the production of race in both virtual and material spaces. The largest impact on the circuitry and flow of the “imagined” and real communities in which people live, work, and love is that ideas flow from webboard to newspaper to school to workplace and back and forth. In examining and analyzing the narratives of the web boards in an attempt to understand how contemporary Detroiters engage, understand and imagine their City, particular tropes and ideas are repeated and recycled again and again.

Cyberspace seems an apt place to analyze the production of race and space due to its seeming separation from location, from the body and from representations of race. Yet at the same time, it’s a place where race, nationality, class, and geography are intimately coded and codified in a space that appears limitless but is in fact limited by the same borders and frontiers of the real. The production of both space and

⁶ Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2002. “Othering Space” in *The Visual Culture Reader, Second Edition*, Ed Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, pp. 243-254. P. 243

⁷ Rodríguez, 32.

cyberspace are simultaneously virtual and real—happening in the imaginary as well as in the material. Even the language describing the Internet, the “information superhighway,” “cyberspace,” “electronic frontier” speaks and affirms a virtual place modeled after “real spaces.” The notion of “superhighway” in particular is an apt spatial mapping to the project at hand in this dissertation. And just like city and regional planners see highways as thoroughfares that allow users to drive over and around cityspaces rather than *within* the City itself—many of the users of the “information superhighway,” and the Detroit forum that I study specifically within this chapter, also approach the City from above and over, rather than from the spaces of the street. Much as prior chapters of the dissertation allude to the role of the highway in both enabling suburbanization, as well as urban renewal and slum clearance projects to clear neighborhoods to build highways, the information highway emerges in this chapter as well as the users “connect” to the City without passing through the city itself.

In the 1980s and 1990s cyberspace was conceptualized as the “next” frontier of technology and interconnectivity. And academic and practitioner texts studying the formation of the Internet began writing in the 1990s about the Internet as an ideal “community” space, wherein, there was hope that the internet would create an idealized utopian space transcending social identities and national borders.⁸ Earlier studies of cyberspace speak to the Internet’s possibility as a utopian space, a space of

⁸ “A cyber-house divided” *Economist*, 9/4/2010, Vol. 396 Issue 8698, p61-62.

limitless possibility⁹ and as an idealized democratic community space. And as such many of the earliest chat rooms and webspaces on the Internet were formed of, by, and for people to meet others with similar interests or geographic location.¹⁰

However, before the reality that borders in the “real” world would be rebuilt in the “virtual” world, there were high hopes for a cosmopolitan space that would be borderless and connect users across country and social strata.¹¹ This idea of an utopian idealized and imagined community echoed Benedict Anderson’s earlier production of idealized “imagined communities” through the advent of print capitalism.¹² Arjun Appadurai extends this notion of imagination in the era of globalization to formulate “imagined worlds” fueled by the dimensions of global cultural flows he terms “scapes”, of which technoscape is an important mode of flow.¹³ Like the communities linked through media, through circuits, scapes, and nodes—there are still those that are imagined as outside of the community—the deep horizontal citizenship even within the seemingly boundless site of the Internet.

⁹ Nakamura, Lisa. 2000. “‘Where Do You Want to Go Today?’ Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality” in *Race in Cyberspace* Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, editors. New York: Routledge, pp 15-26.

¹⁰ One of the earliest versions of this was the Blacksburg Electronic Village partnership between Virginia Tech, Bell Atlantic Company of Virginia, and the town of Blacksburg to wire the city and create a community network for government information, civic information, and business information specific to the city and community. See Silver, David. 2000. “Margins in the Wires” in *Race in Cyberspace*, Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakurma, and Gilbert B. Rodman, editors. New York: Routledge.

¹¹ This is in hindsight ill-conceived as the countless discussions earlier and still about the division in access to the Internet (the “digital divide”) as well as early discussions on how the online presence of hate groups have grown and found the Internet as a safe space to build organizations and recruit new members. See for example Nelson, Alondra and Thuy Linh N. Tu, editors. 2001. *Technicolor*. New York: New York University Press; “The Brave New World of E-Hatred.” *Economist*. 7/26/2008, Vol. 388 Issue 8590, p69-70.; Cord, Jefferson. “Virtuality Bites” *American Prospect*, Dec2010, Vol. 21 Issue 10, p31-33.; Pajnik, Mojca. “Citizenship and Mediated Society.” *Citizenship Studies*, Sep2005, Vol. 9 Issue 4, p349-367.

¹² Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.

¹³ Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 33.

What's fascinating is that in the current time period when racialized logics and ideas on one hand are heavily veiled and coded, racist legislation, vitriol, and ideologies surge over the airwaves, the blogosphere and the newsmedia.¹⁴ And the flows between print media to online media and online media to blogs and user-created forums are seamless.

The rise of the Internet paralleled the rise of the neoliberal agenda in the 1980s and 1990s, marked by the policies of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton agendas that called for expanding private interests while shrinking public institutions. Policies and priorities like “trickle-down economics” and notions that “rising tides lift all boats” as well as priorities to “end welfare as we know it” became central sound-bites to their economic agendas working to obscure issues of race, class, and education through a notion that corporate profits will enable and provide jobs for those at the middle and bottom of the economic sector, and an inability to succeed and reach the American dream of home, education, and prosperity was due to individual failure or deficit rather than structural inequities. As such the racialized history of race, property, and wealth in the United States was veiled by the notion that private competition and personal responsibility would ensure prosperity for all Americans. According to scholars such as Lisa Duggan and Michael Omi and Howard Winant, the neoliberal political project in the United States worked as primary means of obscuring issues of

¹⁴ The dissertation was written during the rise of the “Tea Party Movement” as a grassroots movement premised on fiscal and social conservatism, and represents in particular a backlash to what it considers the “liberal” policies of President Obama and spending on social programs.

race historically and contemporarily.¹⁵ The neoliberal agenda in some ways then is aligned and supports the agenda of colorblindness whereby the racial wrongs of the past are equalized through equal access of opportunity in the present. This rhetoric, far from being limited to political discourse impacts policy formation and everyday attitudes about race, class, and the American dream.

The timing of the rise of the Internet and narratives of Cyber-utopias parallels the production of post-racial ideas of colorblindness. Much of the early race-based Cyber Studies scholarship focused first on issues of access and then centered what happens to race online, how it was represented and engaged. As Lisa Nakamura writes,

As scholars become more sensitized to issues of diversity online, there is a welcome shift in emphasis from simply recognizing that racial inequity does exist there to a growing concern with how race is represented in cyberspace, for the Internet is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where “race” is created as an effect of the net’s distinctive uses of language.¹⁶

This work then is an intervention that seeks to understand not only *how* race is produced online or what happens to race online, but attempts to link the ways in which there is an actual renegotiation of the idea of physical space through its racialized representation in cyberspace. As Part I of the dissertation shows the rhetorical formation of racialized space through the relationship between the social and historical policy formation, this chapter reveals the virtual space of the Internet as a space to produce narratives and historical memories about the built environment. This chapter

¹⁵ Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality?* Boston: Beacon Press and Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York and London: Routledge.

¹⁶ Nakamura, Lisa. 2002. *Cybertypes*. New York: Routledge, p. xv.

then becomes a location to understand *how* consensus memories of post-racial ideas are narrated and produced online about offline spaces. This work utilizes the Detroit user forums on city-data.com to understand the virtual as a space of narration, as an archival and testimonial space, to understand the ways in which physical space itself is transformed and renegotiated through cyberspace.

City-data.com is an informational website that collects, analyzes, and integrates data from a variety of sources and positions itself as a catchall for information on cities across the United States. Seen primarily as a resource for information as varied as home sale price, registered sex offender information, weather, political contributions, and other demographic information, targeting users with a compiled source of comprehensive information. City-data.com has a large web presence and was visited by over 13 million unique visitors in October 2010.¹⁷ Its information and content is primarily geared towards users interested in information relevant to moving and relocating to a particular city. City-data.com is widely cited by the media and according to its “About Us” section it is, “owned by Illinois-based Advameg, Inc. and reaches 15.2 million absolute unique visitors per month with 91% of visitors from the US, 2% from Canada and 1.4% from the UK (Google Analytics, March 2010). As of April 1, 2010, Quantcast.com ranks us as the 85th largest website in the U.S.”¹⁸ City-data.com is a highly trafficked web source seemingly because of the large and varied amount of content it provides. Each city (large or small) has information regarding population broken down by demographics, median income,

¹⁷ According to city-data.com homepage accessed January 6, 2011.

¹⁸ www.city-data.com accessed January 4, 2011

house price, rental price, education, crime, permits for new housing, among other categories. The website seems to be primarily marketed at people interested in relocating and finding out more information about housing and neighborhood related aspects a particular city. The information itself is compiled from a wide variety of sources and there is in fact a disclaimer in fine print at the bottom of the page that reads, “City-data.com does not guarantee the accuracy or timeliness of any information on this site. Use at your own risk.” However, even with this disclaimer, and despite the reality that city-data relies on other websites to power its data and it is not readily apparent which data sources city-data uses in its compilations, it is still seen as a source of reliable information as evidenced by its citation and usage by newspapers. Its visual format and user interface is relatively rudimentary and antiquated with simple text driven content and minimal usage of graphics and images. There are no embedded videos or multimedia features. This website is visually constructed to be perceived as primarily functional and presents itself to function primarily as a space to find out information about particular cities focused around housing, relocation, and community information. Its form is one of the ways it constructs itself as a “data” location as it is primarily concerned with the seemingly neutral delivery of a particularly racialized and classed discourse of not only home-buying, but community composition and neighborhood value. Beyond the actual city-specific data provided, one of the more interesting features is the discussion forum. In the forums users are able to post topic-based threads and other users reply to the topic.

There are over 2,000 topic threads on the Detroit Forum boards.¹⁹ Much like the other city-specific forums, and in keeping with city-data's primary function as a website with information about home-buying and rental markets, many threads are about moving and relocating to a particular neighborhood or metro-Detroit city. Many are about polling community members for places to go, hotspots, quality of schools and neighborhood decline. Quite a few are about Detroit-specific places and memories. And there are the underlying themes of fear, safety, and speculation on the rise and fall and rise again of the City of Detroit. After scanning the topic threads and reading further threads such as: "I found my old house...", "Segregated Detroit", "Hamtramck: A White Ghetto?", "Detroit Fools who Talk" it became clear that the ideas of both a racial divide in Detroit and the laying of blame for the "decline of Detroit" were reoccurring posts and themes regardless of the OT (original topic) of the thread. As I read through threads and posts I began to break them down and analyze them along ideas of: memory and nostalgia of the city, tropes of "white flight", and crafting authority on the forum in order to understand popularly constructed ideas of the racialization of home, location, property, and cityspace. Of the total threads posted in the Detroit forum, there were over 25,000 individual posts dating back to approximately August 2006. I decided to focus primarily on one forum thread, "I found my old house in Detroit today" for the purpose of the chapter to enable an in depth look at one conversation on race, place, and memory. This thread embodied the many ideas and attitudes that the Detroit web forum in particular reveals—that the

¹⁹ As of January 19, 2011 9:30 am PST.

divergent attitudes and understandings of both the past, present, and future are indelibly coded racially. Even more so the understanding of who is to blame for Detroit's "demise" and its possible "revitalization" are so starkly portrayed within this forum. While the forum and the threads that I discuss below are by no means a representative sample of the entirety of the Detroit forum, they provide a deep and focused look at the production of longing, nostalgia, crisis, race, and hope in the virtual and real spaces of Detroit.²⁰

History, Memory and the Narrative of Equal Access to Home Ownership

SCBaker:

"It is 1968. Flash forward to the 21st century...You underprivileged people, come one come all, we have loans for you. No need to have personal responsibility or income, everyone qualifies for a loan. After all, it is all Americans right to own a home. We the bankers will earn a hefty fee for writing the loans, and you will finally have your own home. No need to worry about default, you or I will never be held responsible. It is the American way."²¹

Maryleell:

"We paid our homes free and clear, then were forced out due to the circumstances. No, we didn't create the circumstances, we were the victims. After a lifetime of hard work, we had nothing to show for it, nothing to sell, no equity, a total loss. Meanwhile, other "oppressed minorities" were literally given the homes we'd broken our backs to build and maintain. All sorts of HUD programs to shoehorn in the oppressed. Once they got there, if they got behind on their payments, no problem, just grant extensions."²²

There is a particular nostalgia and longing that underwrites many of the Detroit forums relationship with and to the City of Detroit. Many of the users are self-identified as former residents or children of former residents of Detroit, the

²⁰ A special thanks to Sara Clarke Kaplan for a particularly productive conversation early in the writing of this chapter to help me think through my methodology and points of analysis.

²¹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #42

²² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #64

descendants of white families who moved from the City to the surrounding suburbs in the long, slow movement of white Detroiters beginning in the 1950s. While this moment is constructed both popularly and in academic literature as “white flight” it is not and was not an overnight occurrence. One of the most long-lasting tropes of the last 20th Century U.S. City is that of “white flight” that many whites were “fleeing” the supposed crime and depravity of the inner city (read blackness) for new homes in the suburbs. The racial reconfiguration of the metropolitan area parallels a racialized reconfiguration of the spatial imaginary. According to Eric Avila,

Typically *white flight* describes a structural process by which postwar suburbanization helped the racial resegregation of the United States, dividing presumably white suburbs from concentrations of racialized poverty.... White flight entailed a renegotiation of racial and spatial identities, implying a cultural process in which an expanding middle class of myriad ethnic backgrounds came to discover itself as white... showing how a heterogeneous public embraced a classless but deeply racialized fantasy of suburban whiteness, and... access to that newfangled identity.²³

A corollary to the new spatialization of race resulted in the production not only of blackness, but whiteness, as movement itself was a way and means of racial formation. White flight then, according to Avila, is not only about the construction of the black inner cities, but the fantasy of the white suburban. However, the notion of whiteness becomes normalized *through* access to a particular spatial location—the suburban enclave. As Part I of the dissertation worked to show how the City of Detroit, much like other northern cities, attempted to keep blacks and other people of color relegated to segregated jobs and housing in the face of increasing black

²³ Avila, Eric. 2004. *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, pp 14-15.

migration to the City in the first half of the 20th century, Part II shows how the imaginary of the late 20th century and early 21st century Detroit has been constructed as a space of blackness, death, and depravity. An important function in this description is the presumption that blacks and other people of color were able to also move freely into the suburbs like their white contemporaries. In constructing this narrative of equal access to the suburbs via hard work and shrewd savings, then the only suitable explanation as to why blacks were unable to leave had to do with *personal* defect as opposed to *institutional* policies and structures.

One piece of creating this narrative of equal access to housing and single family homes in particular is the legal decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*²⁴, widely touted

²⁴ The *Shelley v. Kraemer* supreme court decision of 1948 handed down a decision not just about the *Shelley v. Kraemer* case of St. Louis, but also of two other companion cases, the *McGhee v. Sipes* case of Detroit, and the *Hard v. Hodge* case of Washington, DC. According to Sullivan, Patricia. 2009. *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: The New Press, 359, "On May 2, civil rights advocates won a major victory when a unanimous Supreme Court struck down judicial enforcement of restrictive covenants based on race. Chief Justice Fred Vinson, writing for the Court, paraphrased the major argument advanced by attorneys for the plaintiffs, ruling that in the cases of *Shelley* and *McGhee* such state action violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the Washington, D.C., case, *Hard v. Hodge*, the Court held that by enforcing the covenants the district court denied the plaintiffs' rights intended by Congress under the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and in accordance with the public policy of the United States."²⁴

The recognition by the Federal Courts of the inherent violations of equal protection in housing was a huge rhetorical victory for the Civil Rights movement. However, in practice, the ruling made the enforcement of covenants inviolable by law, but did not outlaw them completely or take into account the precedence of legal segregation prior to the ruling. The ruling maintained that it was not illegal for property owners to adhere to them voluntarily, and did not ban the registration of covenants locally. Therefore it was only illegal for the state to enforce against the will of owner and buyer, but not illegal for the owner and buyer to enter into them under agreement, which in effect meant that barriers still prevented many from owning and buying homes. Federal and local governments were well aware of this disparity in practice, however after the legal ruling on *Shelley v. Kraemer* in May 1948, they had to actually make it seem as if they were doing something about it. Again, it begs to question the difference in the letter of the law and the actuality of the law. In a 1995 article entitled "Black Residential Segregation Since the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* Decision" Darden, Joe. T. *Journal of Black Studies*. "Black Residential Segregation Since the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* Decision," Vol. 25 No. 6 July 1995, 680-691. Joe T. Darden, professor of Geography, concludes that: "Blacks have made very little progress in reducing segregation in housing since the 1948 landmark Supreme Court decision... After a period of 40 years, Blacks remained highly segregated residentially despite the elimination of racially restrictive covenants. Over the years, new forms of restrictions have taken the

as the end of racial restrictions to homes. In discussions and references to the decision, it is often portrayed as the end of racial covenants. In my own teaching I frequently find myself up against a wall after discussing *Shelley v. Kraemer* (legislated equality) and the reality of life in the late 1950s and 1960s in terms of equal access to housing (lived reality).²⁵ Despite the legislated intent, the application of *Shelley v. Kraemer* did not fundamentally change access to housing—and in doing so it pushed the lived reality of unequal access into a deeper, darker corner wherein it became even harder to discuss and push the inequality of access. Clearly, the legal battle is an important piece in changing the enactment of policies, however the legal right is often

place of covenants. Racial residential segregation is so deeply ingrained in American residential structures that the mere elimination of discriminatory practices may not be sufficient to eradicate it.”

²⁵ A primary example of the difference between the legislated access to homes and the reality of racial restrictions to the single-family home is in the example of Levittown, NY. Levittown and the family who created it, Abraham, Bill, and Alfred Levitt, may exist in popular memory as the most famous/infamous suburban developers, with their large-scale developments in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. While the Levittown in Long Island is widely known as the first of the Levitt’s developments, they went on to build planned suburban communities in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and many other places. Prior to the passage of *Shelley* in 1948, the Levittown leases included a provision that, “The tenant agrees not to permit the premises to be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race.” After the ruling of *Shelley*, the lease stipulation was removed, but the practice continued from the time the first Levittown resident signed a lease in 1947 until the Myers family moved into the Levittown, Pennsylvania development in 1957. The Myers’ faced months of harassment, violence, and racial terror, and finally a series of court cases in 1958, during which time Bill Levitt, continued to make public comments confirming that, “Our policy on that [racial segregation] is unchanged. The two other Levittowns are white communities.”²⁵ In the face of federal law, the biggest private homebuilder in the United States continued to flagrantly enforce a policy of white only housing well until the 1960s, underscoring the distinction between the everyday practices and reality of the enactment of legislation. Not until the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, in what some view as a publicity move, did Levitt finally publicly make a statement for open housing when he ran a series of full-page ads in cities around the country with copy such as: “Levitt & Sons States ‘Open Housing’ Policy as King ‘Memorial’” and “Levitt Pays Tribute to Dr. King in Deed—Not Empty Phrases.” A full twenty years beyond the passage of *Shelley*, the largest private homebuilder in the U.S. finally announced the company’s intention to completely open housing. This goes to show that oftentimes the letter of the law does not necessarily lead to the enforcement of the law, particularly in the scope of the Civil Rights legislation and housing. The assassination of Dr. King served to solidify more moderate support of the Civil Rights movement and its attendant discussions of access to homes, schools, and jobs. Even still however, there is still a sense of divide between abstract ideas of equal access and preference for neighbors and neighborhoods that are ethnically and racially mixed. Kusher, David. 2009. *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America’s Legendary Suburb*. New York: Walker & Company.

not enough. Particularly as can be evidenced with the long battle for equality and access since the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Fourteenth amendment as well as the Thirteenth and Fifteenth as the enactment of the rights and restrictions that those amendments provide have been open to a wide variety of interpretation.²⁶

However looking at the conflicting narrative of *legislated* versus *lived* equality on the web forum over sixty years *after* the passage of *Shelley v. Kraemer* reveals the long lasting discursive impact of the legislation of an idea regardless of its actual influence.

So on one hand legislated moments such as *Shelley v. Kraemer* are considered “history” and the *lived* result of narrative is memory. Pierre Nora’s seminal essay, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”²⁷ seeks to understand the spaces of and between memory and history. He writes:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again.²⁸

²⁶ Thinking here about involuntary servitude, and access to voting rights, existed (and exist) far beyond the end of the Civil War, well into the 20th and some would argue the 21st century.

²⁷ Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.” *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24.

²⁸ Nora pp 8-9

This distinction between history and memory and the spaces in between are important as they work to constitute one another—memory is at work in the present, in the current representations of the present through the past whereas history is a representation of the past. This is important in the memory and remembering of the users on the city-data forum. While primarily about personal memories, they also invoke what is considered a shared historical memory or an idea of consensus memory. The role of a shared historical and consensus memory is essential in the creation and production of national imaginary and myths about ideas of equality of access and the national resolution of social systems of segregation. Memories such as “MaryleeII” and “SCBaker’s” above are particularly revealing. In their memories as well as understanding of history there is a way in which they code blackness as “underprivileged” and “oppressed minorities” and despite the rhetoric and legal rights for access to home ownership—there is a thread of vitriol about the ability of other people to access homes. This is a result of the resolution of the “History” of racial segregation and integration through the legislated ideas of *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Shelley v. Kraemer* and moments like the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the rubric of the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the supposed national reconciliation over issues of segregation memories like “MaryleeII” and “SCBaker” that opened this section, are seen through the lens then of *personal* inability to thrive under the veil of equality.

MaryleeII:

“I grew up there as a child, but my parents and grandparents actually paid for their homes. No government program, no special lets settle the score deals, just cash. They paid on their homes for 20 years. That

meant paying every month, or you were evicted. No one cared about your sob story, pay or get out.”²⁹

“MaryleeII’s” statement above preceded the pull quote that opens this section and exposes the undercurrent of racism prevalent in her understanding of home financing and her assumption that it is a lifetime of “hard work” that provides access to home ownership. Much as this same narrative played out in Walt Kowalski’s understanding of home ownership in Chapter 3 and the self-help campaigns that fueled the public housing debates as discussed in Chapter 1—success and failure in home ownership frequently are linked to *individual* hard work and success. And “government” aid is linked to *individual* inability to provide home and work for family. However, both of these narrative tropes ignore the government aid that funded and privileged home ownership and suburbanization for white Americans throughout the 20th century.

“MaryleeII” tells fellow users that on one hand her parents and grandparents paid on their homes for 20 years, yet on the other that they paid for their homes free and clear. Obviously “MaryleeII” does not understand or acknowledge the government-backed financing that enabled her parents and grandparents to have a twenty-year mortgage on their homes. The mortgage financing industry has long been a collusion of private lenders and government backed financing. However, it is often made to seem that private financiers for home-builders and developers of suburban communities and government backed mortgages were separate entities, despite their intertwined relationship.

²⁹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #64

After the passage of *Shelley v. Kraemer* many in the federal government felt that the private sector is where change can be made, particularly in the financing industry. In effect by allowing the private sector to be held primarily responsible for invoking change the government is able to hide behind legislation as a marker of change despite the reality that the government did very little to ensure that actual change was made. In the post-*Shelley* months, B.T. McGraw, Deputy Assistant to the Administrator, Housing and Home Finance Agency urged financiers to make mortgage financing more available. He states in 1948,

Reports repeatedly indicate that lack of adequate mortgage financing, with or without FHA-insured loans, is mounting as a deterrent to active and prospective development programs to increase the supply of standard housing available to Negroes and other minorities. Even when the universally difficult site problems are overcome by responsible developers and sponsors, they are finding it more and more difficult and often impossible to obtain mortgage financing for developments to accommodate racial minorities in most urban areas throughout the Nation. In instances where financing is available, the tendency is toward tighter terms through higher interest rates, lower appraisals, smaller loan-value ratios, and shorter amortization periods. Tighter credit terms are even more prevalent in financing Negro purchases of existing homes at the current highly inflated prices, with the resulting use of unwise junior mortgages tending to mount in such instances. When undertaking developments for open occupancy without racial or other ethnic distinctions, responsible developers and sponsors have so far been unable to find any mortgage financing on any terms whatever. Indeed, the problem of obtaining mortgage financing is tending increasingly to rival the problem of acquiring sites as the number one roadblock in the housing of minority groups.³⁰

McGraw herein outlines the difficulty in accessing a home well beyond the practices of restrictive covenants. Beyond actually finding a home in a nationally overcrowded

³⁰ "The Neglected Tenth in Housing and Home Finance," by B.T. McGraw, July 1948, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 43 Community Services Department, Folder Housing 1949-1950, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

housing market, the ability to finance that home is additionally difficult for buyers of color. While during the postwar period financiers were practically giving away homes with 30 year fixed rate FHA backed mortgages to white veterans, the terms and conditions for black borrowers was much different. Specifically, the amount that a home was given credit for often did not meet the inflated price for a person of color buying a home. “MaryleeII’s” understanding and memory of her family history, much like other users comments reveal, is devoid of the institutionalization of white home ownership and home buying and the ability of her family to secure mortgages for their home through the collusion of private and government policies. A user named “reconmark” questions “MaryleeII’s” perception of the housing market and the racialized understanding through which she frames the path to black home ownership.

reconmark:

“So because your family was white and by the virtue of their whiteness..they paid for their house, but by your implication all the black people were just given homes,,as I posted previously; in the face of facts and reality..the blacks did it all just dosen't fly!!!

A tidbit for the ignorant...once QUALIFIED BLACKS were no longer redlined and/or restricted by convenabts, once they could get a bank loan, they paid much more on that loan than your parents did..and it continues to this day.

Blacks with identical credit scores and histories still pay more in interest and are shuffled into sub-prime mortgages even when they are more than qualified for conventional mortgages. I know you will say that isn't true..but it dosen't matter; you haven't let facts get in your way yet!!!

Blacks also took the most dangerous, back breaking jobs in the plants, that worked just as hard for their money as everyone else..according to people like you this is impossible to comprehend.”³¹

³¹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #70

In an attempt to bring to light the institutional racism present not only in housing, but in work, reconmark offers a reply to the assertions by “MaryleeII” that her family and worked hard and paid for their houses with the underlying counter assertion that black homeowners received homes as a handout or subsidy. In so doing “reconmark” attempts to disrupt the narrative of hardwork and determination were the keys to home ownership and positions instead institutional forces like race-based access to financing and jobs as key means in which whites were able to access home ownership. “reconmark’s” posting is important for his pulling together the varying and interlinked barriers to home ownership—redlining and covenants and private financing and the types of employment in the factories. “reconmark’s” attempt to historicize the memory-work of “Marylee’s” personal history is met with resistance both to his historical narrative and his place on the thread as is more apparent in the section below “Who Has Right to the Narrative.” The unofficial and unspoken housing restrictions were not unique to Detroit and existed throughout the country as a means to prohibit blacks from entering neighborhoods. But the reality of this collusion of private and public forces to keep blacks and other people of color from accessing homes—old or new is forgotten and dismissed on the thread by many of the forum users.

While this section focused on the narrative of access to housing in the City, the following section analyzes the competing understanding of “white flight”. On one hand the users engage with the movement from City to suburb, but the nostalgia and memory-tropes surrounding that movement are particularly important in the construction of the moments of “flight” from the City.

“We are Refugees”—Memories of “White Flight” and Nostalgia for the Old

Neighborhood

Maryleell:

“I understand exactly. Its like we're refugees. I was chatting with a lady from Iran, everything she grew up with is gone, burned, destroyed. she can't go back if she wanted to. And she left due to dire circumstances, like we left Detroit.

When you think about it, we are refugees. We didn't leave, we fled. We can't go back down memory lane, except via the Internet. Lately I've been reminiscing over old pictures, websites, etc, but there's no way I would ever go back there physically, simply because there isn't anything to go back to! My home, school, church, playgrounds, little businesses, are all gone. For those areas still remaining, well, its not worth the risk to take a trip down memory lane. I got out, stay out.”³²

SCBaker:

“Remisc, I feel your pain. My childhood home was destroyed by arsonists back in the 80's. In 2003, I looked at a vacant lot where my house once stood. I think looking at a vacant lot was a lot easier than seeing just a stub of a house remaining.

Most of us have got on with our lives. We may have wonderful families, nice homes and a financially comfortable existence, but the destruction of our City and our first or childhood homes remain with us even if we have placed it far out of our minds. We still feel the loss, knowing we can never go back home.

Thank you so much for starting this thread. I wish more people would find it and post their stories. Only those who have lived it can completely understand what we are feeling.”³³

“Maryleell” and “SCBaker” represent the voices of many in this thread that feel like “those people” who destroyed their beloved City have wronged them. These ideas and notions are not unique to this thread. There is a particular nostalgia and longing that underwrites many of the Detroit forums relationship with and to the City of Detroit. A

³² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #30

³³ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #29

fair number of users are former residents or children of former residents of Detroit, many the descendants of white families who moved from the City to the surrounding suburbs in the long, slow movement of white Detroiters beginning in the 1950s. While this moment is constructed both popularly and in academic literature as “white flight” it is not and was not an overnight occurrence. And as Part I of the dissertation shows there were particular legal and financial policies that increasingly meant that blacks and other people of color were unable to move to the suburbs unlike whites.

This particular discourse, this “longing for a better time” is an important trope to pull apart and analyze. And in some ways Renato Rosaldo’s conception of “imperialist nostalgia” is an apt lens through which to think about and analyze what the forum users are both describing and ascribing.

Imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox: A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of “innocent yearning” both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.³⁴

The common sense conversation that under girds the idea of “white flight” both in this thread as well as in popular scholarship relies on central ideas that—the central city was old and dilapidated, cities were charging more taxes for fewer services, and that homes in the suburbs were new and larger. However, the very racial signifier of “white flight” indicates that the seemingly structural reasons for moving out of the

³⁴ Rosaldo, Renato. 1993. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 69-70.

center city frequently boil down to a moral panic over not the city, but the increasing *blackness* of the city. Is it coincidence that Detroit's population peak in the 1950s paralleled the end of segregation in public housing and the increasing inability to enforce segregated private housing? Is it coincidence that suburban developments built with private money were able to unofficially enforce segregated ideas despite the reality that public dollars underwrote the infrastructure development, schools, and highways that enabled the suburbs to be built?

Rosaldo's conception of nostalgia here is especially important given the ways in which this thread began and the memories that subsequent posters like "MaryleeII" and "SCBaker" shared with longing. A user named "Remisc" began the thread entitled "I found my house in Detroit today" and it currently has over 160 replies and has been viewed over 11,800 times.³⁵

Remisc:

"I found my old house in Detroit today...
...and I was horrified. I found the street, but all I found at my former address was a teal foundation and the remains of the pillars of my front porch. I used to feel safe in my neighborhood, but I was scared just trying to find my own former home. I drove up and down the streets where I used to let my children play. They're now full of remains of burned down homes, caked with garbage, and infested with assorted stray animals. I moved out of Detroit 17 years ago, when the neighborhood was still pretty OK. I'm still in shock that all that could happen in under 20 years."³⁶

At work in the memory and the remembrance of white Detroiters about their old homes are tied up in notions of the production of the moral panic and the crisis of the city. The production of the moral panic in the city is not limited to Detroit. As Steve

³⁵ As of February 4, 2011 <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>.

³⁶ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #1

Macek writes, “As imagined by right-wing intellectuals, mainstream politicians, and the major media, the inner cities had become nightmare zones of crime and pathology and out-of-control urban populations were largely to blame. The geographical and cultural distance separating ghetto residents from white suburbanites predisposed the latter to accept such representations at face value.”³⁷ So while suburban residents did not create the narrative of crisis or panic in the central cities, the work of memory and media worked to continue and perpetuate the idea of urban crisis. The memories of those on the Detroit forums and narratives of urban crisis in Detroit abound in academic and popular writings. Detroit is not the only city produced as urban crisis but for many it is seen and read as ground zero or exemplar for that crisis. On the one hand the thread respondents are engaged in both reliving the production of the crisis and are also participating in reaffirming and recycling the narratives of that crisis. They do it however within the framework of nostalgia, of longing for what once was, or rather—and this is important here—*their* interpretation of what once was.

This is an important perspective of Rosaldo’s notion of “imperialist nostalgia” that the nostalgia can be unfounded or very selective. Much like the idea of memory—nostalgia links to the idea of remembrance of the past from a location in the present. As he writes:

Other scholars attempt to demystify imperialist nostalgia through a more frontal assault: They vigorously assert that the past was no better, and most probably worse, than the present. Rather than claim that nostalgia conceals guilt, they try to eliminate altogether the validity of elegiac

³⁷ Macek, 2.

postures toward traditional society by claiming that they are “idealized fantasies” designed to gloss over violence and brutality.³⁸

This can be seen clearly in the ways in which both memory and history are often socially constructed by what the common sense of a time or event may assert or reveal. This is appropriate for those posters who have “idealized fantasies of the past.” As “reconmark” so aptly observes above, the past in Detroit is not an idealized place of harmony and access to homes and neighborhoods. And as Part I of the dissertation exhibits more fully, the nostalgia that many white Detroiters gesture back towards, the City that so many want to return to was a City that was openly hostile toward non-whites and a system of longing for “good old days” that enforced and maintained the white power structure.

Marylee II:

“You actually went back and looked? I “visited” my former neighborhood by google map, I could barely recognize my old neighborhood, most of the houses are torn down and nothing but vacant fields. I just sat staring at the lot the google indicated was my home, nothing but a vacant field. I recognized a crack in the sidewalk, I used to draw chalk lines on it.

I spent a lot of time just remembering the old neighborhood, the people who lived there, and spent the best years of their lives there. It was a solid, working-class neighborhood. My father, like many residents, found his way there after WWII, bought a home with his VA loan, got a job in the auto industry, and we all felt it would be that way forever. After all, we worked for the auto industry, we supplied the world with vehicles, and also the military. How could we fail and cease to be?

...And, yes, Detroit did start to die after 1967 and the riots. Oh, dear, was I being “racist”? To even mention the riots is considered racist, I guess we’re supposed to call it a “socially significant event” or some such mish mash. All I know is right after that the old neighborhood split up, for sale signs sprouted like mushrooms, school attendance dropped that Fall as anyone who could either sold and got out or sent their kids to private school. We stayed in touch, but never again did we have the

³⁸ Rosaldo, Renato. 1993. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 72.

feeling of community that I did with the old neighborhood. Its all "Gone With the Wind" now, but, that's racist, too....Sorry for ther OP you came back and found your home like that! That's why I don't want to go back, its too sad."³⁹

“MaryleeII” as a forum user is incredibly interesting for her willingness to say (or write) out loud what most would consider a taboo topic in more public conversation. In this “MaryleeII” clearly in this thread and her posts in other threads positions herself outwardly as a person that seemingly attempts to either provoke or at the very least belittle the notion of what is “racist.” And as a poster seems acutely aware of the reactions that her posts may incite and seems to try and preemptively call her own thoughts as “racist,” but does so in a way that she believes that “racism” is in fact “mish mash.” Part of the fuel of “MaryleeII’s” posts resides in the fact that she repeatedly indicates that she *cannot* go back since she and her family fled because alternately there is nothing to return to or it is too dangerous. This assumption of not visiting former homes and neighborhoods is an idea exhibited by other users in addition to “MaryleeII” and “usroute 10” who has indicated on other threads that he is a Detroit resident attempts to shift the conversation from the devastation of the city to the “love and hope for their city.”

Important as well is the idea that “MaryleeII” visits her old home via the virtual space of google maps. This is a moment wherein the “virtual” becomes and serves as stand-in and equivalence for “the real.” The fact that “MaryleeII” is resigned to visiting from the Internet speaks of the reality that she has constructed of both the past and the present. Particularly her reference to *Gone with the Wind* is important to

³⁹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #14

think through in terms of the film and book as a prime example of the nostalgia surrounding the antebellum south and even the benevolence of plantation life under slavery. It is interesting because in the post that opens this section “MaryleeII” positions herself and those who left Detroit as “the refugees” as they were “forced” to leave the city and it is interesting that in her reference to *Gone with the Wind* it evokes Scarlett O’Hara’s “forceful” leaving of her life in the South. In fact that narrative is about the continued longing for the old south, so perhaps in some ways it is an apt metaphor for “MaryleeII’s” nostalgia for an explicitly racially segregated past.⁴⁰

usroute10:

“Detroit is not so unsafe that you can't "take a trip down memory lane" in person. Come on now.

Your sob stories of having to flee Detroit because of the criminals have been documented over and over and over and over again on the internet and newspapers and magazines. We know why so many people have left over the decades - these causes have been well-documented.

What would be a lot more interesting are stories of people who are trying to improve the city, or people who have stayed all these years and still have love and hope for their city, or people who have moved from the suburbs or from out-of-state to the city and are enjoying their time in the city.

Somebody has to take responsibility for the condition of the city. Nobody wants to solve the problems of the city. It's so much easier to leave than to band together with fellow Detroiters and try to stem the decline.”⁴¹

“usroute10” calls into question the production of Detroit as criminal and attempts to check “MaryleeII” from her accounting of Detroit as so unsafe, visiting her old house

⁴⁰ Important to note here that it is not only whites who are nostalgic for a segregated past as the work of Michelle R. Boyd in *Jim Crow Nostalgia* (2008) University of Minnesota Press goes to show as she analyzes the reinvention and sanitation of Chicago’s Bronzeville history in order to forward redevelopment and community agendas.

⁴¹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #31

is only possible via the Internet. Instead of falling prey to the production of “panic” of the death and depravity of Detroit, “usroute10” attempts to insert another narrative, disrupt the repetition of the urban crisis. However, he is soon met with the following comment:

SCBaker:

“Why are you on this thread? Did you find your old house today? If, so please tell us your story about its condition and provide pictures if they are available. If ,you have no old house to find then post your remarks on the appropriate thread.”⁴²

And there is the fascination of Detroit from journalists, from urban explorers, suburbanites and academics—Detroit as a place of ruin is the more fascinating story, the story of demise, of beautiful old buildings and those who destroyed them with violence and disregard. And this thread—those who are posting and reminiscing prefer the stories of destruction and any attempts otherwise are asked to find an “appropriate thread” if they have no old house to commiserate over. And for these users the emptiness or destruction of their old homes is at once personal and collective memory. However, they want to retain their memory and status of victim to the destruction and depravity of Detroit, and as next section works to show, they attempt to articulate their collective memories as the consensus memory about Detroit and its past.

Whose Past? Creating Consensus Memory

Yac (Senior Moderator):

“Back on topic folks. And no, it's not about race or your personal dislikes about other members.

⁴² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #33

Thank you.”⁴³

Remisc:

“Thank you. All I tried to do was share a story about finding my house in Detroit, hoping other people would share their stories of finding former homes in Detroit, and all the fun they had living there and whatnot. As with all the Detroit threads, it's turned into a race thing.”⁴⁴

One of the most compelling questions that this thread and the memory of Detroit long past underscores is: who has the right to the narrative and whose narrative is privileged? While it is clear from the “I found my old house” thread that there are multiple perspectives and multiple experiences of the past, but an important question is *whose* narrative is both privileged and forwarded. While others such as Steve Macek and Stuart Hall have written about the ways in which the media creates and crafts the public discourse, the questions raised by the city-data.com forums circulates on how individuals are able to craft and circulate a particular discourse that naturalized Detroit’s racist past. In the case of the Detroit forums and the threads examined here there are multiple ways of asserting and creating authority both in memory and in terms of user profiles. In this section I’ll talk about the ways in which users position their narratives as personal experience and therefore valid and true and in the next section I’ll talk more in depth about how the website itself creates and monitors ideas of authority.

A central theme that the comments above reveal and that the entirety of the thread attempts to reveal is the confusion and mixed relationship of “race” as an entity that is either fueling the conversation or has nothing at all to do with the conversation.

⁴³ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #105

⁴⁴ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #106

As both of the comments above from “Yac” and “Remisc” state: “It’s not about race” and “It has turned into a race thing.” Yet, as the dissertation as a whole works to show, the conversation about housing in the city of Detroit in the late twentieth century cannot be separated from the institutionalization of race, despite the multiple attempts in the past and present. However, what is most interesting in the narrative threads of this forum in particular is the confusing back and forth among users sharing their sad, nostalgic memories for the past alternately saying that the thread is not about race, yet they use an entirely race based logic of black criminality and depravity to explain the “demise of Detroit.” Users such as “usroute10” and “reconmark” go out of their way to talk about the ways in which Detroit’s past is colored with the reality of racial segregation in home, work, and education. They attempt to rectify the overt racist comments being thrown out by “MaryleeII” and “SCBaker.” After multiple back and forth comments, the moderators, “Remisc” and “MaryleeII” make comments to get back to the “OT” or original topic.

Reconmark:

“Yes, let's get back the the original topic, which was NOT black people ruined it all, don't work and had everything handed to them on a silver platter !!

Anyone live around the Dexter and Boston area in the last 40 years!! It's hard to imagine that when I lived there we had bakeries, cleansers, a car dealership, and nightclubs.

I learned to swim at the YMCA on Dexter and Grand River, there was also a city swimming pool next to my elementary school (Keidan Elementery) during the summer when it was hottest we would climb the fence and swim after closing hours.

We shouldn't have but nobody had air conditioning back then.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #82

And with that memory, “reconmark” does talk about his old neighborhood and the contrast to which the users in the forums have repeatedly said that after the whites left the neighborhoods all the small businesses also left. What “reconmark’s” comment provides is an understanding that due to segregated neighborhoods there were thriving black businesses within the neighborhoods and that white property owners are not the only people entitled to memories of the past. In terms of the memory however, “SCBaker” is quick with this reply that outlines his understanding of the narrative development of the thread:

SCBaker:

“Just had to get in one last dig, did you? Remisc began this thread to tell her story. Immediately she was criticized by usroute10. It was all her fault and others like her for the demise of Detroit. Marylee11 told her story and was attacked for her story as well. By the way, her first post did not include any defensive comments, she simply described her lovely neighborhood before its demise. She should have never been put in a situation of having to defend herself. First usroute10 and then you had to chime in and keep the racial strife conversation going. The two of you turned this thread into an ugly attack session.

In reading your posts, I get the feeling that you felt gangs of "blacks" were justified marching into peaceful neighborhoods inflicting unspeakable destruction and horror against the innocent residents. While agreed, the black residents did suffer from unfair racial prejudices, violence was not the way to solve the problems. Violence, or the fear of it brought a once great dynamic City to its knees. Dr. Martin Luther King knew that violence was not the way. Too bad not enough people listened to him.

There are so many stories to be heard and I hope more people will find this thread and post their stories without fear of being attacked.

The moderators will close this thread if we don't cool it.”⁴⁶

It is both revealing and interesting what “SCBaker” reads and articulates as an “attack” and also his interpretation of MaryleeII’s memory of the racialized logics of

⁴⁶ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #83

Detroit as “simply” descriptive. His recounting asserts that particular narratives of Detroit, much like Detroit history as frequently told is removed from the understanding of and affirmation of the reality that race did play a part in access to home ownership both in terms of financing and accessibility of homes. I find it particularly interesting that “SCBaker” and “MaryleeII” throughout the thread positions themselves as both the victims of an “attack” in the thread itself that parallels the “attack” that they felt they were under in their neighborhoods which “forced them to flee and become refugees.” Much as a call to let the past remain the past serves not only to undermine and disavow the reality of the multiple factors involved in the “demise” the continuing disallowance of an articulation of the institutional forces that created such “demise” is met with increasing racial vitriol.

It is particularly interesting at this point in the narrative that “SCBaker” chooses to invoke Dr. King as the paragon of non-violence—a reminder of the way in which the memory, speeches, and work of Dr. King have been co-opted to justify everything from ending affirmative action programs to the continuing inequality for African Americans in housing. When in fact in the 1960s Dr. King attempted with a coalition group to desegregate the Chicago suburb of Cicero and was turned back by violent mobs of angry whites. As Stuart Hall et al discuss in the production of the “crisis” in media the narrative of “violence” is an important piece in creating and maintaining the idea of “crisis” going far beyond an act of violence:

Violence represents a basic violation of the person; the greatest personal crime is ‘murder’, bettered only by the murder of law-enforcement agent, a policeman. Violence is also the ultimate crime against property, and against the state. It thus represents a fundamental rupture in the

social order. The use of violence marks the distinction between those who are fundamentally *of* society and those who are *outside* it. It is coterminous with the boundary of ‘society’ itself.⁴⁷

Throughout the thread and the various Detroit forums the trope of violence overshadows topic discussion boards—whether it is the perceived “safety” of a neighborhood, the historical accounting of the violence of the 1967 rebellion, or the repeated references to “their destruction of our neighborhoods.” In this case the idea of “violence” is used very much to understand and partition both access to narratives and history as well as to conceptions of who is inside and outside of society.

And the varying narratives, rather than a consensus narrative is what makes the threads so contentious. The users each attempt to circulate and solidify their versions of the past—and do so through the use of alliances. As the following section shows, the users assert, demand, and eventually realize a consensus memory through the creation and fixing of authority.

Creating Authority—Crafting Online Public Discourse

Remisc:

“Yikes. This thread is getting out of hand.”⁴⁸

The city-data.com forums are intriguing for their sense of anonymity in what many read as a period of hypervisible social networking. In contrast to a website where users post to and create reviews of places and create boards and discussion threads along the lines of providing reviews of services and products, City-data is

⁴⁷ Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: The MacMillan Press, p. 68.

⁴⁸ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #80

driven primarily by user generated topic threads spurring discussions based on questions or comments. The anonymity of the city-data user profiles—lack of personalized avatars, lack of basic profile information, even specific location information speaks partially to the platform of the website and its ease and accessibility of the data, but also speaks to the users' relationship to the web interface and their decision to share or not share basic information publicly, in contrast to many other sites where users share at minimum a representative photo or image and quite often even more personal information. In terms of the interface itself, it could be interpreted that city-data.com does not have a primary mission of social networking and the user profiles and information were something added later to “update” the aesthetic feel and style of the web forums.

As a piece of this idea of anonymity is the parallel understanding that while the forum is for and used by individual users, there is the sense of the overall monitors that inhabit the space of the web. So while the “community” itself is wiki-style based on the individual contributions of users, there are “moderators” who exist within the community forums as both participants and people who “monitor” the discussions. Moderators have the ability to “close down” discussions, which in effect disable anyone from further posting on a thread. According to the forum FAQ section, each of the geographical states has approximately 2 moderators who monitor the threads and each moderator typically works 1-4 states. The Michigan forums, of which the Detroit forum is part, has two moderators, “Yac” and “magellan.” In a reply to a general website question as to how moderators are chosen one of the moderators responded:

Moderators are chosen by the current team when and where they are needed. There are no written criteria so I guess you're right - they're no different than the rest of us. We tend to choose calmer people who rarely engage in heated debates, are somewhat diplomatic and are able to spend a lot of time here.⁴⁹

It is interesting that on the one hand the discussion forums are user driven boards and topics that are initiated by individuals, yet on the other hand, the boards themselves are monitored by two people assigned to police and decide what are and are not appropriate to topics of conversation, in effect having supreme power to shape the public discourse. Their primary function is to maintain a “status quo” of topics and to monitor what may be deemed offensive and inflammatory. However, in what follows it becomes clear that they are invested in maintaining a particular narrative interaction, a consensus memory, as that is the most consolidating and explanatory version of what happened to the City. In effect then, the role of the moderators parallels the idea that Hall et al has about the role of the news in reproducing ideologies.

The media, then, do not simply ‘create’ the news; nor do they simply transmit the ideology of the ‘ruling class’ in a conspiratorial fashion. Indeed, we have suggested that, in a critical sense, the media are frequently not the ‘primary definers’ of news events at all but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as ‘accredited sources’. From this point of view, in the moment of news production, the media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers.⁵⁰

The media then, is investing in maintaining and reproducing the consensus memory.

The Internet and this forum are forms of Internet media and as such can be understood from both the high level of users visiting city-data.com and its citation by other news

⁴⁹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/faq/83674-moderators-becoming-moderator.html> accessed January 17, 2011.

⁵⁰ Hall et al 1978, p. 59.

and media organization as an influential source in producing narratives. The form and interface of the city-data.com forums lend themselves to a maintenance of ideas of race neutrality and color-blindness to prohibit the fragmentation of the normative narrative of urban space, and Detroit space in particular, as highly segregated and perpetuate a virtual segregation that parallels the notion of physical segregation.

The posts below outline the end of a thread entitled “Segregated Detroit” just prior to it being shut down by moderators. As might be expected from a thread with the above title there was a lot of discussion as to the what, why, and how of the hypersegregation of the Detroit metro area.

Indentured Servant:

“They want to try to explain the black condition today.....without the use of the past. Why? Why would not a person want such powerful information used? Why would people try to separate the present from the past...when the present is the creation of the past? Why would people want to believe and attempt to propagate the idea that actions do not begat reactions and hence that 300 years of abuse to black people had no negative reactions that transcends time and space, economics, phsycology and culture?...

Detroit is like a fossil in that it captures the racial attitudes of the period in which the regions growth ended or dramatically slowed, which was the beginning of the 70's. Regions that have boomed over the last 40 years demonstrates and reflects more modern racial attitudes....and hence are not as segregated as older slow or no growth regions like Detroit. So the Detroit area is indeed SEGREGATED, because the evolution of how it arrived at this racial divide was systematic discrimination over the decades.”⁵¹

magellan (Moderator):

“Indentured Servant, City-Data is not your own personal self-help program for whites. I think most of us have heard more than enough. Move on.”⁵²

Indentured Servant:

⁵¹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/116353-segregated-detroit-12.html>, post #116

⁵² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/116353-segregated-detroit-12.html>, post #117

“ARE you trying to segregate.....keep people like me from certain topics? I am not welcome? Hmmm.....sounds to me like the same type of reaction that created a segregated Detroit. Certainly you have the POWER to isolate or ban me from an area....not unlike what caused Detroit to be the way it is.”⁵³

magellan (Moderator):

“I'm not going to ban you. I'm saying that you've gone from debating the issue to monopolizing the topic and trying to brow-beat people into submission, just because they disagree with you and don't subscribe to the same theories. Find something else to discuss for a while.

Topic closed for a while.”⁵⁴

The end of the thread is telling, both in terms of the ways in which particular views are maintained and supported. When “magellan” tells “Indentured Servant” that, “City-Data is not your own personal self-help program for whites. I think most of us have heard more than enough. Move on,” it clearly aligns “magellan” with the viewpoint of the majority of the city-data forum users—that refuses to take the larger picture into account of historical instances of institutional racism. What “magellan” and other users find offensive is the way in which “Indentured Servant” attempted to map the institutional and systemic discrimination of blacks in the United States. By describing this action mockingly as “self-help for whites,” “magellan” aligns himself with the presumptive majority to silence “Indentured Servant’s” historical accounting. Despite the sense that the forum is an open online community—it is very clearly drawn here who is part of that community. This is clear from “Indentured Servant’s” response drawing a parallel to the segregating of physical space to the segregating of virtual space. “Indentured Servant” is aware enough of the larger power structures of both city-data and the urban reality to realize and articulate that “authority” figures

⁵³ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/116353-segregated-detroit-12.html>, post #118

⁵⁴ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/116353-segregated-detroit-12.html>, post #119

such as “magellan” have the ability to allow or disallow him to be mobile or immobile. And as such, “magellan” exercises his authority and closes down the thread—effectively ending “Indentured Servant’s” ability to mobilize his account of a city and online community invested in the institutional legacy of whiteness—unable to allow even the slightest threat to the “official” narrative.

This can be seen in the thread “I found my old house today” as discussed above. In this case, “Yac,” a senior moderator is seen trying to tame the inflammatory back and forth discussion between “Reconmark,” “usroute10,” “MaryleeII,” and “SCBaker.”

Yac (Senior Moderator):

“Everybody please calm down. Agree to disagree, ignore each other - I don't care. Just don't turn an interesting and controversial (as it seems) topic into a flame war.”⁵⁵

What happens in the end however, is that the users who want to talk about the “ruins” of Detroit and of their history remain the dominant force on the board as other users who have memories outside of the ones deemed “appropriate” to the original topic. So on the one hand there is a call to return to the “OT” (original topic) of the thread, which is “I found my old house today”. However, even when a precedence of talking about the “destruction” of homes, neighborhoods, and postulating about *who* is responsible was considered part of the “OT” any critique of this flow of conversation is considered “off topic”. If other users want to talk about how neighborhoods are still thriving, about childhood memories that don’t fall inside this narrative, and defend the coded (and not so coded) racial attacks being thrown around then their responses are

⁵⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #75

considered outside the original topic as the topic is committed to maintaining and forwarding a particular narrative of loss, destruction, and nostalgia.

The idea of the anonymity of both posters and the power of moderators, speaks to the invisibility of the inner-workings of the website and the forum and in some ways parallels ideas of race neutrality and colorblindness. The forum attempts on one hand to maintain a perspective of fair and neutral community—yet at the same time relies on personal subjectivities to monitor and set the precedence as to what is “appropriate” for discussion. Similarly this may be seen in the use of the “reputation” feature on the website. I primarily used the website as a place to analyze what others were saying and did not post in any of the threads as I did not want to shift or impact the discussions. However, as I read more and more threads, some without even a veiled attempt to hide racist ideas and language, I found myself trying to add to the reputation of those who I felt were speaking truth, who were able to dialogue and engage the ideas of institutional racism, who were trying to educate the other users of both personal and institutional experiences with racism. As I found myself clicking on the “Rate this post positively” option of posts I soon got an automated message that stated: “You must spread some Reputation around before giving it to X again.” I’m not certain what the algorithm is to produce such an automated response, as it prohibits a user from giving it to the same person twice in a row and even giving to another person in between does not suffice as “spreading” reputation around. The cynic in me also wonders if particular posters and sentiments are allowed to receive “Reputation” at a faster rate or with fewer barriers than others. However, I could not

bring myself to add to the “Reputation” of many of the other users whose comments I found offensive to try and test my cynical impulses. While there is an option to “Report this post” there is also an accompanying form that must be filled out indicating if it’s spam, advertising, or if it’s offensive. I did not “Report” any posts because while I find the underlying assumptions of the posts offensive, most posters walk the fine line between coded and inflammatory language.

Linking Detroit’s Past Memory to its Future History

Indentured Servant:

“It’s always darkest before the dawn.....you just have to know what time it is.....and you will benefit.”⁵⁶

SCBaker:

“I am sure all Detroiters, past and present are pulling for the City to rise from the ashes. It is hearbreaking to see a once vibrant City that was admired around the world lay in ruins.”⁵⁷

The popular perception, regardless of which side of the debate about whose “fault” it is that the City of Detroit exists as it does today are the almost unanimous voices calling for and pushing towards Detroit’s rebirth, it’s “renaissance.” “Indentured Servant” and “SCBaker” clearly on different ideological sides of the battle for the narrative of Detroit’s past have similar ideas about the rise and future of Detroit. Both of the above statements reference the current “darkness” of the City and it’s dormancy—as if it’s asleep and needs to be awakened from the comatose sleep of near death. SCBaker’s comment above in some ways echoes the city’s motto, coined after a fire destroyed the city in 1805: “We Hope For Better Things; It Shall Rise From

⁵⁶ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/1170986-detroit-slowly-rise-again-2.html>, post #11

⁵⁷ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html>, post #59

the Ashes." The theme of fire and ashes appears both in 1805 and in the specter of the 1967 urban uprising as evoked both within the commercial that opened this dissertation and the web forum at hand. Many posters on the forum talk about and gesture toward Detroit's rebirth. While on one hand this is a spirit necessary and needed in order to increase the population and economy of Detroit, on the other hand it continues to reify the idea that the city, despite its 900,000 people is empty. Or simply put, that the residents who live in Detroit don't "count" as residents.

The potential for Detroit's "rebirth" is seen and postulated throughout the various threads within the Detroit forum. "Jwo85" began a thread entitled: "Detroit slowly on the rise again" which started a conversation on bringing growth to the city. He began the thread by posting a link to news article in the Detroit Free Press entitled, "Detroit's profile grows as investors, young professionals return to city,"⁵⁸ which outlined the increase of students and professionals moving into the "revitalized" neighborhoods of the city. "Jwo85" pastes in particular a passage from the article that states and made the following comment below:

Jwo85:

"A year ago, Blake Vanier and Rachel Perschetz, both 29, vacationed in the Motor City out of curiosity. Instead of finding the dangerous wasteland often depicted on TV and in the national media, the best friends discovered a city with friendly people, eclectic hangouts and great potential.

Enamored by the city, Vanier, who works in finance, moved from New York City to a loft in Midtown near Wayne State University in mid-October with a new job. A

⁵⁸ <http://www.freep.com/article/20110109/NEWS01/101090450/Detroit-s-profile-grows-investors-young-professionals-return-city>

few weeks later, Perschetz joined him from Washington, D.C., to continue working as a real estate consultant.⁵⁹

This is what we need for a full rebirth is more younger people leaving other areas of the U.S. and coming here as well our own younger michigan people staying here and committing to the city.”⁶⁰

While both the original news article and “Jwo85” position these as markers of the “slow rise of the city,” it calls to question the ideas weaved throughout the dissertation of gentrification and mobility and immobility and ghettoization. Both the article and “Jwo85” postulate that the rise and “rebirth” of the city will be from outside investors and the return of people who have fled the city. But what of the people who have stayed? Who never left? Who didn’t want to leave? Who couldn’t leave? What happens to them?

Posters on the board continue to speak of the “opportunities” in Detroit and many are eagerly anticipating them. For example “UnemployedFinanceGuy” talks about his upcoming move to Detroit and wrote: “Detroit is a fantastic opportunity right now - think of America in the 1920s. You have a whole empty canvas on which you can be as creative as you want.” And then goes on to compare the “potential” of Detroit to Williamsburg, Brooklyn.⁶¹ And as others have written about—the transition of Brooklyn’s neighborhoods from bedroom communities and housing for working class and middles class people and families to the rapid gentrification and out-pricing of those who lived in those neighborhoods before their full “potential” was realized are well documented.

⁵⁹ Neavling, Steve. “Detroit’s Profile Grows as Investors, Young Professionals Return to City.” Detroit Free Press January 8, 2011.

⁶⁰ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/1170986-detroit-slowly-rise-again.html>, post #1

⁶¹ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/1170986-detroit-slowly-rise-again.html>, post #4

And “Indentured Servant” who as outlined above was the catalyst in the shutdown of a thread because of his attempt to discuss and engage the historical factors of institutional racism in the production of present-day Detroit has a clear perspective on the future of the city that in some ways mirrors my own perspective of the future of Detroit. The state of Michigan, composed of two peninsulas surrounded by the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world, recently entered into a compact with the other Great Lake states to preserve this valuable resource. Detroit’s name comes from the French *Détroit*, which means strait. Detroit and its river is an important connection between the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence sea and the Erie Canal. Physically Detroit is in a very valuable location as the twenty-first century crisis over fresh water escalates.

Indentured Servant:

“Detroit is a STEAL. I mean.....if anyone has any prognosticating skills, based upon current realities shaping future trends, you know Detroit is ripe for growth. Detroit will become a major trend in about 5 years. Forget the naysayers.....they know not of what they speak. Along with the trend of the re-urbanization of America, Michigan will become more attractive in the future because of an acceleration fresh water crisis that it currently in its infancy. Michigan is probably one of the fresh water capitals of the world, with the Great Lakes nearly completely surrounding it. If that is not enough, there is a growing realization among the public that Americans have to support American industry and the goods it produces or eventually it ripples and diminishes opportunity for us all. That means that the Big Three will likely gain market share from a shift in attitudes and a closing of the quality gap that has steadily been shrinking over the last decade.

It’s always darkest before the dawn.....you just have to know what time it is.....and you will benefit.”⁶²

“Indentured Servant” doesn’t reference it, but there are some who believe that the fresh water crisis was forecasted long ago and that there was a deliberate attempt to

⁶² <http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/1170986-detroit-slowly-rise-again-2.html>, post #11

de-invest in Detroit's industry and infrastructure in order to drive down prices for land in order to make "ripe" the ability for investors to buy large pieces of land at rock bottom prices. Land that will be especially valuable since the signing and ratification of the Great Lakes State Compact into state and federal law in December 2008 that protects and keeps the water resources of the Great Lakes for the eight states and two Canadian provinces that border the lakes.

The questions raised throughout this chapter frame the broader questions of the role of history and memory in creating Detroit's past and the attachment to a consensus narrative of Detroit's late twentieth century history. An analysis of these ideas is important particularly in terms of how they impact Detroit's present and future. The narrative of the dead post-industrial city is shifting and the production of Detroit as a space of artists, activists, young people, and gentrifies on one hand offers inspiration for its "rebirth" but simultaneously relies on an already constructed perception of Detroit as dead and decayed and empty—ready to be filled by those with desire, creativity, and investment capital. In many ways this future of investment capital and innovative new ideas and entrepreneurs mimics and recycles the nostalgic memory about Detroit's rise through the innovations of the industrial pioneers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The work of this chapter then is to critically engage the media circuits and flows present in producing narratives of Detroit city-space not only by academics, government officials, and major power brokers. In analyzing the online production of the city, everyday attitudes that are often hidden and filtered through a sense of politically correct attitudes of race are laid

bare. And this unfiltered (though not unmoderated) forum provides an understanding of how a consensus memory around race, segregation, and urban disinvestment is produced both in the virtual and the real.

The work of Part II of the dissertation is important to understand and reveal the ways in which the institutional investment in whiteness that was created through policy implementation and the built environment disappears from contemporary understandings of the urban landscape. In particular I work to analyze how and why the City's racist past vanishes from the contemporary consciousness in an attempt to stem ideas of race neutrality in both policy and perception. In a moment that increasingly works to forward the ideologies of colorblindness and race neutrality, Part II of the dissertation works to engage the ideology of race—aims to understand how place is imagined, recalled, and constructed, in order to reveal the landscape of Detroit as willfully produced—both materially and ideologically—through the racism of past and present.

Conclusion: Denaturalizing Difference

“If only Detroit could point to some natural disaster for its misfortunes. Within hours of the earthquake that devastated northeastern Japan, for example, President Obama called the prime minister to offer “whatever assistance is needed.” Likewise, when Hurricane Katrina swallowed up New Orleans, George W. Bush traveled to Jackson Square to promise that “this great city will rise again.” Alas for Detroit, there was no presidential statement of purpose, no outpouring of American sympathy, after the Census Bureau reported its own calamity: the shrinking of the city’s population to just 713,777—a level not seen since around the time Henry Ford started cranking out the Model T. In Detroit, of course, we do not see lives being lost to an angry and capricious Earth. But the human wreckage is there all the same—the consequence of crime, strangled opportunity, and lives without hope.”¹

“U.S. census results revealed that Detroit has lost a quarter of its population -- 237,500 people -- since 2000. It was the largest percentage loss ever for any American city with more than 100,000 residents, except New Orleans, which lost 29% or 140,000 people after Hurricane Katrina.”²

“The number of people who vanished from Detroit — 237,500 — was bigger than the 140,000 who left New Orleans.”³

The 2010 census data on Detroit was released at the end of March 2011. For a few days after the news was abuzz with the historic population loss for Detroit and Michigan. These numbers were released on the heels of the early March theatrical release of *Vanishing on 7th Street* a low-budget apocalyptic thriller where the entire City of Detroit except for a handful of survivors disappear—vanishing over night. In the end, the only two people who survive the shadows of darkness are two children—one preteen African American boy and a 6 year old white girl who, when the film

¹ McGurn, William. “A Requiem for Detroit: A once-great American city today repels people of talent and ambition.” March 29, 2011. *Wall Street Journal Online*.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704471904576229003143739080.html>

² Riley, Rochelle. “Census data is cold reality for Detroit.” March 26, 2011. *Detroit Free Press Online*. <http://www.freep.com/article/20110327/COL10/103270511/Rochelle-Riley-Census-data-cold-reality-Detroit>

³ Seelye, Katherine Q. “Detroit Census Confirms a Desertion Like No Other.” March 22, 2011. *New York Times Online*.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/us/23detroit.html?scp=1&sq=detroit%20census&st=cse>

closes, are seen riding a horse down the middle of a deserted freeway littered with abandoned cars—heading out of Detroit toward Chicago, in hopes of finding other people. It was hauntingly ominous that I saw this film the week I finished the dissertation and two weeks before the census data was released. According to news media, the census bureau, and the film, Detroit is disappearing and its people are not simply *leaving*, in the words of the New York Times, but are *vanished*.⁴

It is ghoulishly ironic that the media continually draws together the statistics on the population decline of Detroit to the population decline of New Orleans. What is worse is the ways in which the 29% population decline of New Orleans is scripted as a “natural disaster”. For the news media that continues to bring New Orleans in as a foil to the Detroit decline, the way in which population exodus of New Orleans can be explained, can be rationalized, and can be accepted is within the framework of *Katrina* as the cause of the exodus. In a way, the notion that New Orleans’s loss of 140,000 people is somehow “reasonable” may be the most disturbing news surrounding the release of Detroit’s census numbers, because like Detroit, what happened in New Orleans is anything but natural. The ways in which the breaching of the levees—and the subsequent flooding of the neighborhoods adjacent to the levees followed by the scattering of communities that were relocated from the New Orleans Superdome by bus, by train, and government to cities and towns all over the United States, was anything but natural. The intersections of race and class and a conversation about who many of the 140,000 people are that left New Orleans are not

⁴ *ibid.*

part of the news story of the census data. The reality that most lower income New Orleans communities are not being rebuilt means that for many displaced residents even if they desire to return home, there is not a home to return to. These are the stories missing from the supposition of New Orleans exodus as “natural” in contrast to Detroit’s supposedly “unnatural” population statistics. Much as there is nothing “natural” about the population rupture that resulted from the breach of the levees, there is nothing natural about the population decline of Detroit. As the dissertation has shown, the material and ideological production of spaces of racialization and racialized space structured the spaces of race and the spaces of the City of Detroit in the twentieth and twenty first century.

This project began long before I even knew it existed. My pursuit of a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies with an emphasis on urban studies, racial formation, and cultural geography comes directly from the ways in which my life has unfolded. This dissertation emerges from my own experiences and understandings of Detroit and my placedness within it and outside of it. Growing up in the metro-Detroit area—one that has long been framed and considered in terms of blackness and whiteness—my personal understandings of race were formed within this local understanding of race. In my neighborhood community of primarily third and fourth generation southern whites and white ethnics, my position as an Asian American was always negotiated as not quite white black and not quite black. Growing up seven miles north of Detroit’s northern border—the ways in which those seven miles were constructed as the other side of the world—farther even than the 20 miles to the national border with Canada—

made me realize early on that some borders are different than others. And it was truly after I moved out of the Detroit area and lived in Seoul, San Francisco, and now San Diego that I experienced moments of “invisibility” of being Asian American in ways not even imagined before. But as these moments of racial invisibility unfolded, my identity as a Detroiter was put into question. When I would tell people I’m from Detroit I usually got responses along the lines of: “You must be so glad that you live here now.” “Wow, San Diego must seem like paradise compared to there.” “There are Asians in Detroit?” I share these moments to offer a little bit of insight into the ways in which my personal experiences understanding, negotiating, and analyzing the racialization of space and the spatialization of race is part of my lived experience.

It is also what moves me to think about the ways in which ideas of racial formation and structural racism are ideas and concepts that have a national and legislated narrative along moments of settler colonialism, slavery, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1924 Immigration Act, the Civil Rights movement, and so on. But there is also a particularly local and regional understanding of racial formation and structural racism that is important to engage. That while often legislated at a national or even state level, race is *lived* in the local.

The goal of the dissertation then is to analyze and form an understanding about what we “know” about what Ruthie Gilmore calls the “fatal couplings of power and difference”⁵ as manifested in the study of race and space, to reveal *how* we know it.

⁵ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography.” *The Professional Geographer*, 54 (1) 2002.

This work in particular takes what is “known” about the racialization of Detroit and reveals places of origin.

Most studies of Detroit focus on its growth, development, and emergence powered by the auto industry and then its movement into the post-industrial period, its decline of population and industry, pivoting around the 1967 rebellion, and its emergence as poster-city for “urban crisis.” Detroit has long been a favorite of sociologists, urban scholars, and the media where statistics are so easily legible in their polarization along lines of black and white. So while race is almost always a piece of the analysis, Detroit has been the subject of relatively few studies of racial formation. Despite its continual reference as the ultimate example of “urban crisis”, white flight, and an allegory for the failure of industry and race relations—very few works on Detroit engage the ways in which ideas of race are formed.

This is where my intervention as an Ethnic Studies project emerges. The dissertation aims to illuminate the mechanics of race and the mapping of race in the material and ideological landscape of Detroit. The dissertation looks explicitly at racial formation—and sees beyond census data and demography and utilizes interdisciplinary source material and methodology to analyze how race becomes welded both to place and to ideas—to see race as constructed and mutable over time and space. In so doing, I seek to reveal the constructedness of race as well as the social, historical, and spatial significance to move beyond the static notion of race that is often privileged in other disciplinary lenses.

My decision to break the dissertation into two Parts was initially motivated by what I saw as divisions in methodology and historic moments. Part I in particular positions the state from Omi and Winant's⁶ framework of the inherently racist state, and that concessions, conflicts, reform, and backlash happen within the work of the state to maintain an equilibrium and power. Part II then picks up and interrogates the idea of "color-blindness" and equality—in the face of a shifting racial state as established in Part I.

In terms of the specific methodological choices of data—much as I tell my students, that although the research plan or questions may begin the project, the research shapes the project. Initially I went to the archive to try to shift and move the narrative of Detroit beyond its typical frame of black and white. But the archival materials reinforced the binary, as very little information existed in the archive that produced a fuller multi-racial picture of Detroit. My next move was to try and understand then, how racial formation of black and white were created in terms of city policy and documents. My focus on neighborhoods and public housing emerges from and is in conversation with the ways in which statistics and demography are so often borne out at the neighborhood level and that the idea of place and race are so often about neighborhood spaces. For Part II, I wanted to look to the ways in which Detroit was understood conceptually, the *idea* of Detroit. I do this to reveal the lasting impact of the policy formations in Part I and also to reveal the ways in which contemporary ideas of race often focus on interpersonal racism and are frequently divided from the

⁶ Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York and London: Routledge.

systemic and institutional legacies of structural racism. The methodological locations of Part II aim to reveal and reattach the institutional relationship between contemporary understandings of race and institutional racism. For both parts of the dissertation the goal was to analyze how, to borrow from Katherine McKittrick, the spatial naturalization of difference happens. As McKittrick states, “racism is a spatial act”⁷ and this work sees material and ideological movement and containment as key sites of racial formation.

The work analyzes this spatialization through the articulation of both the racialization of space and the spatialization of race. In thinking through these interrelated concepts I look to the work of Josh Sides and Kay Anderson who discuss the ways in which a space becomes linked ideologically to a racial or ethnic group—as can be seen in Sides’s work of the metonymy of “Compton” and Anderson’s analysis of the idea of “Chinatown”.⁸ These examples represent the ideological linkages of race to space, the racialization of space. And the spatialization of race I see from a perspective and legacy of institutional or systemic racism and as one of the most powerful ways in which to understand and see the legacies of institutional racism—through the spatial landscapes of neighborhoods, of schools, prisons, and higher education—all institutional spaces that bear out the legacy of the racial state.⁹ So in

⁷ McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ Sides, Josh. 2004. “Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb,” *American Quarterly*, 56(3): 583-605 and Anderson, Kay J. 1987. “The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Dec, 1987), 580-598.

⁹ As the work moves ahead I will think and follow up more with Charles Mills idea of the “racial contract” as pointed out by Yen Le Espiritu as means of spatialization of race, that bodies are marked and carry race with the, resulting in the spatialization vis-à-vis bodies.

some ways initially, Part I was intended as an intervention into the spatialization of race and Part II an intervention into the racialization of space. But as this work shows, the ideas and physical productions of space are intimately interconnected.

Both the battle for Detroit's past and Detroit's future continues through both its plans for its future and its remembrance of the past. In nearly every single article discussing the 2010 census, the population decline is indelibly linked to the post-1910 population increase due to Henry Ford and the rise of industry. The census release mirrors and mimics the same narrative of Detroit's rise due to industry and its decline to flight to the suburbs, urban riots, and the decline of industry. The same idea of industry that many link to the promise of Detroit is ultimately seen as its downfall. And while industry is an important piece of that narrative—as the work of the dissertation has worked to show, it was not simply industry that created and fueled the productions of Detroit.

This dissertation aimed to move the conversation about race and housing in America beyond an entrenched colorline. While many scholars have provided invaluable information about the racial limits of the democratic ideal as it relates to housing in the postwar urban north, I argue that instead of looking at the way in which the debates of housing integration and white flight were based on a line demarcating the boundaries of neighborhood racial lines, a case study of race and housing can be seen as a way to understand racial formation in the U.S. Racial formation moves the housing line, not racialized boundaries of a neighborhood. This project engages the location of housing as way to understand and deconstruct the racial project at work

both nationally and locally in the aims of understanding that the battles around housing are parts of the racial project at work.

As the work of this project continues to grow, expand, and be streamlined, I can see the places that the future may take this project. In particular as this dissertation ends, the possibilities of where to take it next emerge. Future projects will interrogate the construction of Detroit's binaries and unsettle the black-white frame that I initially intended to do. The work of this dissertation project then was to enable the understanding of the production of blackness and whiteness in order to understand the workings of the racial state and racial formation. In doing so I open up the space and possibility then to understand the multi-racial racial formations at work in the city historically and contemporarily. As the project grows and unfolds, it will take the work of racial formation in the spatial and ideological landscape of Detroit established here and apply it to the larger questions of racial formation in Detroit in the hopes of unsettling binaries of black/white, industry growth/decline, city/suburb through an analysis of Detroit's borders.

As I conclude this dissertation Detroit was an interesting subject of conversation in a "Meet the Press" interview in the last two weeks. On Sunday May 1st, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was one of the featured guests. In a conversation about the stalled U.S. economy Mayor Bloomberg made the following comment:

I'll give you a good example of how you can fix some of the problems in America. Take a look at the big old industrial cities--Detroit, for example. Got a great mayor in Mayor Bing. But the population has left. You got to do something about that. And if I were the federal government, assuming you

could wave a magic wand and pull everybody together, you pass a law letting immigrants come in as long as they agree to go to Detroit and live there for five or 10 years, start businesses, take jobs, whatever. You would populate Detroit overnight because half the world wants to come here. We forget, we, we whip ourselves a little bit too much. We still are the world's greatest democracy. We still have hope for--if you want to have a better life for yourself and your kids, this is where you want to come. And you could use something like immigration policy, at no cost to the federal government, to fix a lot of the problems that we have.¹⁰

Bloomberg, an independent since his split from both the Democrat and Republican parties, has recently been a vocal proponent of immigration reform that would allow green cards and visas for entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, and foreign graduates¹¹ in order to stimulate the economy through the narrative of hardworking immigrants. In his statement above, it is interesting that Bloomberg believes that the government could “fix” Detroit through a policy of allowing immigrants to come to the city and incubate business and innovative ideas—assuming that both the Detroit population would be happy and that the immigrant groups would be happy just to be part of the nation. Notice, that Bloomberg didn’t invite immigrants to his City, to the narrative space of New York, with its long mythic relationship to the American Dream and in fact Bloomberg has been cutting services to legal and education services that serve immigrants.¹² The narrative here isn’t necessarily about the role of immigration in Detroit, but about the idea of Detroit’s need for “rescue” and both the linkage here that repopulation would “fix” the problem and that immigrants can be boiled down to

¹⁰ Transcript of “Meet the Press” May 1, 2011

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42822623/ns/meet_the_press-transcripts/t/meet-press-transcript-may/

¹¹ Bloomberg, Michael. “A New Immigration Consensus.” May 2, 2011. *The Wall Street Journal Online*. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703387904576279293334248326.html>

¹² *New York Times* Editorial. “The Immigration Reform Team.” June 24, 2010. *The New York Time Online*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/25/opinion/25fri4.html>

nothing more than their status as “workers” and Detroiters maintain their status as a “problem.” The Mayor of Detroit in an interview responded to Bloomberg’s idea by saying, “I don't know what he was on. We can't provide jobs for the people here. My job is to take care of the people who are here and give them the opportunities they should have for jobs and living situations. But to think that we're going to get a boatload of people who aren't going to find a job doesn't make a lot of sense.”¹³ The conversation here and the coded language deployed by both Bloomberg (hard workers) and Bing (boatloads of people) are important pieces of the narrative and “debate” over immigration. As the project moves forward moments like this, where policymakers and public ideologies come together are important moments to think through and analyze in the narrative of Detroit.

As the conversation over Detroit’s population loss bookends the narrative of this conclusion, it will be a fruitful starting place to think about in terms of *how* the imaginary and the policies work hand in hand in shaping the material and ideological landscapes of Detroit. The newest binary of population loss/growth is an idea that helps to draw out the narrative of borders and frontiers that this project will focus more on as it continues. From a historic perspective of movement and containment structured and motivated by globalization to a full circle moment whereby movement and containment continues to be structured and motivated by globalization is a place

¹³ Neavling, Steve. “Bing says residents must embrace change: 'We are still in denial about our problems'.” May 12, 2011. *The Detroit Free Press Online*. <http://www.freep.com/article/20110512/NEWS01/110512018/Bing-says-residents-must-embrace-change-We-still-denial-about-our-problems-?odyssey=tab|topnews|text|FRONTPAGE>

where the narrative of Detroit can be brought full circle as the debates continue over who has the right to manufacturing the narratives of Detroit's past, present, and future.

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