

Racial capitalism and claims to space in post-bankruptcy Detroit

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## **Abstract**

My dissertation examines the roles of land use and property governance in mediating racial and economic inequality in the urban environment. This dissertation is concerned with how gendered and raced subjectivities shape property relations across the urban landscape in the United States. The articles that comprise this manuscript dissertation are based on an extended case method approach utilizing mixed qualitative methods in Detroit, Michigan between 2016 and 2018. These articles explore how the evolving governance of property following Detroit's bankruptcy manifested in market formations and legal frameworks that disrupted long-practiced informal relationships to property by residents. Residents' voluntary stewardship has revealed the generative capacities of the city's vast stock of vacant properties, the community's ability to defend themselves against politics of austerity, and how city government has come to depend on residents' unpaid labor in the absence of municipal maintenance capacities of fair taxation policies. Detroit is a propagative site for understanding contemporary manifestations of racialization and urban property relations due to the large stock of municipal land holdings, the temporary seizure of democratic representation during the 2013 instatement of emergency management, and this post-bankruptcy moment of imagining how all Detroiters will live together in the increasingly divided city. This is the context in which land justice and housing advocates, including urban farmers are reshaping Detroit's narrative of material depravity. By exemplifying how municipal land holdings and foreclosed homes can be harnessed toward ends of racial justice through the redistribution of property back to those whose' stewardship has added value to their neighborhoods, Detroiters are working toward a future their elected officials have not yet imagined. These articles address how urban property markets are mobilized toward ends that are increasingly fractured from liberal conceptualizations of the role of city governments. Once thought to hold moral obligations to improve the lives of residents through providing public services, equity in governance, and to advance the human condition via infrastructural development and democratically embedded public process; the volatility of this particular city's government has produced quite the opposite, constructing variegated rather than equitable tiers of citizenship and access to space.

## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to three women, young and old who span four generations of their family; Mae Frances Larkin, grandmother to Olivia Ceceil Hubert, and great grandmother to Wren Frances Willerer. In the early 1960's, Mae Francis moved herself and her five children to Detroit from Mississippi. She had grown up in a share cropping family and knew how to care for a kitchen garden, animals and children, though she worked at a nursing home in Detroit. In my time knowing Mae, she has applied for grants available to Detroit's seniors to help keep their homes in adequate repair, and we've shared lemonade and baked treats on her front porch on Detroit's lower east side. Mae's specialty is frying up frozen breakfast sausages from the nearby gas station and serving them in butter. She carries a Tupperware container of fried sausages wherever she goes. Her granddaughter Olivia was born in 1985, and attended the now defunct Detroit Public School vocational program for horticulture during high school. She graduated and went on to complete a BSc in horticultural sciences at Michigan State University on a full scholarship available to graduates of Detroit high schools. I met Olivia on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010 on a very cold and rainy day on her farm, Sister Acres Farm located in North Corktown, Detroit's oldest neighborhood. We grew our friendship, and Olivia became one of the most influential teachers I've known in my many years of education. I've often told Olivia that the closest thing I've had in my life to attending church has been our many mornings together; us weeding, and me listening to her talk about land dispossession and racism in the city where she was born and raised, and now raising her own child. In 2014, she gave birth to Wren Frances who joined us in all weather out in the field rows of Brother Nature. In the summer of 2018, Wren and I walked hand-in-hand across the farm to her low hanging tree fort with hay bail steps leading to the platform where a small radio and her sitting blanket waited. Seated on the platform together, Wren looked across the rows of the farm and located her parents in the field and whispered "[y]ou love each other. That's why you're here".

## Acknowledgments

Joya D’Cruz and Stefanie Cohen, epistemologically have been the two most valuable teachers in my life thus far. Their teaching, guidance and friendship have been immeasurable. They have taught me how to witness, how to use my senses, and to trust that sometimes we do not get to know. Not all desired knowledge is attainable. I would like to acknowledge the learning that has come out of my authentic movement peer practice group at the Lightbox Studio, under the guidance and Stefanie Cohen. It is a pleasure and an education to move among you.

Gratitude is owed to everyone who has been a stand-in parent and elder to me throughout the process of my doctorate degree. Karanja Famodou and I cared for bees together at the Detroit Black Community Food Security network farm, D-Town Farm for four seasons and continue our friendship through discussions of politics and theory. He has been a constant cheerleader for my research and progress. Cathy Snygg and Gary Swartz have lamented with me about city politics in their kitchen as we prepare food together enough times to have lost count. They have maintained candid interest in hearing about the development of my ideas, and Cathy has helped me maintain a running timeline of changes to city bylaws that address agriculture. Mae Francis Larkin, my friend Olivia’s grandmother has fed me, offered a listening ear and always a generous amount of advice about how to handle life, which just so happened to continue as research is being conducted. She reminded me that I am loved and let me know that I always had a welcome home to go to.

Olivia Hubert, Greg Willerer and their child Wren Francis welcome me into their home for conversation and tea at all hours, and they have been so generous in their years-long friendship with me to continue to talk about the politics of land in the city, racism, food security, and all of their plans to build a different kind of future for their family. Olivia and Greg were my first friends in Detroit, and their experiences as farmers have been deeply instructive in leading me toward producing work that is of use to people living the struggle.

Jessica Jurgutis is my best friend and traveler through life. The amount of personal growth we have guided one another through during our doctoral degrees may be the most expedient and dramatic development I have done since the initial markers of growth, of learning to walk or saying my first words. I am fortunate to have Jessica at my side to go through the bigness of it all. In our friendship, she has helped me become one of my trusted teachers. My cat Sauce saw me through both of my graduate degrees, and she has crossed the US/Canada border more than most humans I know, often to receive a puzzled look by border guards. It took adopting a cat at the age of 24 for me to discover that what had been missing in my writing practice all along was feline companionship, and specifically Sauce’s loyalty.

On a weekly basis for the last five years I have met with Aaron Mondry, a Detroit journalist to sit and write together to escape the isolation that this solitary practice often leads us into. We were joined by Nick Hagen and Sean Work a few years in, two photojournalists, and the four of us have remained steadfast if casual in our practice of producing words and images in conversation with one another. I am grateful for the snacks and laughter and encouragement we offer one another. Alexa Eisenburg has been a regular writing buddy throughout the final stages of my

doctoral degree, and I am thankful for all of the conversations and self reflection we have engaged in together that continues to challenge and strengthen our intellectual pursuits.

I want to thank all of the farmers, housing advocates, and land justice activists in Detroit who have allowed me to be part of their movement spaces, campaigns, meetings, and conversations. Building trust and relationships among these groups generated so much energy and enthusiasm that fueled the research I conducted. The friendships I have made among these communities are invaluable.

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## Prologue

In 1989 my family moved from Stratford, Ontario to Kitchener after my father lost his job at Samsonite luggage company on the shipping and receiving dock. Our move would make my father's commute to his new job in a hardware warehouse shorter, and it relocated our family to a slightly larger and more manufacturing-based city. However, at the beginning of the 1990s Kitchener was undergoing its own decline in manufacturing. The city's multiple leather tanneries were closing as my family arrived. The meat processing plant located across the street from what would become my high school reduced processing capacities that year and the lingering smell of meats in our neighborhood slowly dissipated. The Arrow Shirt Company closed along with Rumble Felt, and the Kaufman Rubber company closure resulted in four families on our block having to move. By the time I was in middle school, friends and I began exploring shuttered warehouses and processing floors around the city.

After graduating from high school, I attended Wilfrid Laurier University and started to volunteer at a Mennonite service organization that opened in downtown Kitchener in the mid-1990s called The Working Centre. The center offered employment services, drug counseling, transitional housing for people returning to the community from prison or stays in addiction facilities, and a friend pitched the idea for a small bike shop that was approved and still operates today. I worked in the center's community garden. We grew food that was processed in the center's kitchen and served for free or for low prices in a street-level café. A professor in one of my Global Studies courses at Wilfrid Laurier asked me if I had heard about all the community gardens in Detroit, Michigan. At the time, my only knowledge of Detroit was the garage bands I'd listened to in high school and that tires manufactured at the Firestone plant behind the local hospital were somehow connected to Detroit's auto industry. Three years later I was working as a freelance journalist and conducting site scouting and research for a Canadian photojournalism group called the Boreal Collective. One of our projects allowed me to spend weekends and a few longer stays in Detroit between 2009-2011. It was easy to find a good concert and difficult to buy necessities like soap or underwear, which I learned over the course of my many weekends having hastily packed a bag before heading to Michigan. The end result of the photographs that were produced was ultimately a 'ruin porn' story, not that I understood it to be so at the time. The images

launched the international career of the story's lead photographer. He went onto work for the Obama administration, Greenpeace, the New York Times, Getty Images, the Associated Press and Reuters. I applied to grad school.

In 2011 I began my master's degree at McMaster University in the School of Labor Studies. With an undergraduate degree in women's and gender studies, and global studies, the focus of my academic work thus far had broadly addressed issue of social inequality. I decided to pursue a degree in labor studies because of my own involvement in urban agriculture in both Kitchener-Waterloo (my hometown) and Toronto, and my recent introduction to Detroit's farming community where people were making a living from urban food cultivation. The project I proposed for my master's research was to study the multiple 'green job training' programs and Detroit's 'green collar' workforce in relation to the radical politics of the city's infamous League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and broader black radical labor struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. Where the City of Detroit and multiple environmental non-profits were adopting the language of revolutionary workers movements of days of yore, their green jobs training programs operated within an austere politics of the neoliberal responsabilization of urban poverty as an issue of sloth and unskilled labor. Literature discussing neoliberal governmentality suggests that neoliberal subjects are lured to neoliberalism's promises of increased personal freedoms and self-realization through 'innovation' (Baptista, 2013; Oosterlynck and González, 2013). This 'appeal to freedom' explanation that subsumes the co-participation of subjects in their own neoliberal rule creates a relationship of the co-production of a neoliberal order through subjects' assumption of individual responsibility (Pyysiäinen, Halpin, and Guilfoyle, 2017). The largely top-down structure of formal urban greening initiatives and responsabilization of Detroit residents at the time, with non-profit and foundation-led greening initiatives engendered inclusions and exclusions to urban space (Neo & Chua, 2017) when the city was on the brink of bankruptcy.

My interest as a graduate student in labor studies was the co-opting of language from the Black Freedom Movement by municipal and non-profit agencies peddling lawn maintenance and tree planting skills to underpaid seasonal workers, who were told they were part of a new green urban revolution. I was cautioned as an MA student to 'be careful' and 'spend as little time in Detroit alone as possible', which were direct words of advice from a concerned supervisor who had

grown up in Windsor and recalled watching smoke rise from Detroit's skyline throughout his youth. My MA degree in Labor Studies from McMaster University was a condensed program intended for activists and people in the labor movement who could take a short leave from work to complete their degree. I began in September of 2011 and graduated the following August. Graduate school seemed like the most viable option to allow me to continue my own writing practice though different from my journalistic pursuits. Being a graduate student offered a low but predictable income and access to academic journals. It was also a justification enough to spend time reading and writing, something I had found a challenging feat when I was balancing writing projects with multiple part-time jobs in the years following the completion of my undergraduate degree. I felt fortunate to have texts curated for me by Professor Wayne Lewchuk, a former autoworker turned economist. His childhood and youth spent in Windsor gave him some peripheral knowledge of an era in Detroit that I would never know.

It was during my MA degree that I read Dan Georgakas and Martin Surkin's *Detroit: I do Mind Dying: a Study in Urban Revolution* (1975). The book, written just six years after the formation of Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1969, chronicled the Black revolutionary union movement and Marxist-Leninist shop floor organizing and wildcat strikes. As a text, it is deeply historical in its approach to the rise of Black labor power in Detroit's automotive and manufacturing industries. Georgakas and Surkin (1975) thoughtfully contextualize the deep seeded tumult that remained throughout the city's Black neighborhoods following the 1967 uprising. They wrote of workers organizing amid ongoing street-level racial oppression that followed Black workers onto the shop floor of their workplaces. Members of the league, which included the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) harnessed labor power to form broad opposition against White authorities, including automotive executives who informed the organization of labor in workplaces where the League had a strong presence. This text introduced me to the distinct labor issues experienced by Black workers during the civil rights movement, and importantly emphasized the connectivity of struggle from the workplace to the neighborhood. For me *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* was the beginning of my ability to make connections between broader struggle and direct action at the scale of the neighborhood.

During my master's degree, I also came across Thomas J. Sugrue's historical political text *The Origin of the Urban Crisis: Race, and inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Sugrue's (1996) depiction of pre- and postwar Detroit addresses the city's shifting infrastructure, broadly defined as housing, sites of manufacturing, new investments in roadways, and the social infrastructure of neighborhood associations and schools. With a focus on the roles of labor and the housing market in post-war Detroit, Sugrue details how the maintenance of segregation in the city's sites of industrial manufacturing, as well as residential neighborhoods, produced a pressure chamber of socio-spatial relations that were upheld by informal and formal practices, by both policy and practice. The preferential hiring of white workers and reinstatement of the white working class back into manufacturing following their return from the second world war exacerbated already heated racial tension in workplaces. The housing covenants that racially restricted the movement of Black families offered realtors and mortgage providers the power to block bust, deny housing, refuse home finance options to Black families, and contributed to the devaluation of Detroit's housing market and racial segregation city-wide. In his detailing of the city's 1950s public housing crisis, a dilemma catalyzed by the removal of several prominently black residential neighborhoods and business districts for freeway construction, Sugrue (1996, 87) states:

The dilemma of the housing crisis for Detroit's poor was still unresolved in the late 1950s. The city directed [B]lacks needing homes to its already crowded center-city projects, and defended the concentration of [B]lacks as the necessary consequence of slum removal.

When I initially read this section in 2011, Detroit had not yet set national records for mass tax foreclosure on residential properties two consecutive years in a row. It took until 2014 and 2015, the years Detroit set national records for home tax foreclosures, approximately six years following the mortgage foreclosure crisis and the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008, to think back to my 2011 reading of this particular chapter of Sugrue's book.

It was in 2015 that I began discussing alternative property ownership models among neighbors in the city, specifically about the possibility of coordinating a community land trust in our neighborhood of East Poletown, where the City of Detroit had granted eminent domain in 1981 to clear 40 acres of dense residential housing for the construction of a General Motors assembly

plant. The plant will cease operation in November of 2019. In December of 2018, I was solicited to write about the closure for the Huffington Post.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In December of 2018, General Motors announced the closing of three assembly facilities in the Great Lakes industrial region, including the Oshawa facility in Ontario, the Hamtramck Assembly located inside of the city limits of Detroit, and the large Youngstown plant in Ohio. I was asked contacted by editorial managers at Huffington Post Canada and asked to write an article about the community-level impact of the closures. Taking a historical approach to the neighborhood level impacts of manufacturing loss, the article urges members of the labor movement and concerned readers to mobilise around lost wages and hardship, and to additionally rouse action about the co-production of neighborhood decline resulting from disinvestment local governmental relationships with manufacturing corporations.

## **Article One**

### **Introduction**

Over the course of my graduate degrees, I have lived the majority of my time in Detroit and have spent multiple growing seasons alongside the city's farmers, many of whom grow rouge and do not own the properties they cultivate. My research has taken place on both sides of the city's 2013 municipal bankruptcy, spanned three mayoral elections and was carried out during the Great Recession and subsequent tax foreclosure crisis that ravaged Detroit's neighborhoods more deeply than the city's infamous 1967 race rebellion. Not long after the city's bankruptcy, the farming community pivoted from discussions of community food security to expressing concerns over property ownership and formalizing rights to land. Although my initial research proposals for this dissertation had a greater focus on food security and food studies, I redirected the focus of my research in response to the changing topic of discussions I was having with farmers. Following the city's bankruptcy filing in 2013 and slow emergence from state financial management in 2014, farmers became increasingly strategic about securing land claims under the new leadership of the city's Planning and Development Department. Though farmers had been encouraged by forty years of leadership at city hall to farm and steward vacant parcels without legal ownership over vacant property, the post-bankruptcy shift in how property is governed has placed farmers in a precarious position. Farmers' shift in focus from food security to land security aligns with the work conducted by the Nation of Islam and the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church during the US civil rights movement, organizations that both purchased farmland for the sake of securing land for the cultivation of food for Black communities (McCutcheon, 2011). Farmers in Detroit have remained acutely aware as they watch property values rise on parcels that had been vacant for upwards of sixty years that the remonetization of disinvested neighborhoods will be a challenge for the urban agriculture community. For this reason, I shifted the focus of my research to keep pace with farmers' focus on the politics of land, its histories in the city, and what directions people are taking to gain security over property, be that a home or farm or parcels stewarded for community use. The articles included in this manuscript-based dissertation are based on research conducted between 2009 and 2018, during which time I was affiliated with graduate programs from 2011 onwards. I initially conducted

journalistic research in Detroit in 2009, and that period in the city informs how I understand the city today. Throughout the last three years, I have assembled and published long and short form articles in academic journals and others that have been directed through community or journalistic avenues. This manuscript-based dissertation was assembled with the intention of making the research I conducted with and alongside many farmers, housing and land justice activists in Detroit available to the people who so deeply informed the work. The pace at which academia allows works to be published, particularly a larger project such as a dissertation, would have risked losing relevance or becoming obsolete in the city's climate of rapid redevelopment. Writing articles has allowed research to be more quickly available than a full-length thesis would have allowed, and the distribution of these publications has been eased through the availability of digital files. Having started this work and my research relationships as a journalist, the manuscript-based format of this dissertation has allowed me to remain aligned with a longer form and investigative style of writing that strikes a balance in speaking to multiple audiences.

### **Questions and themes**

The questions the enclosed articles explore were influenced by conversations with farmers and housing advocates in Detroit, as well as by direct observations made between 2011 and 2018 of changes in property governance, the rise of the tax foreclosure crisis, and the implementation of the City of Detroit's urban agriculture ordinance in 2015. Each article is explicit in its interrogation of the politics of land, and the relationships between racial capitalism, property relations, and the tactics and strategies being carried out by community members to secure and make claims over their relationships to property, space, and the right to remain in their city.

The questions I am drawn to in my research concern the power dynamics within epistemological processes and pedagogical relationships. This dissertation addresses the politics of knowing and knowledge production within anti-racist and feminist frameworks, and how these frameworks inform geographic knowledge. In the initial article on the life and influence of Grace Lee Boggs, I ask: What can a biographical investigation teach us about feminist knowledge production relating to the production of space? What does feminist biography offer epistemologically to our understandings of space? This article was published in *Gender, Place and Culture* in 2018. In the second article that details the operations of a Detroit-based and woman-led housing foreclosure non-profit organization, the Tricycle Collective, of which I was a member, I engage with

literature on critical race studies and feminist ethics of care in geography to address the potential for harm in conducting feminist research that is not critically self reflexive or committed to real material changes. This article explores urban praxis and the theory we produce and espouse to as scholars and activists committed to social justice. The article was published in the *Radical Housing Journal* in 2019. The third article utilizes ethnographic materials from semi-structured interviews conducted with women in Detroit's urban agricultural community, providing a window into farmers personal relationships with the land they cultivate and how it is they politically frame agricultural land use in the city. This article asks how resistance to racial and economic exclusion from property ownership and the municipal governance of property contend over various rights-based claims to space. This article was recently resubmitted after completing reviewer revisions to *Urban Geography*. Thematically the content and questions of the first three articles are concerned with racialization and property relations, and take an interested in how gender and race position women as urban subjects, and how Black women's relationships to property influence the production of urban space.

The final article in the series reviews academic literature from urban studies and geographers who have produced Detroit-focused research in the near-pre and post-bankruptcy period in Detroit, a groups whose research has been defined as potentially contributing to a Detroit School of urban theory by planning scholars at the University of Michigan. This article, like the Detroit School asks: What does studying a city like Detroit offer to questions being asked in urban studies today? This review consolidates recently produced Detroit-focused research for the purpose of identifying contemporary ideas and depictions of the city, and delves into questioning what it is that is now meant by 'post industrial' and 'deindustrial' urban space to identify common questions and interests among Detroit-focused scholarship, to examine whether these Detroit-focused scholars comprise a distinct school of degrowth urbanism.

### **Research context**

In 2009 elders in the farming community started a 'white caucus' within a local grassroots organization called Uprooting Racism Planting Justice, a localized response to the Obama administration's program 'Showing up for Racial Justice' (SURJ). I had already spent a few growing seasons with farmers and had started to establish friendships and working relationships with farmers and fellow graduate students. Although I was spending time in Detroit in 2009 as a

journalist, I did not join the white caucus until 2013. We met on a monthly basis for three years and my understanding of systemic racism started to take shape beyond academic texts. I felt and was affirmed in how grounded I was in the city's agricultural community. Farmers regularly sought my assistance with acquisition applications for the parcels they were cultivating. I was invited to volunteer at the Detroit Black Community Food Security farm, D-Town Farm located on Detroit's Northwest side. For years I had avoided the site, recognizing it as a Black space that I did not want to impose myself upon. My role as a volunteer was as a beekeeper alongside Karanja Famodou, a former member of the Republic of New Africa. In addition to D-Town, I worked weekly as a farmhand at three other urban farms and developed relationships with other farmers through occasional farm visits. I did this for five consecutive seasons and gained a reputation in the farming community as a researcher who was going to make engaging in research useful for farmers. I slowly dissipated from my community in Ontario and built a social and extended familial network in Detroit. These are the people with whom I spend holidays, birthdays, and long late-night phone calls when I'm not in Michigan. Detroit is the city where I made my first middle-class friends and where I met people of my generation with trust funds and stock holdings, though many of them live such deeply bohemian lifestyles that it would never appear as such. This is part of the complexity of the city and a reality that has created social rifts among white and Black urban farmers, artists, and those who make city living into a kind of craftwork.

During the city's peak tax foreclosure years in 2014-2015, I became involved in foreclosure prevention initiatives after a few people in the farming community were faced with the prospect of being evicted by the city treasurer's office from their family homes. I joined the Land Justice Working Group of the local non-profit, Detroit People's Platform, an affiliate organization of the national Building Movement organization. Fellow members and I began fervently attending board meetings of the new Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) in a watchdog effort to keep land justice activists up to pace with changes in local property governance. By that time I had spent five years moving in and out of long term stays in the city and had even purchased a house with a partner. We paid \$13,000 for a 2000 square foot multi-story home with 7000 square feet of yard space. The former Detroit police officer we purchased the home from insisted we pay with dollar bills.

In 2016 I was awarded a Fulbright student research position that was hosted by Wayne State University. I was mentored by Professor Andrew Newman in the Anthropology of the City research institute. We met in 2013 through mutual involvement with the Detroit People's Platform (DPP), an umbrella organization for multiple civic social justice campaigns. I was a member and co-facilitator of the land justice working group. Andrew and our colleague Sara Safransky had been awarded a Wenner Gren scholarship to produce a book project that was collaboratively written with community members and leadership within DPP. A young woman I met at a local farm asked me to join a new non-profit, the Tricycle Collective. The collective grew into a women-led tax foreclosure prevention initiative that operated until January of 2019. Between my involvement with these two organizations, I assisted with the establishment of a community land trust and was part of raising funds that allowed 89 families to keep their foreclosed homes.

By 2016, I noticed that the new guard in the city Planning and Development Department stopped responding to my emails and questions at public events. What was suggested to me by a longer-term city staff member was that I had appeared for too long as an advocate for farmers and spoken too openly about the racism of city planners. The 2015 arrival of a new planning director and recently hired landscape architects who were brought on to manage the 'open space' plan had been instructed to avoid me. When I shared this hurdle with a senior academic colleague, I was told to make sure I was handing out business cards. I began to realize that how I was conducting my work and building relationships may be causing some discomfort among city planners, and was not within an orthodox framework a senior academic colleague would understand.

## **Methodology**

My research methodology was informed largely by a qualitative feminist methodologies class I completed during my MA degree and were based in participatory and action-based methods (PAR). Having come out of a parachuting journalism collective upon beginning my graduate degrees, I was conscious of the extractive interactions journalists and academics were known for in the city, and I knew I wanted to conduct my work in ways that would be mutually beneficial for myself and the people I interacted with. Methodologically I approached my dissertation field research qualitatively and through a variety of forms of engagement. Burawoy's (1998) extended

case method is the most fitting way for me to describe my long-term engagement in Detroit. The extended case method is based in the practice of reflexive science that thematizes our participation in the surrounding world, and resolves that human interaction often results in affective relationships and knowledge production. For Burawoy (1998, 6), “the extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro’, and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future.” In my own extended case in Detroit, my experiences as a farm hand, advocate, consultant, and as a long-term resident (and short term homeowner) allowed me to develop a new relationship to critical race theory and property relations. I have attempted in the enclosed articles to demonstrate my research action orientation, and the self-reflexive relationship I have deepened within my own feminist scholarship and community praxis. The first three of four articles I have written task urban theorists to seek out sites and practices of urban social reproduction that enact disruption to oppressive regimes; whether imperfect or ineffective or gainful in their attempts. The final article may be read as a literature review of the still-young Detroit school of degrowth urban theory, a theoretical initiative born out of a planning conference at the University of Michigan’s Taubman School of Urban Planning in 2013.

If Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method is a frame for my methodological process, the gels I implemented throughout my fieldwork include discussions in geography that include feminist scholarship, urban studies, critical race theory, and political ecology and economy research. What I would describe as my actual methods included semi-structured interviews, participatory and action research, observation and regular reading of grey literature and local journalism. I directed my focus toward the housing work I was already engaged in and went deeper into the theory that had been informed by the many relationships I have with farmers and my simultaneous reading of critical race studies literature. I carried out work with committees within three local non-profit organizations: the Detroit People’s Platform land justice working group; the Tricycle Collective, a women-led housing foreclosure non-profit; and the Storehouse of Hope Community Land Trust. The community members with whom I engaged most extensively are Detroit’s urban farmers. I also regularly attended meetings of the Detroit Land Bank Authority as well as their bi-annual land sales of the city’s stock of properties without standing structures on them. These land sales events were open to residents by invitation only, for the purpose of selling vacant land parcels to immediately adjacent property owners. This DLBA program of selling

“side lots” to Detroit residents for the cost of \$100 per parcel excluded renters from purchasing relatively low-cost land in the city. The DLBA also allowed property owners without primary resident status, meaning property owners who did not reside in the property that made them eligible for purchasing an adjacent side lot, to take part in the buying fairs. I assisted several farmers with navigating the side lot sales program, to ensure they were aware of their eligibility to purchase properties they steward when they were eligible.

Fellow members of the Tricycle Collective and I co-authored a resource toolkit in the form of a booklet (that was also digitized) containing the necessary documents and information residents need in order to apply for property tax exception through a low-income claim the Wayne County Tax Authority.<sup>2</sup> The toolkit has been distributed to over 4000 homes through door to door outreach and has been disseminated by multiple housing assistance agencies in the city since 2017. Quicken Loans, the online mortgage sales company now headquartered in Detroit, also began distributing the toolkit through door to door canvassing as an employee volunteer initiative in which employees exercise altruistic tasks in order to ‘give back’ to the city. I took part in the ‘authority watch’ initiative of a local umbrella organization that ensured community members were in attendance and taking notes at meets held by Detroit City Council. The Detroit Water Authority, the Detroit Land Bank Authority, and the Planning and Development Department. As a facilitator with the Detroit People’s Platform land justice working group, fellow group members and myself co-authored a policy recommendation report that outlined ways community members wanted city planners to implement more just and economically viable ways for residents who have experienced foreclosure to be able to purchase housing and vacant parcels. The proposal specifically focused on collective property ownership models and stressed the importance of non-private ownership options.

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<sup>2</sup> The Tricycle Collective produced the Homeowner’s Property Tax Exemption program toolkit in 2016 and 2017. We determined what content needed to be included in the booklet through our interactions with families undergoing foreclosure, and the suggestions families offered about pertinent information that could have prevented their home foreclosure in the first place. The toolkit booklet is digitized, though we also printed 2000 copies that were distributed to housing organizations and neighborhood associations throughout the city. An additional 4000 printed copies were distributed door to door. This project was funded by the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan. The digitized version of the toolkit, which is still used and up to date today can be found at: <http://fromclosureetroit.com/>.

The extended and continuous conversations I engage in with residents in Detroit is both a dialectical humanist practice (Boggs, Birkhold, Feldman, and Howel, 2014) as much as it was a strategy for establishing trust and a shared understanding that is enabled through an extended case study. As a result of my own commitment to establish relationships and familiarity among community before requesting people's time and energy for academic interviews, I tasked myself to find appropriate and non-extractive ways of being in people's community and social peripheries. With many of the Detroit farmers I interviewed, I volunteered my labor on their farms, usually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for five and upwards of six growing seasons. This involved learning more about vegetable cultivation and fruit tree pruning than I had previously known. I learned many new techniques and developed senses through this form of work that I had not anticipated. Although I had a few years of urban crop cultivation experience, I had never farmed so intensively or among people with such vast knowledge of various plant species or tips for how to grow high yielding crops in generally low nutrient soil that was available in the city. The rows and orchards of people's farms in Detroit are where most conversations and eventually interviews were held. Conversations were held as we worked together, and I was sometimes offered a bag of the seasonal yield to take home with me as a show of gratitude. It became clear to me that although extra hands were helpful, several farmers in the city wanted to have bee colonies on their farms though lacked the time and resources to do so. As someone with beekeeping training, I continued to assist growers with plant cultivation though I added value to their continued investment in our relationship by taking care of bees at four larger farms in the city. Word spread among farmers that I had knowledge of bees, and I was regularly called upon for consultation by growers who were interested in learning to care for bees themselves. Tending to bees became a method of exchange as well as a way to generate conversation with farmers about the controversial urban agricultural ordinance that Detroit City Council tabled in 2013 and passed in 2015; an ordinance that specifically prohibited the keeping of livestock including bees anywhere within city limits. This specific method of labor exchange with farmers sparked my interest in someday investigating the role of interspecies relationships in the field.

In 2015 and 2016 I took part in supplementary training through the non-profit organization Groundswell: Oral History for Social Change. The seven-week long courses I completed during the spring months of each year allowed me to produce interview questions and practice anti-oppressive interview techniques with other scholar-activists around North America. The courses

offered by Groundswell allowed me to feel prepared to speak to community members and gave me a technical framework, that of the extended oral history to shape my interactions and research around. Although I did not conduct an oral history project among farmers in Detroit, the relationships building, narrative construction, and initial and follow up interviews have already been conducted with more than a dozen members of the urban agriculture community. In the future, I would like to continue to explore the integration of oral history into geographic research, and I look forward to the opportunity this would allow for me to continue to focus on non-extractive work and relationship building for the sake of co-knowledge production.

If I were to broadly classify my methods for the dissertation research I conducted, I believe it most closely aligns with participatory, action-based, and ethnographic methods as described above. Feminist research urges practitioners to understand theory as praxis, and for Kye Askins (2018) a theory-praxis nexus co-constructs participatory and action research (PAR). It was suggested to me in the first year of my doctoral studies that it would be impossible for a doctoral candidate to gain research ethics approval for a PAR project, and that it was in my best interest to strictly conduct interviews. I was discouraged both for my lack of experience as well as the amount of time that feminist scholars know PAR to take; that it would be impossible for someone working on the timeline of dissertation completion to make such methodologies work.

Time enables different kinds of research to take place, so feminist geographers explain in their calls for a slower and more effective and engaged scholarship (Mountz et al., n.d.). The Participatory Geographies Research Group (2012) of the Royal Geographic Society frames participatory research as outward looking, and participation as a way of knowing that is driven by a community of scholars interested in developing new connections and epistemologies outside of the academy. Their 2012 ‘communifesto’ on participatory research describes participatory approaches to research as being aligned implicitly and explicitly to activist geographies that engage firsthand in initiatives to advance social change. Cahill (2007) asks researchers to direct their attention away from the social change implications of PAR and to look inward to reflect on how the practice of PAR equally influences the lives of those conducting research. Reflecting on Freire’s conceptualization of subject formation, Cahill (2007) claims just as members of the Participatory Geographies Research Group that reaching outward in our research offers the possibility to invite contributions and perspectives into processes of knowledge production that

may otherwise not have contributed. Fighting the ‘armchair revolution’ of the insular and positivist thinking of the academy is exactly what Freire (1970, 1975) spoke of when he theorized praxis. Although my work may not formally have been approved as a PAR project, it was through my conduct as a researcher and community member in Detroit that I was invited to join Urban Praxis Workshop, a platform for developing experimental tools, methods and knowledge informed through action and the co-creation of knowledge that explores the limits and possibilities of community-driven research, training, and participation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Doing feminist and antiracist research**

There is clear intention in the articles that comprise this dissertation. The scholarship I practice is explicitly and imperfectly committed to anti-racism and the continued evolution of feminist theory and praxis. The completion of my undergraduate degree in women’s and gender studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in 2009 set me on a course for continued study and praxis in feminist research. There was little content offered in the program by women of color, aside from three noteworthy texts: Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera “The New Mestiza”* (1987), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2004). These course materials and the indigenous solidarity activist group I was a member of on campus motivated a continued interest in the study and practice of anti-racism and feminist politics. The work of Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Anzaldua have continued to circulate back into my reading lists and conversations with fellow researchers who have dedicated their work to the deconstruction of white supremacy. Anzaldua’s seminal *Borderlands* (1987), an essay-styled long-form text on the Chicano and Chicano experience of hybridity and the straddling of national identities at the US and Mexico border has continued to challenge my intellectual practice to broaden my own understandings of classification, identity, nationhood, and political alliances. It is a work frequently featured in feminist geography seminars, and the semi-autobiographical account Anzaldua shares in essayist form the need for expression of culture, gender and sexuality in multiple languages and outlets to

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about Urban Praxis Workshop, visit the website at <https://urbanpraxis.org/>

enable active interest in oppressed people's relationship with the borders and in-between-spaces that define identity. In the book's sixth chapter, Anzaldua examines the role of the writer in introducing language, conjuring new ways of imagining the future, and of multiplying our ways of knowing. Upon my first reading of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, and their proclamation that Black Geographies are capable of rewriting the state, I wondered about Anzaldua and writing as a process of creating new ways of knowing (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). The use of reflexive writing in *Borderlands/La Frontera* positions the reader alongside Anzaldua's own learning of the multiple forms of situated knowledge she contains as a lesbian Chicana writer, and exercises an epistemological practice of learning alongside one another. If the practice of writing, be it from a borderland or situated within a Black geography is a means of imagining new futures and reconstructing the state, I wrote the articles that comprise this dissertation with those whom I write alongside and our shared visions for the future in mind.

In my practice of antiracist scholarship, I write and learn alongside journalists, community members and scholars who embrace the intermingling of reflexive, semi-autobiographical and theoretical works. This is a tradition and epistemological practice among both feminist and anti-racist scholars and a form of writing used to express the exploratory process of learning. Calling into question the entrenched views of the nation of racial inequality following the US Civil War, Du Bois wrote autobiographically about the concept of race to challenge what he termed "double consciousness" that challenged Black American's ability to maintain a grounded sense of belonging and identity (Du Bois, 1903). The works of bell hooks take up a theoretical and autobiographical hybridity, not dissimilar to Anzaldua's essayist style in her works addressing femininity, race, love, and social inequality. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks examines the questions "What does it mean to call a place home? How do we create community? When can we say that we truly belong?" (hooks, 2010). These questions are central not only to the work of human geographers, but also central to the questions asked among critical race studies scholars that investigates racial dispossession, placelessness and diasporic communities. In Kobayashi's 2014 presidential address in the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, she utilized a biographical approach to examining the theoretical advances made by people of color geographers on the topic of race and racism in geography scholarship (Kobayashi, 2014b). Kobayashi points out the prevalence of autobiographical investigations into race by scholars of

color and observes that geographers tend to be more commonly influenced by poststructuralist thinking such as Michele Foucault rather than self-reflexive autobiographical theory by someone like Franz Fanon or Sylvia Wynter. Though the work of behavioral geographers positivist ideas about discrimination and radical geographers critiques of racism as a historical process have offered quite oppositional findings on race within neoclassical geography, Kobayashi urges that understanding the development of anti-racist scholarship within geography ought to be grounded in the work of Black geographers whose research is primarily framed within behavioral urban geography (Kobayashi, 2014a).

In 2000, Mark McGuinness wrote in *Area* “Geography matters? Whiteness and contemporary geography”, about the upsurge of interest among geographers in whiteness and race he had noticed throughout the later half of the 1990s (McGuinness, 2000). McGuinness credits cinema historian Richard Dyer’s 1988 essay ‘*White*’ for the increased interest and investigation of whiteness within the humanities. Dyer suggests that whiteness as a subject in literature is presented as no real subject at all, and offers that whiteness is more of an omnipresence or a quality defined by denial (Dyer, 1988). Though how can white scholars go about investigating racism and racialization acknowledging that so many foundational writers of critical race theory are people of color who, as Kobayashi points out, approach critical race theory through autobiographical and theoretical hybridity? Kay Anderson points out the state and institutions for inscribing identity onto place in ways that affirm race as an ideal that holds legitimacy and belongs to white European culture (K. J. Anderson, 1987). In her recognition of the social and institutional rather than natural construction of race, Anderson asks “[h]ow are we to hold on to an antiracist political agenda in our criticism without continuously reinscribing narrative coordinates of people’s identity that are themselves raced?” (K. Anderson, 2002, p. 25) Taking Dyer’s lead, McGuinness suggests that the invisibility of whiteness and its normalization as that which we do not discuss presents a clear project for geographers to locate whiteness and destabilize in through the research.

Rather than an explicit self-referential focus on whiteness, Nik Heynen continues to develop the concept ‘abolition ecology’, to “elucidate and extrapolate the interconnected white supremacist and racialized processes that lead to uneven development within urban environments (Heynen, 2016, p. 839). Aligned with some of the initial paternalistic sites of early urban sociology,

Heynen's abolition ecology seeks out how internalizations of the ghetto, the plantation, and the colony can motivate urban political ecology toward grappling with "the racialization of uneven urban environments and also the abolition of white supremacy" (Heynen, 2016, p. 840).

Paralleling Angela Davis's abolition democracy that calls for the acknowledgement and overthrowing of mechanisms of carcerality including slavery, prisons, and the death penalty as a means toward creating more substantive democracy in the United States of globally (Davis, 2005); both Davis and Heynen draw on the work of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* in which he made the claim that a variety of democratic institutions would be necessary to completely achieve abolition (Du Bois, 1935). Heynen's call for abolition ecology draws on urban political ecology's foundation in Marxist theory, and the necessity to make historical-materialist analysis of urban natures deconstruct the contradictory dialectical relations of racism and coloniality of the urban environment. In Heynen's third and final progress report on political ecology in *Progress in Human Geography* titled "Urban Political Ecology III: The Feminist and Queer Century, he opens with sentiment from Richa Nagar's on radical vulnerability;

"Can options such as solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity serve a useful purpose in ethically navigating the forms of epistemic violence in which metropolitan academics are, and will always remain, complicit?" (Nagar, 2014, p. 3)

Nagar goes on to challenge scholars to be cautious of separating political action from their academic work, and to instead deal with how we may attend to the contradictions and radical contingencies of place and time while resisting making assumptions about shared political alliances or agendas (Nagar, 2014, p. 7).

What excites me about the growing commitment by geographers to attend to the politics of racialization in our intellectual work and praxis is the opportunity to practice vulnerability through scholarship. Nagar's work speaks particularly strong to the importance of reflexivity as a necessary component of intellectual work when addressing racialization, and the use of reflexivity as an epistemological tool, though rare among geographers, holds an impactful presence among those Nagar suggests critical race geographers look to for the foundations of our work, Black scholars who are mapping and growing the subfield of Black geographies.

## **Reflexivity and depoliticizing self-reflection**

To avoid post-race analytical framing, something of a common oversight within the initial ‘emotional turn’ in feminist geography by poststructuralist feminist scholars, I demonstrate a necessary eagerness in engaging with my own reflexive process as well as critical race theory throughout the articles of this dissertation. So as to not repeat the effect of the postmodern turn of taking the social constructs of race and gender for granted or minimizing the theoretical underpinnings of the inequalities and social configurations of domination these constructs have produced, contemporary postcolonial feminist perspectives urge ongoing investigations of social geometries of hierarchy and power (Arvin et al., 2019; Kobayashi, 2003). These may be systemic in nature or specific to the sites of our lives and research. The emotional turn of feminist geography remains largely informed by poststructuralist theory, with particular focus on the reflexivity of embodiments of identity (Faria & Mollett, 2016; Wright, 2010). By integrating the analytic focus of emotional geographies with critical reflexivity as an ongoing practice of conducting feminist research, this necessarily evolving frame of analysis allows considerations for identities and power to be in ongoing conversation as research and life practices.

The priority I upheld throughout these articles was of addressing race and specifically whiteness in relation to institutions, material aspects of positionality, and the socio-spatial relations produced therein. The geopolitical, institutional and real material planes of investigation that usually evade reflexive practice are, as Nagar (2014) says, necessary within a transnational feminist praxis if feminist scholarship is to be deeply and globally impactful in its contributions to both theory and practice. Nagar and Ali (2003) suggest that in addition to reflexive practice that feminist scholars make genuine efforts toward creating and carrying out collaborative efforts that cross multiple borders or social hierarchies. Though I took part in collaborative work throughout my dissertation field period by writing reports and assisting farmers with property acquisition, the importance of practicing reflexivity with others was initially lost on me. Often framed as self-reflection and therefore an isolated activity, reflexivity necessitates practice alongside those we collaborate and work with so that we may be offered perspectives and critical analysis that we are unable to face or accept on our own (Brown, 2017).

Barbara Boswell's (2016) 'oppositional Black geographies' has been useful in developing my own understanding of how critical spatial analysis of oppression, gendered violence, and racialization can reveal socio-spatial relations of opposition against forms of gendered and racialized violence through intentional interactions with and within one's environment. Oppositional black geographies are spatial practices developed by Black women as a means to oppose the misogyny and violence Black women are subject to as a result of racialized and gender supremacy. My expectations of ways that I ought to be able to conduct myself in a city, informed by my own white positionality, were oppositional to the socio-spatial relations of 'oppositional Black geographies' Black women, my own friends included conducted themselves within as modes of self-preservation in the urban environment (Boswell, 2016; Isoke, 2014). Bailey and Shabazz (2014) address the confining of Black life through selective oppositional geographic living as anti-black heterotopias, contending that if Black people are forced to live within contained landscapes for their own safety because of their race and gender, that Black gender and sexual minorities end up living in "a placeless space, a location with no coordinates." The limiting of Black freedom through the likelihood of violence, specifically upon Black women, trans and LGBQ people reflects a larger carceral net of domination described by Gross as the carceral regime; "the broad expanse of the criminal justice system (including officers, prosecutors, judges, the court, sentencing, parole, and prisons) and its vicissitudes (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, brutality, and corruption) that exist in the system's varied apparatuses and yet far exceed them" (Gross, 2018, 4) . Control is the center of supremacy behavior and thinking (Schulman, 2017), and actions driven by supremacy lead to traumatization, of person and place that result, like Boswell (2016) and Bailey and Shabazz (2014) all suggest, in the self-selective limiting of the spatial reach on one's life. Having to respond to the sexist and racist "vicissitudes" of the carceral regime in one's own city and neighborhood is the kind of opposition that Boswell (2016) stresses is driven not by fear but by the drive for an end to come to violation, misogyny, and racism.

McKittrick and Woods (2007) theorize critical Black geographies as an analytic tool for in-depth analysis and critique that is capable of rewriting the nation, and opposing spaces composed of violence and exclusion (McKittrick, 2006; Woods, 2017). The theories that comprise Black geographies make meaning of the relationship between race and space through understanding how Black subjects engage with and challenge carceral and otherwise oppressive configurations

of space. For McKittrick and Woods (2007), theorizing Blackness as geographic addresses the continuous work of liberation that the socio-spatial relations of Blackness necessitate. The continuous nature of producing new geographies was for Sylvia Wynter, understood through her ‘theory of the Human’ (Kamugisha, 2016); “[W]hat is normally imperative to each culture-as-a-living-system is that it know its reality adaptively, i.e. in ways that can best orient the collective behaviors of its subjects, together with its mode of subjectivity (the I) and of conspecificity (the We)” (Wynter, 1997, 157). McKittrick (2006) describes the ways Black women evolve by carving out spaces of survival within systems of oppression that challenge the parameters of violence. McKittrick (2006) identifies the central themes scholars of the transatlantic diaspora tend to focus as mothering, love, emancipation, community, family, and resistance to sexual violence; all of which Boswell and Isoke theorize as being the socially reproductive spaces and tasks compounded with oppositional Black geography (Boswell, 2016; Isoke, 2014). In self selectively removing one’s self from spaces of potential violence, there is a re-writing of the state taking place as in all Black geographic practices (McKittrick and Woods, 2007), though I wonder as Bailey and Shabazz (2014) do about the creation of placeless or spaceless existences enacted through motivations to avoid harm. I can make sense of this by understanding that oppositional Black geographies are not constructed in isolation of other forms of resistance that Black women and their allies engage in to end racialized violence and specifically violence against Black women and their children.

Through my own reflexive practice that involved discussing my experiences of violence with Black women, I learned that my own lack of awareness of Black women’s spatial survival strategies was driven by my own desired relationship with my surrounding environment. While I exercised a sense of openness and even the belief that I was enacting some form of anti-racism by living my life as usual while in a majority Black city, I simultaneously and ignorantly displayed a sense of exceptionalism to forms of violence I am well aware are experienced by Black women. I believed myself to be demonstrating an attitude and practice of anti-racism through the confidence to cycle or walk outside in neighborhoods that were considered outside of those frequented by white people in Detroit. Though what my spatial practices demonstrated was a lack of awareness of the codes of Black femininity in the particular urban environment.

Wynter’s method of investigating identity formation, as a scholar from the Caribbean who came to live in North America, necessitated transcultural perspective. Her theory of the Human argues

for cultural analysis of how the narrative of identity is created by intellectuals and social institutions (D. White, 2010). Though entirely aware of the prevalence of violence faced by Black women, my own spatial relationship with the urban environment enacted a kind of spatial ignorance bound to race-blind paternalism. Despite my belief that my conduct and presence were demonstrating racial openness and even a sense of belonging, I had remained entirely ignorant of the ways I was present in spaces where Black women were not. Despite my best intentions, the critical self-reflection my experiences of violence prompted and the conversations that emerged with Black women about my evolved sense of safety presented me with the reality that identity and values are not analysis; and although trauma had begun to inform my own socio-spatial relations in the city, trauma is equally not a form of analysis. The reflexive practice I ended up developing, had it been conducted in isolation would not have enabled me to understand that I had believed myself to be an exception to violence that I perceived to be more commonly experienced by Black women. By sharing my experiences of violence and social-spatial relationship to the neighborhoods through which I traversed with Black women, I was instructed about my racism and sense of self exceptionalism through an epistemological intervention by Black women. It was generously explained to me that the spatial practices of newcomer young white women in Detroit were oppositional to spatial practices Black women employ to decrease the likelihood of assault, rape, violation or abduction. Oppositional black geographies are, as Boswell and Isoke (Boswell, 2016; Isoke, 2014) theorize, a matter of survival. Through my own reflection and the epistemological intervention of Black women who were willing to reflect with me, I understand counter oppressive Black geographies as spatial practices that need to exist alongside theoretical and practical allyship that extend beyond the values that comprise one's identity. Feeling willing but also entitled to cycle or walk my dog in my neighborhood does not somehow carve out space for Black women to do the same, nor do such self-interested actions of a white woman serve the greater challenges of structural violence faced by women of color and Black women. Following Wynter's(1997) suggestion for transcultural analysis, spatial theorists and anti-racist allies need to examine the potential of creating counterproductive geographies that perpetuate violence against marginalized populations through our own internalized exceptionalism to forms of violence or oppression that we perceive ourselves to exist outside of or adjacent to in our social-spatial relationships. We need to align our allyship by critiquing the geographies of exceptionalism that we produce, and align our own spatial practices with the

needs, desires, and institutions of spatially oppressed communities and people. Making these theoretical and practical connections in my work was the result of Black women and men taking the time to explain how my own actions reflected entitlement more than anti-racist solidarity. I am fortunate to be part of relationships of trust and solidarity in anti-racist struggle to be able to receive such invaluable emotional labor.

The committee and policy work I was engaged in skilled me with the most up to date information about property tax forgiveness, recently revised processes for land acquisition, and the ins and outs about the implementation of new drainage fees that were predicted to and did dramatically balloon the water bills of residents citywide. Farmers requested my assistance in completing the necessary documentation to be able to purchase property in the city, and others requested my assistance in applying for tax assistance or forgiveness on property taxes to avoid foreclosure. These small ways of assisting farmers and residents including my neighbors with reconfiguring their financial ties and legal claims to property provided me with invaluable learning about the selective nature with which city authorities in Detroit apply their policies, assess eligibility, and actually utilize assistance programs for residents in need.

### **Addressing the depoliticizing of intersectionality**

Of primary concern throughout the research process of producing this dissertation was acknowledging my place as a white researcher, studying racialization and property relations in a majority black city. Though the methodological approach and theory used within this dissertation and my own intellectual practice are grounded within feminist theory, maintaining close proximity to core anti-racist feminist works was necessary to continuously realign my analysis around challenging the supremacy of white authority over space, theory, and how whiteness navigates in the urban landscape. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) was explicit in establishing intersectionality as an analytic tool that was to be used specifically to assess the likelihood of harm in the lives of Black women; not simply to account for multiple and varied subject formations, that often contemporarily risk excluding considerations of Black women altogether. Developed as an analytic for legal scholars to account for the rights and safety of Black women, intersectionality's growth and movement outside of the legal discipline has expanded into

humanities and social sciences academic disciplines and transcended the academy entirely. Sirma Bilge (2013) has written about power dynamics within feminist academic practices that have had the effect of depoliticizing the analytic tool of intersectionality. Framing intersectionality as a lens of analysis that provides activists and scholars with resources that extend beyond mere progressive values, Bilge (2013) states that despite inclusive values both academic and activist communities continue to stumble through fully enacting intersectional awareness by confusing intentionality with the outcome. In her article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, Crenshaw (1991) wrote “political strategies that challenge only certain subordinating practices while maintaining existing hierarchies not only marginalize those who are subject to multiple systems of subordination but often result in opposition lining race and gender discourses” (p. 1246). Depoliticizing intersectionality is not simply in the negation of justice-based intentions in the use of the analytic tool intersectional thinking has to offer, but results from what Carbado describes as “race-blind” and “gender blind” practices of intersectionality (Carbado, 2013). Crenshaw’s (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 1993) intention has always been for race and gender considerations to be mutually informing and necessarily compounded in how inequality and violence are analyzed. The unfortunately common practice of speaking for, about, or instead of others (Martin-Alcoff, 2016), particularly among feminist and anti-racist scholars has had a “whitening” effect on an analytic lens formulated for the sake of assessing the potential for harm, institutionally, societally, and interpersonally of against black women.

It was through addressing my own entitlements to space that I was able to understand my complacency in undoing the oppositional geographies practiced by Black women, practiced to specifically mitigate gender-based violence that is at the same time deeply racialized. Intersectionality as a method, and analytic tool, and a disposition contains a genesis of evolution through its utilization and praxis by feminist scholars and activists internationally. There have been failings, as Crenshaw herself and colleagues state, in feminist scholars’ ability to keep pace with the evolution of intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013). Calls for postcolonial feminist intersectional analysis frame the importance of considerations in citizenship status as an additional hierarchical structure alongside race and gender that deserves consideration. Postcolonial feminist intersectionality locates borders and the experience of traversing borders as essential details in analyzing socio-political and spatial processes. This was one of the central

arguments of third world women of color scholars from the Global South in the benchmark texts *This Bridge Called my Back* (Anzaldua and Moraga, 1981) and Anzaldua's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Nearly forty years following the release of these important feminist works, feminist geographers continue the work of addressing inequalities that exist between states and their populations. While the colonizing of lands and people tend to be a geopolitical force imagined as having passed, the social, economic and political relations constructed throughout the colonial period continue to largely structure systems of power and oppression contemporarily (Naylor et al., 2017). Making the claim that the colonality and domination of gender is place dependent, postcolonial and Latinx feminist geographers offer critical insight into the importance of still considering the influence of colonality and imperial domination wherever it is or with whom our research takes us to. If and when Black women exercise oppositional Black geographies for the sake of safety and dismantling gender-based violence, this is one of many strategies Black women employ to challenge racial and gender-based violence. Daigle and Ramirez (2018) caution against making broad theoretical claims that represent postcolonial spaces and people. Their concern is in theorists attempting to "classify or systematiz[e] indigenous, Black and other cultural knowledge systems into a neat synopsis" (Daigle and Ramirez, 2018, 1) further erasing the unique and spatially situated colonial pasts and presents of particular geographies. The experiences of postcolonial women and subjects need to be addressed in close relationship with the environment at hand, with consideration for the particular political formations, indigenous removal, histories and contemporary contexts particular to a place.

McKittrick's (1994) plantation futures, i.e., geographies comprised of past configurations of Antebellum era carcerality in contemporary post-slave urban contexts, is a post-colonial feminist geography particular to the African diaspora and productions of space that upholds white supremacist institutions. It is a Black geography without a particular location because of the global reach of the transatlantic passage and slave geographies, and therefore possibly an exception to Daigle and Ramirez's (2018) cautioning against the broad application of postcolonial feminist theorizations of space. This is not to say that plantation geographies do not take on particular forms in certain places, as modeled by the work of Clyde Woods (2017) in New Orleans or Rashad Shabazz's (2016) accounting of Chicago's Southside. Daigle and Ramirez's (2018) caution of not applying broad strokes to postcolonial geographies for the sake

of exercise intersectional analysis comes from the necessity to grow theory for the sake of accurately portraying colonial effect, rather than broadly applying theory that losses out on the complexities intersectional analysis that is inclusive of colonial considerations have to offer. I am interested to know whether this mean that there are oppositional Black geographies that are specific to Detroit or specific to Black womanhood in Detroit? This is a question I engage with in both the second and third articles of the dissertation. I suggest that the relationships of a few Black urban farmers in Detroit model the potential for reparations in the form of land redistribution. My goal is to continue to work toward acknowledging the “inherent spatiality of intersectionality” (Mollett & Faria, 2018, p. 565)in my intellectual work, and to continue to evolve both theoretically and in practice out of the intellectual rut of problematic and limited critical analysis Rickie Sanders (1990) cautioned feminist geographers were digging ourselves into nearly thirty years ago.

### **Long and sustained vs slow**

A component of the methodology used to collect research data for this dissertation involved longform ethnographic interviews. Shea Howel, a close friend of the Boggs’ and one of Detroit’s community elders is a professor of linguistics and rhetoric at Oakland University in Southeast Michigan, and she was a lifelong friend and political ally to both Grace and Jimmy Boggs. Howel’s role at the Boggs’ Center to Nurture Community Leadership is that of a facilitator and site manager. Both Howel and fellow Boggs Center colleague Richard Feldman, a retired Ford autoworker, regularly host what they refer to as community conversations that provide residents with the opportunity to meet to discuss issues affecting their neighborhoods and the city at large. The regularity of this practice is of particular importance, as continuous conversation was one of the key elements of the Boggsian dialectical framework known as dialectical humanism (Boggs and Kurashige, 2012). The structure of these continuing conversations influenced my own approach to conducting ethnography, and shaped my practice as an interviewer and how I went about inviting community members to be in conversation.

The model of continuous and longer conversations about property politics, food policy and urban austerity that I engage in with farmers is modeled after the ongoing practice enacted by Grace and Jimmy Boggs (1976), as demonstrated in their collectively authored text *Conversations in Maine*. Co-authored with political allies Freddy and Lyman Paine, *Conversations in Maine*.

reveals the epistemological evolution of four Detroit-based activists who engaged in an annual retreat following the city's 1967 race rebellion. The purpose of the retreat was to prioritize ongoing conversations about the political climate and how people and their communities may be able to defend themselves from state violence. The point was to invest in theoretical development about the future of civic engagement and urban activism in the United States. This writing reflected a cultural turning point in US history that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the rise of the peace movement in response to the Vietnam War, and the rise of the urban crisis. Conversation among the elder activists included questions about how contemporary movement leaders may apply the theories of Marx and Lenin and Mao to the contemporary and future political contexts in the United States. The Boggs' and the Paine's predicted that a revolution would arise in response to growing economic and racial inequality in the United States and ruminated on what exactly the coming revolution would and ought to be about. The process of returning to Maine annually for the sake of isolating themselves in political dialogue enabled the group to evolve theoretically over an extended period of time. Their commitment to one another to remain in dialogue generated a classic American Studies text based on forty years of political struggle together. Today both Howel and Feldman continue the tradition of facilitating and encouraging continuous dialogue and idea sharing in Detroit's environmental, labor, housing, and water justice organizations.

The Boggsian commitment to continuous, lifelong conversation within a small corner of Detroit's activist community continues to be practiced by the leadership team at the still operating Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership today, and by some contemporary affiliated partner organizations adjacent to the Boggs Center, including the Allied Media Projects, the Detroit People's Water Board, Freedom Freedom Growers, and the Boggs School.<sup>4</sup> What I see as differentiating continuous conversation from 'slow' intellectual work is the productive and deliverable end within academic dialogue, rather than the commitment to ongoing and transformational discussion with no clear or intended end outside of a shared commitment to evolve humanity; no small task. Although my own political alignment has not

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<sup>4</sup> The Detroit-based Allied Media Projects (AMP) is a non profit organization that evolved out of youth programming of the Mississippi Freedom Summer. AMP is a media-based organization that dedications their resources to supporting media-based liberator movements throughout the United States.

defected so far from historical materials as Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs, so much so that they created their own offshoot party to the Johnson Forrester tendency that permanently ended their friendship and comradeship with CLR James, I have found myself now grounded in the dialectical humanist practice of lifelong conversation among political allies. I credit the leadership of Detroit's activist elders for the introduction of this practice into my wheelhouse of political strategies.

There are clear distinctions between the practice of continuous conversation driven by a dialectical practice dedicated to the evolution of humanity and the act of slow scholarship. Although the practices may appear similar, each is its own unique strategy and is influenced by different motivations. Having taken part in an intentionally slow writing process with a group of feminist geographers early on in my doctoral studies, I am familiar with the prioritization that a small handful of feminist scholars have placed on 'slow' intellectual work. The co-authored article I contributed to was written by six feminist scholars at various stages in our intellectual work, including undergraduate students, junior doctoral students, a doctoral candidate, and two assistant professors. Our article addressed the role of feminist mentorship in the discipline, and how feminist geographers form relationships among themselves as a strategy for managing stress, workloads, discrimination, and the pressures of the neoliberalization of the university (A. L. Bain et al., 2017). The process of writing the article involved face to face discussions about mentorship and our relationships in academia, which took place at a professor's home approximately every three to four months over the course of a year and a half. Our writing collective drew from the works of Linda Peake, Victoria Lawson, and the members of the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective to address challenges we perceived to result from structural changes that were neoliberalizing universities (A. L. Bain et al., 2017; Lawson, 2007). We engaged with articles recently produced by fellow feminist geographers who believe slow scholarship to be a practice of rejecting productivism and high publication turnover; fellow scholars who understand slow scholarship as offering an avenue to develop relationships defined by care and informed by the desire to address and work with the mental health challenges that are ever more present within academic workplaces (Mullings, Peake and Parizeau, 2016). The practice of slow scholarship being explored by feminist geographers is a means to reclaim time for collective intellectual development, and a practice for acknowledging the value that is channeled into intellectual labor that people experience as being devalued or not adequately

measured by performance assessments within their universities (Mountz et al., n.d.). Taking a heavy lead from Lawson (2007a), proponents of slow scholarship within geography have focused the practice on the conditions of their own labor and pace and a means of taking back some degree of autonomy within their institutions. In this way, I wonder about whether Lawson's (2007b) call for "caring geography" instead of "radical geography" is actually productive of different ways of understanding space and place outside of academic environments that inform the conditions of our labor as geographers. This is a critique I engage in further in the second article featured in the dissertation, specifically through a discussion of the ethics of care and the importance of exercising care in the research discussed among feminist geographers. My concern is that care alone originates from a place of self-interest and lacks the intention of systemic changes. Is feminist scholarship being produced for the sake of generating discussion among ourselves or as a strategy for the advancement of equity and justice beyond ourselves? How does slow scholarship extend beyond the conditions of intellectual production within academia, if at all?

Maintaining a practice of slow intellectual analysis has only ever offered me more words and deeper understanding of place. While I carried out this practice with a group of feminist scholars for the sake of publishing an article, there was an agreed upon productive outcome from the beginning of the collaboration that motivated our work. I am interested in continuing to explore long term relationships of mutually informing knowledge exchange that do not necessarily have a predetermined productive end. The longevity of my relationships with farmers and housing activists in Detroit enriched my research because of the depth of the connections that had been nurtured, revisited, and remain continuous. These long-term relationships have allowed me to understand as a geographer the benefit of long-term knowledge exchanges being spatially situated. This holds the potential of decreasing the extractive nature of fast-paced social science research and allows for the development of trust and relationships building between scholars and those they engage with through research. What I am describing is not slow scholarship, in that the purpose of knowledge production and exchange that have and will continue to take place are not scaffolded by the completion of something measurable within an academic institution. Slow scholarship informed my own research process later on in my doctoral studies, though I was already much more familiar with the strategies described by the Trapeze Collective of popular

education enthusiasts and those involved in the 1999 anti-globalization protests about the importance of trust building when developing political strategy and allyship. Informed by state intervention and police infiltration within the anti-globalization movement and environmental defense mobilizing, the Trapeze Collective (2007) stresses the importance of developing close and prolonged relationships with those we align ourselves with politically. This is a tactic for building alliances and knowing who it is we are conducting political work with and alongside. Prolonged relationships building is about evolving strategies as much as it is about protecting activist spaces from infiltration. Scholars who work inside of the academy can create methods and build professional relationships that push back against the environment of competition and overwork, and slow scholarship may be a tool just for that. Carving out opportunities to conduct academic work in ways that can produce meaningful and sustained connection to fellow scholars is something I see as holding the potential for increasing opportunities for joy and support in professional relationships. To be clear, my critique is not of slow scholarship as a practice, but how and for whom the products of slow scholarship, a practice mostly deeply engaged in geography by feminist scholars, are directed toward. My concern is in the insularity of feminist scholarship, and not of feminist scholars directing energy toward making the conditions of their labor more manageable.

In my relationships with farmers in Detroit, I began requesting recorded interviews six and seven years into my initial point of contact with farmers in the city. I invested in building trust and exchanging labor with farmers and housing advocates over multiple years as a way to demonstrate that I was not simply on the ground to gather data. The conversations that evolved between myself and residents in Detroit allowed me to witness how local changes in the city government, especially prior to and immediately following the civic bankruptcy impacted residents in different ways depending on where their neighborhood, and whether or not they own property. The close distance at which I found myself witnessing and supporting people through land and housing struggles, the stronger our shared knowledge and perspective became. I grew mutually informing relationships through conversation and committee work with residents, neighborhood organizations, and people at risk of losing their housing. My interactions with people became about exchange more than extraction, and the practice of listening truly became an exercise in learning together. I approach knowledge production as a political strategy because of whom it is I align my labor with, and with whom I engage most in knowledge production. The

intention of my intellectual practice is to generate resources and co-produce knowledge that can be mobilized for material gain, historical context, and political stature for working class people and anti-racist movements. Though I have a clear group of colleagues within geography and housing studies, my goal as I produce intellectual work is to turn academic discussions outward in ways that disrupt the circularity of our professional networks.

### **Compositions**

The second article in the dissertation, *A Century of Grace*, was written over the course of two years and was initially presented at the Dimensions of Political Ecology conference at the University of Kentucky in February of 2016. The article detailed the legacy of a Detroit elder and now ancestor, Grace Lee Boggs, and the indelible impact her leadership continues to have on radical and social justice activism in Detroit and internationally. The article discusses what I call a pedagogy of engaged urban citizenship, feminist politics, liberatory practices of urban land use. Some historical context of Boggs' political evolution within the socialist tendency and the internationalist parties associated with socialist and communist parties throughout the 1930s and 1940s is addressed to dialectically arrive at the community-based focus of her activism in her later years. Having witnessed the influence of the Boggs' Center and the Boggs' in general among progressives in Detroit upon my early interactions with people in 2008 and 2009, I found myself within a community of young people who were all connected to the Boggs' Center through various organizational affiliations or volunteer roles. Many were involved in urban farming initiatives and spoke about the influence of Grace Lee Boggs on youth programming throughout the city.

A large focus of this article is the impact of the Detroit Summer youth engagement program that was established by Grace and her late husband Jimmy Boggs. The program established a practice of land stewardship among Detroit's youth, and its influence reverberated into inspiring the establishment of a number of local agricultural and environmental non-profit organizations in Detroit as well as a culture of youth direct action in the city's schools and youth groups that specifically engage with vacant land and unmaintained buildings.

I submitted the article to a special issue call for the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* on social justice and the city, edited by Nik Heynen in April of 2016. Heynen

provided rapid and positive feedback on the article, but his fear was that the article would get lost among readership who did not have a foundation for understanding popular education or an appreciation for activist-based academic work. The article was accepted by *Gender, Place and Culture* in the early Winter of 2016 and was published in January of 2018. Upon its release, the article was circulated throughout a small few activist communities in Detroit and was received graciously by the elders of the Boggs Center. Theoretically this article speaks to feminist scholars about the use of biography as a methodology, and integrates aspects of social reproduction and urban political ecology into the larger concept of utilizing the city as a space for teaching youth about the kinds urban citizenship needed to build socially just urban futures.

The third article in the dissertation, *Toward a politics of accountability: feminist ethics of care and whiteness in Detroit's foreclosure crisis*, was motivated by my work as a board member with a woman-led housing foreclosure non-profit called the Tricycle Collective. The Tricycle Collective formed in 2014 and gained immediate respect and name recognition among housing organizations in the city. In the organizations inaugural year of operation, a lean group of volunteers, in response to the 2014 national record Detroit, set as the city with the highest foreclosure rate, purchased occupied houses out the Wayne County Tax Auction and returned the deeds to the still-occupying families that had been foreclosed on by remained yet to be evicted. The model relied on the charitable donations of people who wanted to keep Detroit families in their foreclosed houses. I recall a number of the donations processed while I was a board member from 2016-2019 were from out of state, including a few generous donations from distant relatives of the organization's board members. The article explores the care framework through which our collective operated, that provided a basis for our decision making and drove the kinds of outreach we engaged in to preserve housing ownership.

The article addresses a number of social tensions that arose among the collective throughout our time together, including the economic and housing stability of the majority of our group members, as well as the racial composition of the collective and who it is we primarily served. I engage with Gilligan's (1977) feminist ethic of care, a concept utilized by feminist geographers though largely credited to Lawson (2007a), to address the momentarily helpful though paternalistic impact of our interventions in the city's housing crisis. This article also addresses

the metabolic cycle of housing foreclosure, and suggests the potential for the redistribution of material resources, in this case, housing, as a form of accountability to the ethics of care that members of the organization espouse to. This article speaks directly to feminist geographers who conduct justice-based research or activism as part of the intellectual practice and suggests that care is not enough and can perpetuate the spatial injustices we believe ourselves to be preventing. There is a large component of this article that addresses property relations and racism, racial dispossession, and how scholars and activists can contribute to the preservation of neighborhoods in a majority Black city. I engage deeply with the feminist ethics of care concept as it is used among feminist geographers, and critically analyzed its use in the field for inwardly directed relational work among feminist scholars; with care being taken up as a means of addressing patriarchal and hierarchical conditions within academic workplaces. This article was recently published in the first edition and first volume of the *Radical Housing Journal*, which was launched in Washington D.C. during the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in April of 2019. The article has been circulated among Detroit housing activists and has begun to generate some production discussion about the role white housing activists have to generate more permanent outcomes for underhoused people in the city. I have been offered feedback from Detroit housing activists about how useful it is that the *Radical Housing Journal* is entirely open source.

Throughout my many years in Detroit, I have spent each growing season alongside multiple farmers, tending to livestock, vegetables or orchards throughout the city. Over the course of many seasons I developed relationships of trust and mutual exchange with multiple woman farmers throughout the city, and I had the privilege of witnessing the evolution of property governance farmers dealt with prior to, throughout, and following the city's bankruptcy in 2013 as well as during state financial management. The fourth article, *Urban land under development* utilizes ethnographic data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and participatory research. Accounts directly from farmers detail their experiences of land precarity and of being priced out of the property market in Detroit's post-bankruptcy redevelopment regime. Through the personal accounts of woman farmers in the city, the article chronicles the changes farmers have witnessed in how the city manages surplus property, particularly when surplus properties are put to use as unpermitted urban farms. The article details how the Planning and Development Department (PDD) of the City of Detroit has sold surplus

land to for-profit large-scale agricultural businesses while farmers that grow food for community consumption or operate the farm as a small business are routinely denied ownership through a variety of economic and bureaucratic barriers. While many in the farming critique the Planning and Development Department for making deals with land speculators when the city sells large bundles of vacant parcels to large scale farming operations, some farmers have given into the new forms of regulation and taxation that has been thrust upon the urban agriculture community for the sake of playing by the new rules so as to not put their farm of small business in jeopardy. Recently imposed bylaws that address farming in the city have imposed financial and regulatory strain on farms that have otherwise operated for upwards of decades without oversight from city authorities. The woman farmers featured in this article discuss their use of surplus property in the city through the lenses of sweat equity, the Black geographies of reparations, and the Black radical tradition. These personal accounts of how farmers personally policies their use of urban land for agriculture speaks to the futures that are being imagined through the contemporary use of disinvested civic infrastructure. Of the four articles that comprise the manuscript, Urban land under development draws most directly from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with farmers. Three women featured in this article, took part in multiple conversations with me over the course of several growing seasons. Our discussions were co-productive in generating theories about agricultural land use in Detroit, with particular attention on a reflexive process that explored how farmers politically framed their own use of land for farming, if at all. This process of theorizing with addresses Valentine's concern about white feminists doing the work of theorizing the experiences of Black and women of color. Rather than strictly theorize people's experiences through abstraction, my practice of continuous conversations has generated rich and praxis-motivated discussion and collaboration. Black geographies and social reproduction are major theoretical components of this article, as is feminist political ecology and the construction of degrowth urban natures.

In 2012 faculty and students at the University of Michigan's Taubman School of Planning began hosting a speaker series for scholars conducting interdisciplinary research on Detroit, a city that is more often than not considered an outlier that is defined by losses in the manufacturing sector, white flight, and a large stock of surplus property parcels. Professors affiliated with the speaker series began discussing the development of a Detroit school of urban theory, based on the markers and politics of degrowth urbanism that they believed qualified as a new school of

thought. My article, *The Detroit School of Degrowth Urbanism: A Review of the Literature*, reviews scholarship that has been produced in the near-pre and post bankruptcy period in Detroit, specifically addressing scholarship that focuses on so call markers of degrowth i.e. austerity, disinvestment, home foreclosures, and racial dispossession. This literature review is written from a place of curiosity in the potential of a degrowth school of urban theory, and from a place of critical engagement with what is classified as representative of degrowth. While a common topic among this small group of scholars is the role of racial capitalism within Detroit as a driver of uneven redevelopment, I question whether such moments as slum removal, the creation of the second ghetto, the Housing and Urban Development homesteading act of the 1960s and more recently disinvestment in infrastructure that has been near fatal for urban populations cannot also be considered forms of specifically racial degrowth. I was invited to take part in the co-authorship of a book with a group comprised of twelve American and French scholars who address degrowth as a theme in their research. Josh Akers, one of the books editors and a colleague of mine extended the invitation. During our initial meeting at a two-day long workshop in Detroit held in April of 2019, I noted during the presentation of my research to my fellow co-authors that the book we were proposing to collectively write on degrowth with would authored entirely by a group of white scholars. I posed the question to the group, about whether ‘degrowth; is perhaps a name given to forms of disinvestment to urban spaces and services that impact while people; and that perhaps we were given a new name experiences of displacement, disinvestment in services, environmental injustice, and forced consolidation of the population that has for decades been experienced by people of color and Black communities in North American cities? This literature review of the Detroit School seeks out common themes and theorization among scholars who have written on the city, and utilizes critical race theory and some earlier writings on the ghetto to address how a school of thought based on degrowth needs to carefully define its own defining elements so as to not perpetuate race-blind theorizing.

## Article Two

### A century of Grace; pedagogy, and beloved community in twenty-first century Detroit

#### Abstract

This article poses feminist biographical investigation as a dialectical approach to situated knowledge, and as a potential avenue for a feminist theorization of space and place. By exploring biography as a departure from canonical epistemological structures, the attempt here is to credit, contextualize and identify key places and people of origin in the evolution and production of theory and knowledge without such heavy dependency on the usual resources that legitimize theoretical and pedagogical contributions; such as academic publications, teaching contributions and references. The biographical focus of this article is the life and work of Grace Lee Boggs, an important contributor to urban studies whose theoretical and pedagogical contributions have gone largely unacknowledged by geographers and spatial thinkers. What can a biographical investigation teach us about feminist knowledge production relating to the production of space? What does feminist biography offer epistemologically to our understandings of space? These questions are examined here through the theoretical contributions of Grace Lee Boggs, a long-time resident of Detroit, second-generation Chinese American, civil rights and feminist activist and working-class philosopher, as a means of exploring biography as a feminist research methodology.

**Keywords:** Biography as method; Detroit Summer; feminist pedagogy; restorative spatial justice

#### **Feminist geography, inside and out**

Feminist geographers approach their discipline and research with methodological, theoretical and critical frameworks that utilize varied feminist politics as a primary lens for analyzing society, the human environment, and space in general. Feminist theory and praxis in the field of geography has enabled the integration of typically non-canonical and sub disciplinary thought into the field since the 1980's, prioritizing geographic analysis at the intersections of the

economic, social, gendered and racialized, environmental, and political. Methodological approaches to geographic research advanced by feminist scholars have been known to adopt participatory and action-based research strategies, methods that challenge the idea of the ‘expert’ in the production of knowledge and how data is collected. Feminist geographers concerned with investigations of social justice, and the operation of systemic oppressions in the world, have contributed to instructional settings in the discipline by translating these priorities into pedagogical frameworks that re-shape and transform the classroom environment. For example, Massey’s reflections on gender, space, and place evolved into an analysis on the relationship between space and time over a career-long quest to ‘bring space alive’ (Massey, 2013) from a feminist standpoint. The interdisciplinarity of feminist geographic research forged by Dianne Rocheleau, Geraldine Pratt and Doreen Massey, and particularly contributions of feminist scholars adopted into the field, including Judith Butler, bell hooks, Sharon Zukin, and the late Gloria Anzaldua, indicate time and again that the boundaries of geography (if any do exist) are at this time limitless. To complicate matters, Dowling asked in her article *Geographies of identity: labouring in the ‘neoliberal’ university*, echoing Zelinsky, Monk, and Hanson (1982) ‘who is a geographer?’ Dowling, offering an immediate response to her own question, states that the discipline continues to be most reflective of white and male scholarship (Dowling 2008, 815). Further, Dowling queries, what spaces, participation and recognizable professionalization allow one to be acknowledged as a contributor to geographic thought?

For feminist geographers, and particularly those of us who are white, how do we account for the contributions of activists and people of color to theoretical and knowledge production in the communities and cities in which we work, and the movements and mobilizations within which our research is embedded? Though methodological frameworks of feminist geographers have contributed to the expansion of the fields’ data collection practice, I argue that a boundary does remain within our own training as academics in whose knowledge we value, how we determine ‘who’ is to be studied and those to be studied alongside; of who it is that produces knowledge, and who become the subjects rather than the origins of our theoretical contributions. The problem we have to reckon with is that if there is a canon of feminist geography, it is dominated by both a white perspective and embodied experience of place, including a white feminist standpoint. While the canon of geography is largely white, feminists of colour in the field

produce prolifically though continue to remain on the periphery of a largely white field, acting as a headwaters for anti-racist and critical cultural geographic analysis that is the source of origin for theoretical analysis at the white core of the discipline where most attention is focused. I propose acknowledging the limits to our disciplines' 'limitlessness' and the epistemological boundaries of the institutions in which we work. I urge fellow feminist geographers to amplify our efforts to meaningfully subvert how highly we value euro, androcentric and institutional knowledge production. Let's explore and re-think who produces theory and knowledge through biography, as a way of not only understanding research participants as people, but as a means of knowing their impact and legacy in the place(s) they have lived.

### **Biography and standpoint**

Postmodern literary scholar, Stanley Fish, has critiqued the use of biography as a mode of investigation that offers little more than an abstraction of the past, unveiling minute truth beyond the 'contingency of events succeeding one another' (1999, A9). Similarly, Bourdieu's criticism of the genre lies within the irreproachability of applying narrative structure to ones' life, and the illusion of historical coherence that passes for fact, knowledge or truth without the ability to be critiqued (2000, 301). On the contrary, feminist standpoint theory urges theorizing the positions of women, and women's experiences in the world in relation to social capital and capitalism (Harding, 1986; Hill Collins, 1986). Derived from the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, standpoint theory requires an understanding of the 'double vision' of marginality that affords people who experience life on the margins an experiential and observational epistemic advantage; a particular location for knowing the world as informed by oppression and inequality. Standpoint theory necessitates our acceptance of the claims that; (1) knowledge is always socially situated, (2) marginalized communities and people are socially positioned to ask questions regarding power and inequality that create conditions of marginality, and (3), investigations of power relations should be informed by knowledge from, and in collaboration with marginalized standpoints (Harding 1991; Hill Collins 1990; Hartsock 2004). Grace Lee Bogg's study of Hegel is where she derived her own understanding of how experiences of daily struggle were inseparable from how one comes to know the world around them (Boggs 2014). Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes how subjugated knowledge and specifically knowledge

informed by the experience of being a black woman, is the point of origin for self-definitions of empowerment that can uphold Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and centralize black feminist thought as a world view (Hill Collins 1990). After all, it was Hegel's initial theory of slavery from which standpoint theorists drew inspiration; providing often overlooked though critically important context to Hill Collins centering of black women in knowledge production. Therefore the mission of white anti-racist ally feminist researchers ought to be to engage biographically to ensure that feminist geographic investigations of place are informed beyond Eurocentric white-centered experiences of space (Krolokke and Scott Sorensen, 2006, 32). This is one of the important paths forward for elevating the largely heteropatriarchal, Euro-centric undergirding and ill acknowledged foundations of status-quo geographic theory; that black geographies of displacement, segregation and enslavement comprise the foundations of all geographic and capital expansions on the North American continent, and globally.

England suggests feminist academics have the potential to acknowledge the inherent disparities of power that often exist between researchers and research participants or subjects (1994). Further, the biographies of all those involved ought to inform the structure of the research methods themselves, to address and possibly overcome an imbalance of power; a strong reminder to those whose analysis is often focused on place rather than the production of space by particular groups of people (England, 1994). In addition to influencing methodological design, biography has been taken up by feminist geographers to dedicate and honor the achievements of our colleagues. Accordingly, for example, during the 2008 annual Association of American Geographers (now the American Association of Geographers) meeting, feminist urban scholars formed a panel to honor 45 years of academic contributions from Susan Hanson of Clark University. Panel participants produced a special edition of *Gender, Place and Culture* (2010) and published a five-article issue on Hanson's influence in the field. While it is clear that feminist geographers see value in biography and self-reflexive intervention, less investigated are the lifelong contributions of feminist thinkers from outside of the academy who have produced new ways of thinking about space.

While feminist scholars have an immediate platform for disseminating their knowledge and expressing how their own theory relates to their particular positionality, feminist thinkers outside

of academia often need to create these platforms for themselves, or are otherwise thought of as movement activists, citizen journalists, or informed citizens who become the subjects of research rather than being upheld as producers of theory and knowledge in their own right. As feminist scholars in the field of geography, we all work together toward being keenly aware of the impact of socio-spatial relations in our daily lives. If our knowledge is situated within the places we live out our lives, and those places are more clearly valued for their role in the mutual co-production of person and place as well as theory, could biography be utilized as an epistemological pathway to knowing places differently? What would the academy gain from affording theoretical authority to social justice practitioners within the grassroots and outside of the academy that is not afforded today?

### **A lifetime of Grace**

Grace Lee Boggs' 100th birthday was held at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History on June 26th, 2015 on Warren, just off of Woodward in Detroit, Michigan. Ron Scott, former Black Panther and a long-time friend and fellow organizer of Grace's spoke that evening. As Grace watched the birthday celebration over a live stream in her home, just a few miles away, Scott asked all in attendance, as he had been asked by his now centurion friend Grace Lee Boggs many times before 'Are you ready for revolution?'. The ceremony was held under the vaulted glass ceiling in the annex of the museum, where hundreds gathered to celebrate. Young people made up at least half of the attendees. Grace had a very special place in her political practice dedicated to working with youth. Though I was not raised in Detroit, I consider myself to be one of countless (of likely tens of thousands) of youth who was introduced to Grace's philosophy on community development, witnessed the important grassroots work happening in Detroit, and quickly understood Grace's important message that 'we are the leaders we've been looking for' (Boggs and Kurashige, 2011). As a beloved and powerful figure in Detroit for more than 50 years, Grace Lee Boggs is known mononymously by her first name. As a reflection of the esteem she is held, and in recognition of the namesake by which comrades, friends, and colleagues refer to her, she too will be referred to throughout this text as Grace.

Grace was born in 1915 in an apartment above her father's Chinese restaurant in Providence, Rhode Island. The family business moved to New York City when Grace was 8 years old, where she remained throughout her youth and into her studies at Barnard College from 1935 to 1937 and Bryn Mawr, where Grace completed a doctoral degree in 1940. Her Masters and Doctoral theses focused on Hegel's conception of truth, and Meade's pragmatism. Following graduation, Grace moved to Chicago's South side, took on a low wage position at the University of Chicago philosophy library and quickly joined the housing rights struggle lead by first-generation great migration African American leaders and members of the Trotskyist Workers party. The housing rights movement served as Grace's introduction to radical politics and non-violent direct action, offering a taste of mass mobilization that had been absent during her years in the academy. After becoming a member of the Johnson-Forester Tendency of the American Trotskyist current, a radical Marxist socialist tendency founded by CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace studied and wrote (under the pseudonym Ria Stone) with James and Dunayevskaya during President McCarthy's red scare. She saw value in James' philosophy, 'because it recognized that new contradictions could arise out of great struggles for liberation and that progress did not take place in a straight line' (Hogsbjerg 2015). In Grace's autobiography *Living for Change* (1998), she reflects on her political partnership with James, citing his gift of 'making ideas come alive', and inspiring others to 'see how ideas that matter are created by individuals in particular historical conditions of life' (1998, 45). This dialectical thinking would continue to shape Grace's understanding of the evolution of neighborhoods and community throughout her 100th year of life.

In 1953 Grace moved to Detroit with the hope of joining a revolution among automotive workers, in which she believed workers would 'rise up and reconstruct the city' (Democracy Now, 2014). Shortly thereafter Grace married Jimmy Boggs, an activist, auto worker and organic intellectual among Detroit's African American labor and civil rights movements. They continued to work closely with the Johnson-Forester Tendency and assisted with the production of the group's publication *Correspondence* until their eventual political distancing from the party following James's exile to England in 1962. From her time with the Trotskyist tendency, Grace carried the lesson that regardless of social or economic position, through thought and practice we all contribute to the production of important ideas in society and the world (Boggs, 1998, 45).

## The philosophy of Grace

Though Grace earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy and regularly published journalistic political commentary over the course of her life, her theoretical contributions to the politics of place have remained outside of urban studies and geographic scholarship. To say that the distance Grace maintained from the academy stifled the integration of her work into scholarly text and dialogue would not quite capture the reality of how so often the knowledge of revolutionary activists is mistaken for material or energetic productivity rather than intellectual capability. The same is true of the intellectual work of those without advanced academic degrees. When Grace opted not to pursue an academic career in 1940 upon completing her doctorate, she was responding to the embedded racism of the academy at a time when a Chinese American woman being hired as a professor was highly unlikely. That community-based knowledge is rarely treated with the certainty of institutionally produced knowledge is telling, as Faria and Mollett suggest, of assumptions of authority that remain present in our field, even in the work of feminist and post-colonial geographers (2016).

As a former communist party member and woman of color, Grace's central disparity with the dialectical materialist concerns of orthodox Marxism was her belief that 'blacks, women, and young people, and not only workers' would play a pivotal role in building revolution, not only as laborers but as citizens among one another (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 106). Envisioning the advancement of revolution in this way steered Grace's leadership toward constant theoretical discussion with everyone she worked with, ensuring that youth, neighbors, allies, and friends were urged to theorize their lives in the context of their surroundings, beyond simply living them. In Grace's consistent mutual efforts to philosophically evolve how she conceptualized political struggles and tactics, she returned to the central questions of philosophy; what is it to be human? how do we know? how shall we live? Following the passing of her husband and political partner Jimmy Boggs in 1992, Grace's work carried on his central question of the times; *how will we all live in cities together?* Although Grace had initially moved to Detroit to work as a reporter, believing that a workers revolution was about to erupt and take back the city (Boggs, 1998), her experiences with Chicago's housing block clubs and food line organizing on Detroit's eastside revealed that struggles *beyond* the factory gate were simultaneously happening

alongside factory struggles, and impacted everyone; from arbitrarily high milk prices in the poorest neighbourhoods, to street-level gang violence and the increasing presence of drugs on the streets. Grace, whose politics were deeply informed by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), believed that only through constantly evaluating the disjuncture and contradictions of the spaces we live with the intentions that drive our actions, are we capable of advancing the evolution of movement building and the development of humanity directly within one's own neighbourhood (Boggs, 1998).

Critical self-reflexivity became a component of Grace's pedagogical approach in Detroit's activist community, and she was often looked toward to provide guidance and oversight of various projects in the city, and internationally. Part of this reflective practice required acknowledging that capitalism and the promise of the American Dream had failed black communities; a recognition that always made her question how everyday actions and the political work she was part of was working toward addressing spatial, infrastructural, and political equality for black communities. Geography has historically lacked spatial inquiry into contributions of black culture to the production of space throughout the twentieth century, producing a limited understanding within the discipline by white scholars' of the relationship between race, racialization and property relations in general (Inwood, 2009; McKittrick, 2006; Tyner, 2007). Defacto focus on white contributions to geographic and spatial thought reinforce geography's historical connections to racist projects and conceptualizations of property from a white standpoint (Panelli, 2008; Gilmore, 2007). Accounting for the function of anti-black racism in colonial and imperial spatial projects, both historically and contemporarily is most notably visible in the work of feminist and anti-racist scholars; including Katherine McKittrick's work on the evolution of diasporic geographies and anti-blackness (2006), Rashad Shabazz's inquiries on prison abolition and black public culture (2015), and Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) critiques on the expansion of the state through prison development. These works look to the experiences of black communities to examine questions that are central to geographic inquiry; examining information that reveals the organization of human systems as they relate to particular locations, the movement of people, confinement and enclosure, and relationships to power and space. In an interview between myself and a fellow Detroit Eastside resident a few years Grace's junior, he recalled what seemed like a running column from Grace in the Detroit Free Press

throughout the 1960–80’s; a series of letters to the editor and open letters to the community penned by Grace about everything from eminent domain and the neighborhood toll of the war on drugs, to the cheese lines and high milk prices in Detroit’s poorest African American neighborhoods. Grace’s written contributions and political leadership during her six decades in Detroit were devoted to these same intellectual examinations of place. What is arguably her most lasting contribution to critical engagement with racialization and property relations is the work Grace carried out with her husband Jimmy in the Detroit Summer program; an initiative that gave Grace’s pedagogy life and an urban scale of influence that continues to live on in the urban fabric of civic activism in Detroit today.

### **Beloved community**

Grace’s commitment to non-violence was informed by Dr. Martin Luther King and reflected through her leadership within Detroit’s African American civil rights struggle. Grace assisted in the coordination of King’s visit to Detroit in March 1963; a visit that convened in the largest civil rights demonstration in the United States to date in the ‘Walk to Freedom’, a preparatory event for the March on Washington. It was during the Walk to Freedom in Detroit that King first delivered excerpts of his ‘I have a Dream’ speech. Following the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, the Detroit rebellion of 1967, and Dr. King’s assassination in 1968, Grace and Jimmy’s work became definitively focused on their neighborhood as a means of challenging civic divestment and resulting residential and infrastructural disrepair happening throughout Detroit. As the 1960s came to a close, it was Grace’s belief that years of mass mobilizations had been productive in rousing African American and working-class people to anger and awareness, however very few tangible gains had been made in the way of social, economic, or political equalization in cities throughout the United States.

The Boggs’ consciously stepped back from movement building following King’s assassination in 1968 for a period of critical reflection on the urban crisis, the mass movements of civil and women’s rights as well as the anti-war movement, to explore urban manifestations of inequality that survived and outlasted the urban uprisings of the 1960s. This period marked the beginning of a rescaling of Grace’s direct political action, refocusing her attention to her city and

neighborhood; a shift in scope from the national and sometimes international political organizing that Grace had been part of in the preceding years. This shift in focus to the neighborhood necessitated the development of new theory and practice, a task Grace and Jimmy pursued through conversations with neighbors, and an annual retreat with fellow activists Lyman and Freddy Paine. Asking core philosophical questions to guide their own conversations; who are we, where did we come from, and where are we going?, the Boggs's pedagogical framework evolved toward dialectical humanism, 'reflection based on practice, and practice based on reflection' (Boggs and Boggs, 2008, i).

Dialectical humanism asks for evolution of the self in simultaneity with efforts to change the world, to be accountable for ourselves and others as we interrogate barriers to equality, and face our complacency in how they are maintained. The simultaneous co-production of self and our surroundings also beckons resonance with Neil Smith's theory on the co-production of space between citizens and political systems. However, within Smith's spatial theorization, the evolution of the self-alongside political systems was the parallel girding that produced space itself (Smith, 1998). Katz and Kirby are similarly harkened here in their thought, 'as we produce nature, so do we produce social relations' (1991, 286), including racialization, class, and expectations of gender that have historically influenced from whom geographic knowledge is sourced.

Grace, Jimmy and the Paine's movement from Marxist materialism to humanist thinking offered a reflexive basis within which to evolve political theory and practice in service of building King's 'beloved community'; a world in which the three great evils of racism, militarism, and materialism would be brought to an end. The theoretical and pedagogical influence of dialectical materialism and what eventually evolved into a dialectical humanist pedagogy is well detailed in the co-authored *Conversations in Maine* written by the Lyman's and Boggs's (Boggs et al. 1974).

### **Building the beloved community**

Dr. King's vision of the beloved community would be the outcome of a global commitment to

nonviolence. This vision would be realized through creating opportunities for meaningful work, the practice of restorative justice, the philosophical development of political systems, and spatially to ‘turn the ghettos into a vast school ... every street corner a forum ... every house worker (*sic*) and every laborer a demonstrator, a voter, a canvasser and a student’ (Theobald and Siskar, 2007, 211). The development of a pedagogy of engaged urban citizenship through non-violent direct action is how Grace and Jimmy enlivened Dr. King’s message, and how they envisioned transforming the ‘dying cities’ at the onset of North America’s post-industrial era; a moment in US urban history marked by racial rebellion against growing disinvestment, and economic and social inequality upheld by white institutions. Transforming the ‘dying cities’ became about addressing daily challenges of urban living, nurtured by the Boggs efforts to create a culture of self-determination through tangible neighborhood-level non-violent direct actions, critical self-reflection and theoretical dialogue.

Following the uprisings of the urban crisis in the 1960s, Grace and Jimmy’s work was definitively focused on strengthening community capacities. The neglect of Detroit’s infrastructure and the corresponding decline of services and social capital among neighborhoods impacted by rapid population decline as white and middle-class residents left Detroit for the suburbs commanded a neighborhood-level response. Their ongoing conversations with the Payne’s, as well as their close readings of Freire, King, and Gramsci led to the Boggs’s pedagogical framework of ‘reflection based on practice, and practice based on reflection’ (Boggs and Boggs, 2008; i). This pedagogy was committed to advancing the mission of Dr. King’s pledge to non-violence and necessitated the framework of popular education. Important to note here is that the required reflexivity and cooperation necessary to build Beloved Community commanded that the lines between teacher and student or elder and youth be blurred; a feminist teaching practice William and Abby (2009, 152) call ‘pedagogy in action’ in which young and the old learn from one another through shared experiences of community service. What differentiates Grace’s approach is her vision of engaging all members of her community in direct civic action to build the future she believed to be possible, in pursuit of Dr. King’s beloved community (2010); a pedagogy that reached beyond any classroom to activate spaces, people, and political dialogue across classes, races, and generations of urban residents.

Inspired by their experience in Mississippi during the events of 1964's Freedom Summer, and eager to put their pedagogical framework into practice, Grace and Jimmy coordinated Detroit's first People's Festival in 1991. The festival brought together community organizations and activists in dialogue and celebration of their work to redefine and build 'a city of community, compassion, cooperation, participation, and enterprise in harmony with the Earth' (Boggs and Boggs, 2008; xx). The gathering attracted national attention and drew together environmental and social activists, racial justice groups, educators and practitioners in Detroit together to identify their common goals and potentially create a path forward for future political organizing. In 1992, Grace and Jimmy opened their home as a center for community organizing and education, and from 1992 onward the second floor of their Field Street home operated as the Boggs' Center to Nurture Community Leadership. A community library and resource center were just one of several functions of the Boggs' Center, which also housed programs such as the Great Lakes Bioneers, reading groups and activist residencies, the New Work collective, Detroit Future Schools, and the Living Arts Media Project, to name a few. In addition to opening their home to the community, using the momentum of the People's Festival, Grace and Jimmy created a Detroit-based 'youth leadership movement' (Boggs and Kurashige, 2012, 15).

### **Detroit summer and movement building for the twenty-first century**

The year the Boggs' Center opened, Grace and Jimmy founded Detroit Summer, a program for Detroit youth that combined theoretical dialogue with arts programming community service. The intention was to generate political momentum that would shape Detroit's future through youth leadership. Described by Grace, 'our hope was that Detroit Summer would bring about a new vision and model of community activism- one that was particularly responsive to the new challenges posed by the conditions of life and struggle in the post-industrial city' (Boggs and Kurashige, 2011). Growing the capacities of young people was the task Grace believed to be the responsibility of every generation, as a means of evolving human and political capacities to critically think, practice empathy, and advance society as a whole.

When the city's population began to rapidly decline following the uprising and fires of 1967, Mayor Coleman Young invited residents to participate in the Farm-a-Lot program as a way to

direct newly vacant lots throughout the city away from unregulated or illicit uses. Through the Farm-a-Lot program, a group of African American seniors, most of whom had roots in the Southern United States and had come to Detroit during the Great Migration formed the Gardening Angels in the 1980s. The ‘Angels’ grew and distributed food amongst themselves and in their neighborhoods, farming not only to produce food but out of respect for the land and as a practice of mutual aid, a component of what Grace referred to like work that ‘grows our souls’ (Boggs and Kurashige, 2012). Grace and Jimmy introduced Detroit Summer participants to the Garden Angels in 1994, an initiative that was arguably the catalyst for the expansion of urban agriculture in Detroit, and the thousands of food growing initiatives that take place there today. To be clear, African American elders were at the helm of this initiative, and actions the Angels had been carrying out for a few decades inspired the adoption of further urban agricultural projects by Detroit Summer youth (Stone, 1995), and the formation of non-profits and ad-hoc neighborhood agricultural groups that followed. Julia Putnam, one of Detroit Summer’s inaugural participants recalls her experience in Detroit Summer;

We planted urban gardens, painted murals, and helped rehab a house for an elderly woman. We held peace vigils downtown every week with Save Our Sons and Daughters to acknowledge the young people who had been lost to gun violence. We marched against crack houses in the neighborhood with We the People Protect our Streets ... These activities and the process of engaging in community projects that improve the neighborhoods we were in during those three weeks made Detroit Summer the first manifestation of Place-Based education in the city (Putnam, 2011).

Place-based consciousness was a chief priority in the theoretical and action-based work of Grace; believing that place, in the words of Arik Dirlik ‘is the radical other’ within global capitalism (Boggs, 2000). On place-based consciousness, Grace wrote in her *Monthly Review*, titled ‘Questions of Place’;

Global capitalism relentlessly displaces people and abandons places because it views local communities, cities, and even nations as inconveniences in the path of progress. Place-consciousness, on the other hand, encourages us to come together around common,

local experiences and organize around our hopes for the future of our communities and cities (2000).

Richard Feldman, one of Grace and Jimmy's long-time friends and political comrades described the agricultural engagement of Detroit Summer as a means to introduce youth and teens to the idea that they could work together to change their neighborhoods; a project that encouraged youth to develop leadership and problem solving skills while also growing something of use for their community. He described urban agriculture as more of a means to an end than as a productive activity. Growing gardens on vacant lots introduced youth to critical ways of thinking about their surroundings, and to community builders and who engaged the youth in and multigenerational relationships.

Detroit Summer youths' work ranged from fixing fences, planting vegetable gardens, cleaning and mowing vacant lots, cleaning vacated homes and producing collections of youth art and poetry. The hundreds of participant and visitors of Detroit Summer programs were tasked above all else to incorporate critical self-reflection into the physical, social, and emotional labor of their projects. In the 138.9 square mile city, with an estimated one out of every four properties sitting vacant, one of the tasks Detroit Summer participants faced was addressing dereliction and vacancy, and in doing so redefining the relationship between Detroit youth and the space of the city (Skeleton and Valentine 1998). The service-based program was the embodiment of what Grace saw as Martin Luther King's challenge to alter 'our dying cities' (Boggs 2004; Boggs and Kurashige, 2012). In line with King's critique of America's preoccupation with the expansion of capital for the advancement of society, Detroit Summer's youth committed their energy to projects that built 'critical connections' rather than critical mass; projects Grace claimed 'brought the neighbor back to the hood' (Boggs, 2010; Boggs and Kurashige, 2011). In addition to Grace's Hegelian influence, the development of the pedagogical approach illustrated in *Conversations in Maine* (Boggs, Paine et al., 1978) shaped the objectives of Detroit Summer; with the thought that through reflexive practice, the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy could be overcome and people may begin to act not only on the urgency of their thoughts but through compassion. Recent critiques within the subfield of social geography have similarly identified the important and necessary leap being made from the disciplines tradition in 'Cartesian-based scientific knowledge and a wider (imperial, colonizing) politics' (Panelli, 2008, 801; McKittrick,

2006; Smith and Godlewska, 1994). This critique is rooted in questioning the practice and politics of geography as a predominantly white and English speaking knowledge (Panelli 2008, 801).

### **Restorative spatial justice and the beloved community**

There may not be one concise legacy left by Grace, though what is certain is that Grace introduced Detroiters of all ages to the reality that their city is what they are capable of imagining and making of it. The impact of those working toward beloved community through Detroit Summer was often spatial, a result of the physical transformation of spaces through clean-ups and green repurposing. Detroit Summer utilized the city as a classroom; a pedagogical tool Grace so clearly embraced for inspiring young Detroiters to insert themselves into the uneven terrain of racial and economic disparity and to create the neighborhoods they wanted to live in. Perhaps what Detroit Summer accomplished was youth civic engagement at the level of the street and the neighborhood; a political ecology of youth action through place-based engagement.

To understand the power and value in this work, we have to accept, as Soja suggests, ‘that there is always a relative spatial dimension to justice’ (Soja, 1999, 2). And as Alderman and Inwood add, legacies of exclusion within cities including displacement and dehumanizing conditions for minorities can be conceptually and practically addressed through restorative justice methods (2013). *Restorative spatial justice*, as I name it necessitates that community self-determination exists beyond the symbolic; that legacies of inequality are addressed through reconciliation with places and people, and that the goals of reconciliation be centered on community building and healing, as well as greater access to rights for all through social transformation (Inwood, 2012, 6; McKittrick, 2011) In the context of North American, actual restorative spatial justice necessities a commitment to the decolonization and reconstitution of land to multiple indigenous nations, and diasporic nations who live here today. How can we make sense of the activities of youth as holding the potential for the restoration of a potential past that they had not experienced, a previous iteration of their own neighborhoods prior to uprisings and divestment?

Haraway's offering of 'nature' as a place we exist not through choice but through inheritance (Haraway, 1991) is a way of defining 'nature' that suggests reconciliation and spatial justice may be achieved by younger generations of Detroiters, or anywhere, as a matter of birthright. The importance of multigenerational dialogue and programming of Detroit Summer additionally supports the thought that the situated knowledge of today is informed by the experiences of elders as much as it is by youth; or as Grace would say, all social movements and thought are a product of their time, which always includes the past and present, as well as what we hope for the future. In a predominantly black city, spatial justice through neighborhood scale transformation undoes what McKittrick refers to as 'the repetitive circulation of anti-blackness' that defines the present and the past of black geographies. (McKittrick, 2014, 239). McKittrick suggests that the work we do today is always informed by a past-present cycle of oppression has the potential to undue the constitutional anti-black foundations of North American geography. This form of 'undoing' is informed by the embodiment of anti-blackness throughout time and space, and the necessity to claims one's right for their blackness to be the grounds upon which spatial justice is imagined and produced. This way of knowing may be beyond the experience of white allies and communities, though not beyond where white allies' work needs to be situated, to support, to fund, supply resources, and to critically unpack our role as allies in its further production and maintenance.

Through Detroit Summer, Grace's goal was to introduce youth to a 'civic vision' of 'a new kind of city where citizens take responsibility for their decisions' (Boggs, 2009), with youth at the forefront. Similar to Henri Lefebvre's 'new contract of citizenship' (Elden et al., 2003; Lefebvre, 1990) and Keil's call to reimagine the sorts of citizens we need to be to address the consequences of neoliberalism (Keil, 2009), Grace's 'civic vision' urges us to disrupt the relationship between citizens and the state through reimagining a citizenship practice that challenges our own dependency on socially regressive state structures (Purcell and Tyman, 2015, 113). Instilling youth with a sense of purpose connects them to their surroundings through environmental education, cleaning up vacant housing and properties, repurposing properties for community use, and leaves behind something that provides opportunities for people to reconnect and redefine their relationship to their neighborhoods. This not only youth engagement but restorative spatial

justice in its own right.

## **Property**

If greening projects and urban agriculture were initially a community tool for managing vacancy and creating new resources, these strategies have found their way into the rooster of urban revitalization efforts driven by private, civic- and state leadership, what Hackworth and Smith have described as the ‘third wave’ or corporatization of gentrification (Hackworth and Smith, 2001; Hackworth, 2002). It could be argued that the work of fixing houses and green projects to better one’s community is a neoliberal position that actually enables further cuts to public sector work, and encourages regressive ‘pull yourself up at your boot straps’ citizenship in which services that have traditionally been the responsibility of the state are taken on by citizens. These criticisms come out of concerns of the rise of community development practices that are increasingly couched within third wave policy reform. Third wave governance creates ‘opportunities’ for citizen engagement in urban redevelopment that are essential to neoliberal shifts within urban subject constitution and governance, that create new necessary forms of citizen intervention (Ingamells, 2007; Beal, 2014).

Rather than the historical materialist approach of Marxism, of two opposing forces grappling for power, Grace described dialectical humanism at the 2008 New Left Forum in New York City as “[t]he essence of dialectical thinking is the ability to be self-critical. Being able to see that an idea you had or an activity you had engaged in which was correct at one stage can turn into its opposite at another stage. In Ross’s *Grabbing Back: Essays Against the Global Land Grab* (2014), Grace and comrades from the Boggs Center define urban land grabbing as central to the new emerging post-industrial era following deindustrialization, and therefore necessarily present in the process of urban revitalization under capitalism (Ross, 2014, 197). Taking up land for community use, including urban gardening and refurbishing structurally unsound houses, is one way that ‘visionary’ organizing potentially subverts the use of property toward a privatized and profit-driven ends to urban development. However, community uses of vacant property in Detroit are also influencing large scale business developments on the city’s Eastside. The Detroit Planning and Development Department and the pseudo-governmental agency Detroit Future City

use greenwashing strategies to advance development plans for Detroit's vast stock of open space, ultimately displacing thousands of Detroiters. What civic leadership is revealing in Detroit today is that community land uses can potentially be co-opted, or have their sense of 'community' challenged by developers and land grabbers who make claims to land use through sheer ownership rather than lifelong proximity, stewardship or shared politics.

Chief Executive Officer of Quicken Loans, Dan Gilbert, has stated that in Detroit's *post-industrial* era, the city is at the intersection of 'muscle and brains'; stating 'Muscles: we're still moving things, we're still making things. And the brains part is we now are a very, very hot spot for technology, entrepreneurs, people who are creating innovative ideas. So we got it both here' (Guzman, 2016). Gilbert is a member of Detroit's elite business class who has purchased more than 63 prime real estate properties and 17, 000 parking spaces downtown, at an estimated \$451 million dollars since 2011 (Aguilar, 2015). The Detroit Blight Task Force found that 52% of the houses that Quicken Loans refinanced following the mid-2000's housing bubble are now blighted and will eventually be demolished (MacDonald and Kurth, 2015). If, as Gilbert claims, Detroit is at the intersection of muscle and brains, the muscle is in the rapid purchasing of property for corporate and private use; and community activists, particularly those engaged in the self-reflective and anti-racist community dialogues, are bringing the brain power through critical discussions of uneven development and the need for anti-racist and decolonization politics to stabilize neighborhoods. In this sense, if 'post-industrial' represents the spatial manifestation of economic, infrastructural, and social outcomes of deindustrialization that enable land grabbing in cities, Grace's civic vision for the post-industrial era is a time of setting the stage for social change that has yet to come, as though the 'post-industrial' is 'a time to reimagine everything'(2012). I suggest, the post-industrial era of US cities is particularly a time to critically reimagine how we interact with property, and the potential for equitable and justice based outcomes to come of the evolution of the property system, perhaps even through its dissolution.

### **Critiques of Grace's influence**

Detroit Summer was Grace and Jimmy's way of integrating place-based consciousness into

youth programming. Growing food in the city was what the Boggs's referred to as 'socially necessary' work; a qualifier that challenged consumer culture and reintroduced people to the difference between commodity fetishism and the essentials needed to live. The idea of 'socially necessary' work emerged again for Grace in the mid-2000s when the Boggs Center began engaging with the concept of 'New Work, New Culture', developed by Frithjof Bergmann; a strategy for dealing with the evolving labor market (van Gelder, 1994). *New work* is a means of addressing the rise of unemployment brought on by automation, to redirect technology to replace repetitive tasks in order to allow people to use their time more 'creatively and imaginatively'. As Bergmann describes 'new work is simply the attempt to allow people ... to do something they passionately want to do' (van Gelder, 1994). Grace promoted the concept through community dialogues, a lecture at the 2010 US Social Forum, and through the Boggs Center's participation and endorsement of a New Work, New Culture conference in Detroit in 2011. New work, in theory, is intended to reorganize our labor, toward creatively serving the individual and the community, for communities to create their own solutions to economic and social disinvestment. This perspective of what work should and ought to offer people parallels the entrepreneurial rhetoric espoused within Neoliberalism urbanism, of people creating resources and jobs outside of state interference (Theodore, Peck and Brenner, 2011), to uplift themselves and relinquish their dependency on typical forms of employment and state-supported resources. New work also harkens to the likes of Richard's Florida's creative class, valuing 'creative' labor, and the creative classes' often displacing and uneven contributions to neighborhood-level social and economic development.

Marxist critiques largely from the Fourth International Marxist Tendency urge that Grace 'long ago abandoned revolutionary politics' (Jones, 2012, np) for 'the interests and thinking of a privileged, complacent middle-class social layer'; claims the Fourth International states are supported by Grace's endorsement of a charter school in the name of Jimmy and herself in the late 2000s, and her continuous call to 'visionary' organizing to build a pseudo-spiritual 'beloved community'. In Grace's final years, her perspective on the work of the Boggs' Center evolved and became critical of the center's New Work and charter school initiatives, believing that theory supporting the projects was bourgeois and detached from working-class sensibilities and realities. As for the Marxist critique of Grace's call for progressives to build the beloved

community of King's dreams, it is consistent with their political tendency that the Fourth International lack support for challenging racism.

Shea Howel, linguistics professor, and long-time friend and co-organizer with Grace described dialogue and critical self-reflection of the Boggs Center as always revealing a 'unity of contradictions' within the visionary organizing work of 'creating the future'. Grace herself was highly cognisant of how tensions and contradictions eventually reveal themselves in any form of philosophical and praxis-based production. The contradictions of new work, charter school development, and DIY-style urban redevelopment can be framed within an accidental neoliberal subjecthood that grows out of concern for one's community. Perhaps these ways of thinking and creating are, as Howel described, a means of creating something new alongside what already exists; of creating something new without destroying *what is being replaced*. This latter understanding embodies the idea of changing ourselves while changing the world; as Grace called it, evolution through revolution.

My own concern with this place-focused biographical investigation, utilizing standpoint so far as to recognize one's impact on space, is that of transferability and relevance. If it has been possible that you as the reader have come to better understand Detroit, Michigan through biographical engagement with Grace Lee Boggs, what if anything can be learned here that is transferable to other cities, other theorists, and about ourselves as people in space? Biography offers the narrative of identity and the justification of one's actions along the timeline of their particular existence; but what does this have to do with space and place? One of the values in investigating the life of a feminist activist through biography is to be informed about a particular place through feminist praxis, experience, and impact beyond our own. Feminist biographical investigation can, therefore, create feminist space/time as an addition to commonly known facts and histories that often overlook marginal experiences of place; to gain the perspective necessary to see when and where the subject of investigation carved out the time and space 'to locate and situate the possibility of change (Sroda, Rogowska-Stangret, and Cielmecka, 2014, 8). Because gender, race, and class are all non-consenting subjectivities within space, though are often comprised and reinforced by it, understanding the composition and production of space from a feminist

standpoint as informed by biography also allows us to recognize survival strategies for spatial manifestations of inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The Boggs Center and Detroit Summer have inspired multiple offshoot programs, from urban agricultural projects, multimedia, education and performance initiatives that all critically engage with values of non-violence, anti-racism, and poverty reduction. Alumni members of Detroit Summer have gone on to lead a number of progressive organizations in the city today, including the Allied Media Projects, Detroit Future Schools, Detroit City of Hope, the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, the 5E Gallery, the Field Street New Work Collective, and Freedom Freedom Growers.

Through a commitment to self-reflection and visionary movement building, Grace's commitment to advancing a place-based 'sustainable activism for the twenty-first century' through non-violence continues to move thousands of youth and adults into service, re-appropriating neighborhood spaces through greening projects, creating media and arts-based programming, and advancing philosophical understandings of our humanity to challenge social and economic divestment in Detroit and beyond (Boggs and Kurashige, 2012). Though Grace's work has been critiqued for becoming diluted, separating itself from larger socialist thought from which it initially sprouted, alternatively we can view Grace's body of work and life's contributions as distillation, or a refinement. Moving through Grace's political chronology in this biographic investigation provides reason and understanding as to what social and political conditions may have altered her course away from the dominant thinking and global scale of international socialist parties that she engaged with in the first half of her life. Most importantly her biography provides a lens through which to unpack and more clearly understand a city through the grassroots mobilizing she was part of, and the pedagogical approach that encouraged Detroit youth as well as elders to take up the tasks of imagining and building the community they wanted to live in. Surly, as Grace aged and the scale of her political focus narrowed, her community on Detroit's East side, her neighbourhood of more than fifty years undoubtedly became her church; a residency of constant practice and worship that provided the final treatment

to Grace's theoretical contributions on localized resilience and building 'beloved community'.

In a 2010 interview with *Democracy Now!* Host Amy Goodman, Grace shared her hopefulness in the opportunity we all have to address the post-industrial era through visionary thinking; 'instead of seeing devastation, see hope, see the opportunity to grow your own food, see an opportunity to give young people a sense of process. (In Detroit) the vacant lot represents the possibilities for a cultural revolution (Democracy Now)'. As a self-identifying 'solutionary', what separated Grace's work from so many within the academy is at the crux of what Heynen describes as a tendency for radical scholars 'to identify problems and theorize rather than engage with solutions' (Heynen 2013, 749). Grace was a revolutionary and 'solutionary' thinker whose philosophical development was continuously guided by practice and reflection, and in creating solutions for issues that she and her community faced each day by encouraging others to imagine and work toward what they believed to be possible in their city. For radical geographers looking to produce emancipatory scholarship, the body and community of work gifted to us by Grace Lee Boggs that is (largely) unaccounted for within urban studies and urban political ecology, provides an opportunity to challenge our own tendencies of working within the echo chamber of academia, and urges that we look toward the theoretical contributions and tactical examples from those beyond the academy as epistemological opportunities for knowing space and how to change it differently.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## **Article Three**

### **Toward a politics of accountability: feminist ethics of care and whiteness in Detroit's foreclosure crisis**

#### **Abstract**

In the decade since the 2008 mortgage crisis, residents of Detroit, Michigan have continued to sustain anemic levels of preventable foreclosures by tax delinquency. The city's decades-long over assessment of property values and proceeding windfall of tax foreclosures are happening amid a post-bankruptcy governance regime to remarketize housing and land that has been accumulated by the city through forfeitures and seizures. Over 50% of the city's households, rented or owned, are led by African American women. Growing economic inequality and community efforts to keep Detroit a majority black city have roused organized responses against territorial reconfigurations that could drive further political-economic division and displacement. The Tricycle Collective, a woman-led non-profit that assisted Detroit households in avoiding tax foreclosure, will be examined here for their use of a feminist ethics of care in their approach to foreclosure prevention. This article considers the potential for harm in exercising an ethics of care within a deeply racialized housing market, without the intention of constructing next steps for advocates and activists to direct opposition toward the ongoing crisis of racialized dispossession. Speaking through critical race studies, urban geography and feminist theory, a feminist ethics of care will be deconstructed alongside what I call a "politics of accountability", as a framework for action and analysis.

#### **Keywords**

Ethics of care, whiteness, accountability, Detroit, metabolisms of foreclosure.

#### **Introduction**

This article will examine the work of a feminist and woman-led housing advocacy group, The Tricycle Collective based in Detroit, Michigan and their charitable interventions into the city's ongoing tax foreclosure crisis. Tricycle Collective's efforts chronicle important lessons about

what informs feminist ethics of care, and how anti-racist allyship can present material gains while simultaneously bolstering structural and institutional supremacy values that are protective of both whiteness and capital. The tactics and mission of the Detroit-based Tricycle Collective, will be analyzed alongside a critical examination of feminist ethics of care (FEoC) and Harris's 'whiteness as property' (Harris, 1993) to inspire broader dialogue about the moral conflicts and desire for fast and measurable results that lead so much housing advocacy and engaged research toward ethical satisfaction rather than actual material gains. I argue that material outcomes in the form of financial, political or economic indemnity can attend to gender and racial inequality by subsuming a FEoC in the development of what I call a politics of accountability (PoA). Examining the ongoing metabolic process of tax foreclosure as a site for the reproduction of 'whiteness as property' (Harris, 1993), this article examines FEoC in relation to racialized and class inequality in the housing crisis, and how FEoC can lead to misguided outcomes within housing advocacy and policy, activist and participatory research. Drawing on my time as a member-organizer and board member with the collective throughout 2016-2019, I assess how the collective's tactics perpetuated racial dispossession through the benevolence of charity.

Tricycle Collective's efforts offer important lessons about what informs an ethics of care, and how anti-racist ally-ship can present material gains while simultaneously bolstering structural and institutional supremacy values that are protective of both whiteness and capital. This analysis of the Tricycle Collective's role in Detroit's foreclosure crisis will critically build off of a feminist ethics of care using critical race studies and the urban political ecology concept of metabolism. Working toward what I call a 'politics of accountability', I argue that white-led housing advocates and theorists ought to work toward producing material outcomes in the form of financial, political or economic indemnity to attend to class, gender and racial inequality of the housing market.

### **Ethics, care and responsibility**

Gilligan's feminist ethics of care (FEoC) emerged out of her 1977 study on feminist standpoint theory and critical reflection on her witnessing of women's decision making and moral questioning in determining whether or not to retain or terminate unplanned pregnancies (Gilligan, 1977). For Gilligan, feminist ethics of care is grounded in an inherent human desire to

relate to ours and others' place in humanity. Gilligan asserts that the relationality of human behavior allows morality to be examined as a form of interdependent reasoning driven by the emotional self (Held, 2014). In this sense Gilligan's feminist moral theory is concerned with determining and acting on one's sense of responsibility to their surrounding environment including the lives and lifeforms that inhabit those spaces, be they dependent or interdependent. Moral theory according to Gilligan necessitates reflecting on ourselves in relation to others, the sharing of life experiences, and of being called to act on the evolution of humanity through our own moral development and preceding actions. Cooper refers to this ontological point as evidentiary grounds for ethics of care, they refer to as "a feminine gender-related perspective of care" (Cooper, 1989). However, while Gilligan initially argued that the reasoning of women and their moral foundations were highly referential to emotions and connectivity to others, what has become known as Gilligan's *relational view of the self*, was misinterpreted by fellow feminist theorists as an explicitly woman-centered point of self-referencing (Gilligan, 1977; McDowell, 2004). In the decades following the publication of Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1977), trans theory scholars have necessarily interjected into universalized binary frameworks that gender essentializing is bound up with the equally oppressive forces of the carceral state (McDonald, Stanley, & Smith, 2015; Morgensen, 2016), of racism and anti-blackness (Bassichis & Spade, 2014) and of bolstering inter-species supremacy and human dominance over the environment-built or otherwise (Woelfle-Erskine & Cole, 2015).

Human geographers have long discussed the relational constructions of place and space, particularly in urban scholarship in which cities are presented as networks of connection, interaction and flows (Darling, 2010; Keil & Boudreau, 2006). The relationship between care and responsibility in geographic scholarship and feminist political ecology broadly generates discussions of moral resolution, conflict, and inequality, and of exercising a responsibility to the future using 'rights'-based analyses in relation to environmental justice (Elmhirst, 2011), and scientifically-founded arguments concerning climate change. Lawson calls geography a *caring discipline*, referring to geographer's intellectual contributions to social justice, human rights, and welfare, as well as to arguments concerning conservation, emergency response and animal protection (Lawson, 2007b). This assessment of the discipline at large speaks to a reading of geographers as carrying with their intellectual practices a sense of responsibility to humanity, the

environment, and to the future through their intellectual pursuits and engagement beyond the classroom.

Massey understood *geographies of care* as a gauge for scalability of one's actions, described by Massey as a set of nesting dolls; "First there is 'home', then perhaps place or locality, then nation and so on. This 'nesting doll' of care works under the assumption that we care first and for, and have our responsibilities towards, those nearest in" (Massey, 2004, p. 9). Smith's interest was in the interrogation of "impartiality" produced by living in an ever-globalizing world and smaller localities. Drawing on development theorists Singer's concern about the global reach of moral responsibility, Smith's states that moral claims vested in impartiality may be present in matters that require anything but (D. M. Smith, 1998). FEOC has been taken on by several feminist geographers, less as a moral exercise than in the construction of professional interpersonal relationships (Bain et al., 2017; Darling, 2010; Lawson, 2007a; Moss et al., 1999). Though relationality continues to be central to investigations in human geography research (Elwood, Lawson, & Sheppard, 2017), FEOC, as practiced by feminist geographers today, has largely been redirected to address the institutional conditions of our labor (Moss et al., 1999). Moss et al. introduced feminist geographers to the possibility of creating "*caring collegial environments* as a means to overcome the 'masculinization' of academia. Within mentor and mentee relationships, Bain et al. (2017) identify a feminist ethics of care as constitutive of sustainable intellectual communities, in which mutual caretaking, empathy, and empowerment are exchanged between mentors and mentees.

With the exception of Lawson, feminist geographers have largely demonstrated that FEOC has been turned inward as an aspirational mode of conduct used to gauge and influence the professional environments of academic departments and networks. This inward dialogue of critiquing the masculinization of the academy has refracted ethics of care from its initial origin, from which fellow feminist geographers may have been able to critically self-reflect and redirect care ethics beyond collegial dynamics and into the fibers of our analysis, thereby moving theoretical investigations beyond relatively secure workplaces and mostly middle class incomes. In suggesting that scholars reconnect Gilligan's intention of FEOC to the project of contributing to the evolution of humanity, this critique intends to move scholars, and those practicing a FEOC

in institutional relationships or privileged positions toward what I call a politics of accountability (PoA).

Politics of accountability is the process of making stronger considerations for how our work and energy may be directed toward systemic inequalities from which we benefit, in ways that offer material gains rather than benevolent interpersonal gestures in already power-laden relationships, and that expand our peripheries of care beyond our academic or institutional ‘homes’. Lawson’s “Geographies of Care and Responsibility”, written 30 years after Gilligan’s conceptualization of FEOC states: ‘We can build on what we have learned from [geography’s] longstanding focus on the substance of care to develop a broader program of research and practice that begins from a critical ethic of care and responsibility’ (Lawson, 2007b, p. 2). To redirect fellow feminist geographer’s professionalized interpersonal construction of FEOC, I suggest we insert attention to Gilligan’s definition and praxis of FEOC. What I suggest here is that feminist geographers recommit, for the first time, to a more orthodox approach to Gilligan’s ethic of care in its ‘challenge to the dominant established approaches to morality, and to the political, legal, economic, and other ways of thinking, and the social institutions, that are associated with them’ (Held, 2014, p. 107). This article will argue for a return to the systemically relational approach set out in Gilligan’s 1977 article through what I will establish as a departure from ‘care’ toward the development of a politics of accountability, reinvigorating responsibility to the dismantling of larger systemic oppressions that are beyond the singularity of our individual or privileged professional relationships<sup>5</sup>.

### **The metabolism of foreclosure**

The housing market and urban property systems, in general, are key components of city infrastructure, whether in a growing megalopolis, hinterland, or a city ‘shrinking’ from population decline and economic austerity. At the core of urban political ecology (UPE) research is

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<sup>5</sup> As a young woman in academia, I am well aware of the challenges presented by and embedded in the masculinization of the academy. While I am endlessly committed to building supportive relationships and dismantling patriarchy and its institutional manifestations, my hope is to encourage feminist scholars to acknowledge that FEOC has largely been appropriated and misused. I encourage us all to find new language.

an understanding of the cyclical evolutionary processes of urban environments that continuously inform broader economic, political and social relations, that in turn catalyze further environmental change (Heynen, Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006); thus, the circulatory process of urban metabolism. UPE acknowledges that the material conditions that constitute urban environments are carefully managed to serve elite interests, and therefore uphold social stratifications and hierarchies that produce *de jour racism*, urban environmental injustice, and strategic disinvestment. According to Swyngedouw (2006), social relations transform the environment and subsequently evolve the relationship between society and nature. Two central tropes of urban political ecology, metabolism, and circulation, offer frameworks for examining socio-natural processes that draw on what Harvey calls Marx's three moments of capital; production/valorization, distribution, and realization (Edwards & Bulkeley, 2017; Harvey, 2018). With Smith's assertion that nature plays a central role in capital's moment of production/valorization (N. Smith, 2008), whatever forms nature and capital take in the urban landscape and the relationship between them is of central concern to UPE scholars (Keil & Boudreau, 2006; N. Smith, 2008). Though urban political ecologists have examined housing issues in relation to greenbelts and farmland preservation (Brinkley, 2018; Keil & Macdonald, 2016), tree removal and sustainability in urban rental markets (Heynen, Perkins, & Roy, 2006; Palmer, Instone, Mee, Williams, & Vaughan, 2015), and barriers to home energy conservation in low-income and eco-city development (Caprotti & Romanowicz, 2013; Hilbert & Werner, 2016), the right to housing as well as foreclosure and eviction have been underexamined in UPE (Cidell, 2009).

As of 2003, 68% of the mortgages held in Detroit, MI were of the subprime type, compared to 24% nationwide and 27% in the rest of the state of Michigan. More than \$63 billion in home value was extracted from Michigan's housing market during the mortgage crisis in 2008 through devaluation, and 200,000 households were displaced across the state (Isley & Rotonardo, 2012). Today, homeownership by Black families comprises 78% of all ownership across the city (Akers & Seymour, 2018), and as of 2016 66% of Detroit, residents held subprime credits scores and 68% held delinquent debt. This clear racialization of debt delinquency and access to secure loans that enable the accumulation of assets through property ownership are part of the legacy of the impoverishment of the city's Black residents (Beeman, Glasberg, & Casey, 2011; Harris, 1993).

In Harris's *Harvard Law Review* article "Whiteness as Property" (1993), property is understood as parallel to systems of domination and subordination over Black people and communities. Harris states that 'whiteness, initially constructed as a form of racial identity, evolved into a form of property' that is historically and presently protected and acknowledged by law' (Harris, 1993, p. 1716). Racial formation in the form of real property is demonstrative of how institutional economic relationships so deeply embed themselves within the intimate material realm of the household while simultaneously producing restrictive urban ecologies characterized by racialized access to property. The whiteness of the property system is built into the urban environment and is reproduced through spatial practices that 'intersect with ideas about nature and belonging' (Brahinsky, Sasser, & Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Harris, 1993) that reveal deeper political interests in the maintenance of racial marginalization.

Dorothy Roberts charges that the trajectory of exploitation and dispossession of Black reproduction was established at the time of the forced integration of Black women into the colonies as laborers, whose decisions concerning reproduction were denied and became "subject to social regulation rather than to their own will" (Roberts 1997, 23). The heteropatriarchal entitlement to the bodies, labor, sex, and children of black women, while deeply informed by colonial-era governance of Black women in the colonies and chattel slavery, has been institutionally fortified throughout the evolution of settler-colonial property regimes that are manifest in contemporary urban property markets. This agricultural point of entry of Black labor into the colonies as field workers marked the beginning of its own metabolic cycle of dispossession, domination, and restricted mobility between Black populations and white property owners. This cycle of racial domination born in the antebellum period sometimes referred to as *blues ecologies* (Woods, 2017), presents itself in urban property markets today in what McKittrick refers to as *plantation futures* (McKittrick, 1994). These are distinct Black geographies that reflect trajectories of continued dispossession, and moments of mortal compromise by Black women whose navigation as property and of the property system has nearly always been one of life or death (Fields & Fields, 2012; McKittrick, 2006). The multifaceted blunt force of Euro-nationalist aggression in settler colonies toward indigenous and enslaved people comprises the *toxic geographies* in which Black and people of color continue to live out restrictive social relations to land and property under the settler colonial logics of control

and domination (Nunn, 2018). On the social implications of property, Harris (1993) states that the institution of slavery preceded the social relations that constructed racial identity, fusing race with economic domination while granting white workers —regardless of class— a monopoly advantage over the property market. What McKittrick, Roberts, and the Fields urge us to see are the intersectional forms of domination over the bodies, reproductive capacities, sexuality and mobility of Black women that have historically and continue to comprise the real material disparities that racial capitalism stacks against them. In understanding Harris’s conceptualization of ‘whiteness as property’, the liberal terms in which property is produced and exchanged has historically undermined women’s autonomy and reproduced heteropatriarchal relationships of reliance and servitude, especially for Black women.

### **Dispossession**

The influence of mob-like prejudice conjured through the self-privileging of white European subjects’ entitlement to property has defined property relations in the Detroit area. Beginning with the XVII century forced removal of Ojibwe, Ottawa and Miami indigenous peoples, and the constant movement of enslaved Black populations (miscounted at three fifths human value of white settlers) throughout the XVIII and XIX centuries, the disposability of Black and indigenous populations have been a distinct marker in Detroit’s centuries-long history of population decline, intertwined with colonial territoriality and racial dispossession. While the city is internationally known for its large expanses of vacant property and meadow-like neighborhoods, often misrepresented as entirely uninhabited (Millington, 2013; Solnit, 2007), Detroit’s nearly 40 square miles of ‘open space’ is anything but incidental. Throughout the 1920s, 30s and 40s housing covenants signed by realtors and neighborhoods association members prevented neighborhood integration between Black and white residents across the US. With the aid of redlining from financial institutions, Black and ethnic urban ghettoization took shape (D. Wilson, 2006; W. J. Wilson, 1987). In addition to the Klan-mobilized violence that disciplined the movement of Black families into white neighborhoods, not to be overlooked is the instrumental role that white women’s hostility and coordinated communication networks played in vigilantly maintaining the whiteness of their neighborhoods (Sugrue, 1996; Widick, 1989).

Postwar ‘white flight’ in the 1950s is often thought of as the moment that turned Detroit toward its economic and political ruin. Following the introduction of redlining in the 1934 National Housing Act, 87,000 housing units were constructed in Detroit between 1940 and 1952, and only 2% were made available for purchase or rental by black families and residents (Dillard, 2007, p. 200). In Detroit as elsewhere, the post-war mass migration of white and middle-class families out of urban centers and into rapidly developing suburbs was made possible through the privileging of white veterans in the implementation of GI Bill benefits that included housing vouchers, and state-sanctioned segregationist redlining through Federal Housing Administration (FHA) laws. The 1970s marked the rupture of the ‘institutional ghetto’ constructed through decades of persistent housing discrimination when, as Wilson describes suburban housing markets opened up to middle-class Black families (Sugrue, 1996; W. J. Wilson, 1987). The evolution of the urban ghetto following the departure of economically mobile Black households meant that residents became increasingly marooned in marginalization (Cutler, Glaeser, & Vigdor, 1999). Increasingly, urban residents became geographically excluded from stable sectors of the economy and were subsequently made reliant on working low-wage jobs that offered only insufficient remuneration (Clark, 1989).

The first wave of foreclosures in Detroit arrived years before the national crisis in 2008 when in 2003 the State of Michigan anticipated high rates of attrition and state-wide unemployment neared 7% for a period of two years (Michigan, 2008.). Thousands of subprime mortgage holders were on the verge of defaulting (Collins, 2003), and to absorb the windfall Act #258 was created, allowing localized governance structures to manage properties that were anticipated to foreclose. Act #258 determined that all properties acquired through tax and mortgage delinquency by state and county authorities could be sold at auction to recuperate lost tax revenue. Only five years later, the mortgage crisis of 2008 constructed a perfect storm of policy and practices targeting subprime mortgage holders. The financial crisis manifested differently throughout the country. In Detroit, a city with nearly 70% of homeowners holding subprime mortgages among an 83% African American population, dispossession as a Black issue was overwhelmingly clear. It was the period following the mortgage crisis of 2008 that housing activism in Detroit turned toward strategizing against foreclosure-based evictions. The organization *Moratorium Now!* advocated

for a moratorium on mortgage foreclosures city-wide. Detroit Eviction Defense, a group that originated out of the Occupy Detroit encampment of 2011, began coordinating legal support and direct actions including barricades to prevent the bulldozing of properties and eviction of residents from foreclosed houses. Between 2008 and 2013 the city lost one-quarter of its residents, contributing to a still shrinking population that today sits at 677,116 people (United State Census, 2017).

### **The Tricycle Collective: keeping Detroit at home**

The United Community Housing Coalition (UCHC), a non-profit housing advocacy organization was established in 1973 to assist low-income Detroit residents experiencing housing insecurity. The organization offers residents emergency housing and financial counseling through caseworker support. At one time UCHC conducted a door-to-door canvassing program to distribute literature about the county's now-defunct "buy back" program for homeowners who had experienced tax foreclosure, only to have their houses transferred into whatever the governing landbank authority was at the time of eviction. Between 2005 and 2014 mortgage foreclosure shook Detroit's housing market with just over 78,000 foreclosures and subsequent displacement of residents (Deng, Seymour, Dewar, & Manning Thomas, 2018). In 2008, caseloads at UCHC increased so extensively that the canvassing program was put on hiatus and efforts were redirected toward more face to face counseling with clients. Ted Phillips, director of UCHC, recalled canvassing lists of no more than 400-500 households in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a fraction of the nearly 28,000 homes accounted for in the foreclosure listings in 2014, and the 24,793 homes in 2015<sup>6</sup>. However, whereas Phillips and the UCHC team had previously handled a windfall of mortgage foreclosure clients, 2014 and subsequent years of foreclosure were largely the product of tax rather than mortgage delinquency.

In 2014, a UCHC staff member saw the need for the reinstatement of a door to door canvassing program to increase the dissemination of homeowner education materials and to ensure that

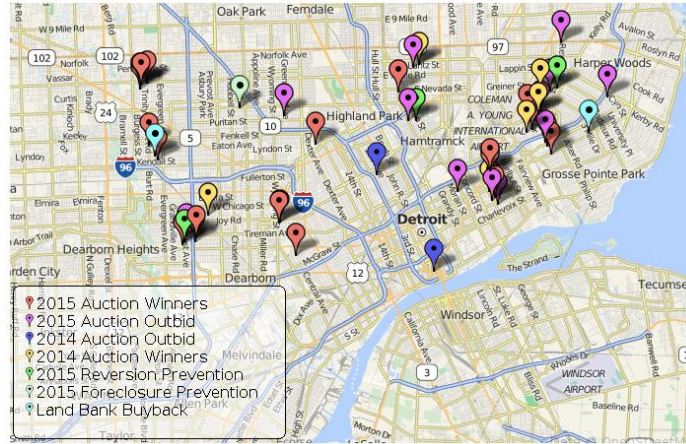
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<sup>6</sup> Phillips took part in a day-long housing network gathering at the June 2018 Allied Media Conference, where he spoke about the changing landscape of foreclosure.

families at risk of losing their homes were made aware of pending foreclosures before receiving a county eviction notice. Lacking internal capacities within the organization, the need to support stretched frontline service providers resulted in the establishment of The Tricycle Collective (TC), a non-profit organization dedicated to the prevention of tax foreclosure. The name was inspired by bicycle's belonging to children that were seen strewn on the lawns of the houses the organization canvassed. The Tricycle Collective's initial formation consisted of fewer than five Detroit residents, none of whom had directly experienced foreclosure themselves but all of whom wanted to intervene in the ongoing crisis. The organization's launch in 2014 involved a fundraiser through which money was raised and used to purchase dispossessed homes from the Wayne County Tax Auction, that were then re-deeded back to occupying and previously foreclosed-on families. Recipient families contributed personal funds within their means to top-off the funds raised by the collective, increasing the auction bids that could be placed on their foreclosed homes. Efforts were made to seek out households where children lived, which were often led by single mothers. While collective members did conduct door to door canvassing and homeowner outreach, they became known broadly as a Robin Hood-like charitable organization that purchased foreclosed houses that were deeded back to occupying families. In this way, TC's tactics contributed directly to a cyclical relationship of homeownership constituted by the economic inequality that resulted in the dispossession, accumulation and recirculation of housing that was recaptured through charitable efforts, enabling previously foreclosed owners to retain their homes. In advance of the 2015 county tax auction, the collective raised \$20,000 and canvassed over 400 occupied homes that were subject to tax foreclosure. Relationships were established with 31 families whose houses were on the 2015 auction list, and through a partnership with UCHC—who acted as the straw buyer—the collective won 18 of 31 property bids.

**Figure 1**

Map of 2015 Tricycle Collective  
Wayne County Tax Auction  
outcomes.



Over time, the configuration of the collective evolved, and by 2016 it was entirely comprised of members who identified as women, including one member whose home the collective had purchased from the 2014 tax auction. Members were predominantly white and light-skinned women, and all but one member held at minimum an undergraduate if not a graduate level degree. This composition of the collective was consistent with post-bankruptcy growth demographics of newcomers to the Metro Detroit area, who tended to be highly educated, white, and between 20-35yrs old (Detroit Future City, 2015). This was the same period in which Detroit and Wayne County experienced the greatest decline in homeownership by Black households, decreasing from 51% in 2000 to 40% in 2016 (Elliott, Ratcliffe, & Kalish, 2016). It was at this time when I became an active member of the collective and its board of directors. In 2016, Tricycle Collective members began writing and designing a foreclosure prevention *toolkit* to be made available as an online resource and printed booklet. Two years of record-breaking mass foreclosures had passed, and Detroit's ongoing tax foreclosure crisis continued to necessitate the evolution of tactical responses among housing advocates. The intention of the booklet was to direct low-wage households to apply for the Homeowner Property Tax Assistance Program (HPTAP), also known as the poverty tax exemption if deemed eligible by the City of Detroit Office of the Assessor and Board of Review. The collective's decision to design a foreclosure prevention toolkit booklet was based on the observation that homeowners were generally aware of housing assistance programs for low-wage households, but that the inaccessibility of institutional documents, notary requirements and required annual reapplications to programs acted as barriers for potential recipients. Collective members believed that the direct delivery of program application documents along with instructions on how to apply for the HPTAP could

prevent the evictions of more families living in houses that were subject to foreclosure. In 2016, approximately 40,000 Detroit households were eligible to receive support from HPTAP, though fewer than 5,000 applied for the benefit. While the creation and dissemination of the toolkit was an attempt to ‘scale up’ the work the collective had been capable of in the 2014 and 2015 foreclosure windfalls, the reach of our political commitment to the right to housing was soon put to the test.

### **Scaling values**

Though the Tricycle Collective exercised a sense of responsibility in our ‘home’ as Massey called it (Massey, 2004), the question of how far the collective’s values extended was presented in divisive discussion among collective members in the fall of 2017. In recognition of the United Nations ‘Day for the Girl Child’ that year, the collective was contacted by a Caterpillar Footwear public relations representative expressing the company’s interest in making a donation of \$2,500 as well as free pairs of work boots to a woman-led organization. The solicitation was circulated to collective members, with a resounding acceptance. Caterpillar Footwear is the subsidiary of Caterpillar, a heavy machinery manufacturer directly boycotted by the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) (BDS Movement, 2019) movement due to the corporation’s sales of heavy machinery to Israel, machinery which has been used to demolish housing in occupied Palestine. This concern was raised among the collective. Several members were uncertain how the BDS movement related to preventing home foreclosures and displacement in Detroit, while others suggested that we accept the work boots and donate the wares to women in need. Other members suggested that the collective accept the donations on the grounds that both would benefit insecurely housed women in Detroit and enable TC to continue to fund our operations. Several members raised concern about ‘coming across as too political’, and not wanting to miss the opportunity for the collective to receive good press, which could have attracted further donations. Similar to TC’s reluctance to directly address anti-black racism in the foreclosure crisis in Detroit, members felt it was ‘not our place’ to make a statement that concerned Palestinian displacement or occupation.

As Gilligan suggested, FEoC as an exercise of one's moral framework often presents moral conflicts that tend to inform decision making processes that continuously reinforce ethics and relationality. The collective's consensus-based decision-making process revealed the highly localized restraint collective members allowed their political practice and actions to operate within and complicated the perceptions of care and responsibility that had informed our work thus far. Ultimately, the collective did not accept funds nor the footwear and made these decisions without directly consulting partner families or women who could have directly benefited from the donation. In our attempt to expand care and accountability to our mission, we practiced imperfect process and unintentionally excluded potential benefactors from decision making. We released the following statement<sup>7</sup>:

*We have a responsibility to make transnational connections to the work we carry out in our own communities. Our struggle for housing rights and security for families in Detroit are entwined with the demolition of Palestinian settlements overseas. Housing insecurity is a global crisis that requires global solutions, even though most of the time we are only capable of committing ourselves to actions locally. Making a commitment to support the BDS movement allows us to stretch our work beyond the city. A company that directly benefits from a multi-tiered contract with the Israeli military, and acts as a mechanism for Palestinian enclosure and removal has no interest in keeping families and people of color housed in Detroit (Tricycle Collective, 2017).*

Although the collective's mission states "we believe everyone has the right to a home", our collective decision to align our belief in the fundamental right to housing with the BDS movement necessitated critical reflection, concessions, and an acknowledgement of the diversity of struggles of housing activists and advocates we were situated within. Collective members were faced with considering a "politics beyond place", as Massey describes, of seeing ourselves as part of a larger national and transnational network of people politically committed to housing as a universal right. What became apparent in discussions among collective members following

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the rejection of the donation was the comfort of maintaining a race-neutral approach to our campaigns. Acknowledging that white Detroit residents, of which the collective was largely comprised, benefit from the housing, social and cultural tastes catered to by the city’s post-bankruptcy gentrification and redevelopment regime could have differently informed the collective’s tactical approach.

Although the collective’s rejection of the Caterpillar donation presented the opportunity to no longer conflate housing security with the action of buying homes from the tax auction racial liberalism continued to shape our tactic of seeking out high profile opportunities to showcase our charitable work and our ability to purchase housing. Rather than disrupt the cycle of foreclosure, our charitable though well-intentioned and care-informed efforts contributed to the circulation of over assessed and foreclosed homes in the cycle of capital that continuously displaced and compromised the material, economic, and physical security of tens of thousands of Detroit households. At the time of dissolution of the Tricycle Collective in December of 2018, board members convened and reviewed the property tax standings of each of the households that had been assisted through auction acquisition. What was found was that 75% of all families the collective assisted between 2014 and 2018 once again owed outstanding back taxes, including 39% of families who would likely re-enter foreclosure in the 2019 tax cycle due to accumulating three years of outstanding taxes.

**Table 1. Property Tax Status of TC Families at Time of Collective’s Dissolution (Dec. 2018)**

<b>Number of homes</b>	<b>Percentage of TC assisted families</b>	<b>Status</b>
29	25%	Owe no back taxes
42	37%	Owe back taxes to 2017
27	24%	Owe back taxes to 2016
16	14%	Owe back taxes to 2015 (11), 2014 (3), 2013 (1), or 2012 (1) or earlier.

## **From care to a feminist politics of accountability**

Smith suggests that in caring relationships, liberal ethical frameworks may inform care through an “egalitarian theory of justice” (D. M. Smith, 1998), that risks overlooking systemic material disparity by upholding universal principals of equality. This is perhaps the case in Gilligan’s assertion when she claimed that “everyone has an equal voice” in a 2011 interview on the future of FEOC (Gilligan, 2011). In upholding equality for all principals, housing advocates and researchers run the risk of perpetuating the racial liberalism that drove dispossession in mid-20th century American urban renewal (Ranganathan, 2016), and further embedding the anti-Black logic of liberalism into the urban environment. Among Tricycle Collective members, it was clear that keeping residents housed was the material priority of our work; though discussions concerning systemic racism and the property market were often deferred to one-on-one conversations among a small number of board members due to a clear lack of engagement in integrating explicit anti-racist initiatives into our advocacy. As though purely incidental, Gilligan understood pre-conventional notions of justice in universal terms that are always seen as moral dilemmas of contradictory responsibilities (Gilligan, 1977). For most collective members, the material outcomes of purchasing homes from the tax auction were clear acts of care and charity, which were ultimately meeting the moral obligation members felt toward our mission of “Keeping Detroit at home”, as though all Detroiters faced equal threat to foreclosure to begin with. Though Gilligan addresses justice as the weighing of dilemmas that ultimately inform a FEOC moral framework, the egalitarian assumption of equality risks enabling potentially harmful benevolence in caring relationships.

As for FEOC among academic colleagues and in the pursuit of policy, activist and participatory geographic research, reflecting on the actual outcomes and consequences of these forms of engagement may disappoint us in what is revealed (Ward, 2007). Gilligan came to theorize FEOC after witnessing the accounts of people experiencing moral conflict (Gilligan, 2011). Perhaps the transference of FEOC into academic relationships among feminist geographers has had the effect of distancing this practice from the relational framework of grappling with moral conflict from which it originated, replacing moral conflict with the structural oppression of masculine dominance within academia. While no moral framework can be perfectly practiced, the

liberalizing effect feminist geographers have had on FEoC holds potential consequences when the same internalization of this framework emerges and produces moral conflict in settings beyond academia where there are real political, economic and material consequences at stake for those we research and work alongside. In the Tricycle Collective, our own desire to be good to our neighbors presented itself as a moral conflict, as the possibility of directly confronting racism in the property system might not have allowed us to retain the support of our donors or our potential partner organizations. Instead, the resources we had access to as mostly white and middle class women were directed toward work that garnered popular support without posing questions that may have challenged the structural inequalities from which the majority of our collective members and donors benefited, especially in relation to the place of white women in the property system. When the moral conflict thinking of FEoC collides with policy work, the potential for systemic interrogation of larger equity-based disparities is often ignored in exchange for more immediate deliverables. More immediate material though less systemic outcomes may be achieved through influencing policy, or prolonging access to insecure attachments to housing, or the benefit of supportive individual emotional exchanges in professional settings that lack long term struggle toward addressing resource disparity. For this reason, I suggest that the relational foundation of FEoC be used as a guiding principal within policy and activist work, as well as in academic settings, to foster more critical self-reflection of access to unearned entitlements and rights that uphold systemic inequality. In addition to determining potential immediate outcomes that result from caring relationships, critical reflection that specifically seeks out relational inequalities between carers and recipients of care could offer direction for attending to those inequalities. I suggest directing caring labor towards dismantling sources of material disparity, by taking into account relational power and sources of violence that produce those disparities (Crenshaw, 1991) in order to establish relationships that are accountable to equity rather than paternalism.

Constructing a politics of accountability requires self-reflection of how one's actions and engagement align with commitments to anti-oppression and equity building. When a predominantly white organization or institution assumes responsibility for shaping the daily material realities of African American communities, say through housing paternalism, assessing such a contribution for its commitment to long term equitable gains for that community is a

means of measuring the organization's contribution to lasting resource distribution to historically marginalized people. The relationship between housing justice work in Detroit to historical legacies of the racism of the US property system necessitates self-reflection that directly accounts for the whiteness of property, and the global diasporic displacement and forced movement of Black subjects through laws, covenants and financial configurations that privilege white property ownership.

In Detroit, the landscape of housing insecurity is emblematic of the white supremacist ideology that constitutes and is protected by the property system in the US and other settler-colonial nations. The composition of the Tricycle Collective by white middle-class women embodied access to the property system through channels that are particular to the still sanctified positioning that white femininity maintains within the patriarchal structural of capitalism and nation building. Accountability to housing rights in the context in which the collective functioned, of multiply privileged women assisting mostly African American women and children, at times fetishized the American Dream of homeownership without consideration for the larger political struggle and history within which the foreclosure of Black households is embedded. To destabilize the metabolic process of foreclosure and upend the white supremacist ideology that acts as the foundation of settler-colonial property relations (Broeck, 2013, 2014), approaching housing rights through a politics of accountability could center justice-based outcomes defined by potentially affected communities. Rather than utilizing morality to extend tentatively conferred rights of property to Black households, an ethics of accountability would also demand of white people to challenge *property as whiteness* and to produce reparations.

## **Conclusion**

Exercising one's position within the property system as a white person by attempting to charitably extend the privileges of whiteness to Black households is little more than a metabolic stop gap in a chronic cycle of displacement. However, the potential for political gains and reconfigurations of the property system must more actively conspire into existence simultaneously. Accountability to material gains in housing and land justice movements could start with white allies, activists, and scholars beginning to dismantle the coupling of whiteness as

property. I will leave the details on how this could manifest for future work, and encourage allies, advocates, the housed and under-housed, and scholar-activists to envision these possibilities together. What those acting on behalf of, or in solidarity with, people in struggle are held accountable to is determined of course by the configuration of the social relations involved, and the mutually agreed upon outcomes based on the capacities and shared political commitments of all parties. In housing and property struggle, practicing a politics of accountability necessitates not the abandonment of FEOC, but rather the subsuming of care into bigger picture work that rectifies relational inequalities through the materialization of political and material gains for historically marginalized and continuously dispossessed people. While liberalism is inseparable from racial capitalism (Ranganathan, 2016), Harris asserts that Black identity is not the functional opposite of whiteness (Harris, 1993); and therefore, the reconstitution of the property system requires producing social relations to property that are beyond what the economic and political configurations of racial capitalism have or would ever allow to materialize. We have to think bigger and act collectively.

Identifying the privileges granted to people through white identification does not necessarily translate into understanding our potential role in the reconstitution of property and land markets. White people are prone to falling into a counteractive process of knowing themselves as white while continuing to permit anti-black racism in ways that may appear impartial or even caring. Practicing a politics of accountability that centers systemic inequality rather than resolving moral conflict offers the potential for a mutually supportive and productive path forward for white academics, advocates and activists to redirect their energy toward dismantling the systems from which we undeservingly benefit. In this case, the white members of the Tricycle Collective acted on a sense of moral responsibility, extending tentative access to housing to people who have experienced foreclosure through our own privilege within the property system. The moral conflict of charitable works driven by care in relation to property unnecessarily preserve cycles of dispossession and fail to see the big picture questions of land reconstitution in the form of reparations and indigenous land reclamation. Whiteness needs to be centered within a framework of accountability that is both capable of making material gains beyond its own fortification, while simultaneously dismantling the white supremacist structure from which the property system relies on.

## Article Four

### Urban land under development: the potential for property redistribution in Detroit

#### Abstract

Publicly held property stewarded by Detroit's urban farming community comprises a portion of the vast stock of publicly held property in the city's land bank. While vacant properties have largely been voluntarily stewarded by residents and community organizations for decades, recent governmental efforts to remarketize vacancies have created tension between community members and the city planning department. The development driven agenda of the city's government still emerging from municipal bankruptcy is at a point of convergence with increasing interest in broader access to Detroit's public stock of land, both for community use and private development. How voluntary stewards and city government politically frame this inventory of properties demonstrates a divergence of visions for the city's future. While Detroit's post-bankruptcy property marketization strategy pushes community users of surplus property toward ownership, agricultural land users are increasingly restricted from purchasing parcels, that have often been under their stewardship for years, creating a bottleneck from inclusion within a larger revitalization strategy. Voluntary stewardship conducted by the city's non-owning urban agriculture community is investigated here in relation to what Detroit's mayor calls the developmental 'paradox' of the city's land question. This article examines the various claims farmers are making over unowned vacant land, and the barriers they face to formally purchasing the properties they steward.

**Keywords:** Racial justice; feminist political ecology, urban land use, property relations

On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver gave a lecture at Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. During a short intermission, another former Panther, who remained anonymous to audience attendees took to the microphone. Addressing the audience, he said "All this land here, all this development happening in [Detroit] and what do we got to show for it? We gettin' pushed around. This, this is OUR city! Pushed around? WE GOT THE LAND! It's ours, not theirs. So let's take it. Let's do something for

ourselves! From the ground up!”

The struggle for racial justice and equitable property relations has a deep seeded history in Detroit. A former fur trading post, Detroit was built on appropriated land and capitalized indigenous livelihoods by French settlers. The movement of enslaved African decedents throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century across and traversing the colonized river straight laid a foundation for disputed lands, by indigenous, settler, and a diasporic and enslaved population. Located across the river from the Canadian province of Ontario, self-emancipated slaves traversed the Detroit River for upwards of two centuries (Miles, 2017), sometimes drowning while trying to reach Canada; Detroit was a borderland colonial settlement turned city, straddling a national boundary that represented freedom. Centuries later following emancipation, US race relations in Northern border cities manifest in *Jim Crow of the North*, and dire segregationist housing covenants greeted the arrivals of the first and second Great Migration. Throughout the twentieth century, Detroit’s African American community stood up against racialized oppression through revolutionary union movements, liberation theology, community organizing and black power struggles for racial justice today (Dillard, 2007; Geograkas and Surkin, 1975). Today the city’s residents are up against state and civic government-led austerity measures that has resulted in the gutting of the city’s public school system, a direly undermaintained sewerage system, uneven redevelopment and gentrification, and the ongoing displacement of residents through tax foreclosure and rising rents.

The urgency of the former Black Panther’s call ‘WE GOT THE LAND’, speaks to Detroit’s past and the city’s present as well as the geopolitical relationship between the global economic expansion of capitalism made possible through the opening of the transatlantic passage (Gilroy, 1993; McKittrick, 2006). This call to seize power over land may also be making reference to Detroit’s 83% majority African American population, and the decades-long out-migration of generations of white residents that began in the 1950s (Newman and Safransky, 2014). Claims to Black power over urban land in the United States are grounded in the expansion of global capital having been conducted through the forced labor and movement of Black and people of color (McKittrick, 2006); while simultaneously ‘Blackness’ has been categorically constructed as existing without any permanent claims to place (Broeck, 2014; McKittrick, 2006) . This

historically constructed ‘placelessness’ and claims to financial compensation for value extracted from enslaved laborers comprise the ongoing argument for material and monetary reparations for the African American population in the United States.

### **Farming while black**

Urban farmers comprise one group of interest in Detroit’s land question. Detroit is known nationally and internationally as a city that has welcomed urban farming as a method for managing large parcels of land that would otherwise be left fallow or unkept by municipal maintenance crews. Since the creation of Mayor Coleman Young's Farm-a-lot program following Detroit's 1967 race rebellion, the city has allowed urban farming to take place under a variety of agreements, ranging from formal leases and deed transfers to more tentative don’t ask-don’t tell practices. This early program developed to support residents to take over parcels where recently demolished houses stood prior to the race rebellion provided a model decades later for the creation of the Detroit Agriculture Network in 1997, and the Garden Resource Program in 2004 (Pothukuchi, 2017). Urban agriculture and the labor of farmers has been leaned on in the last four decades to alleviate some of the burden of parcel maintenance for the tens of thousands of properties that have been exhumed from previous owners or forfeited to the city. Scholarship on urban agriculture tends toward deeply critical perspectives of YIMBY’ism and the classism of local and organic food production, or celebratory of the educational and beautification elements that urban farms add to cities (Classens, 2015). In studies racialized effects of global food markets and the racialized property relations that urban political ecologists have examined through urban agriculture, race tends to be theorized through its relationship to capital and class rather than a driving force of inequality all its own (Slocum, 2010) or remains unaddressed altogether (De Lind, 2002; McClintock, 2010). Detroit has been a majority black city since the 1960s. With an 83% black population and the leadership of black community elders at the helm of several larger community or non-profit farming initiatives, urban agriculture in Detroit is driven by histories of black land struggle, food sovereignty, community food security, and the legacies of black southern farmers whose families migrated to US Northern border cities during the first and second great migrations. In the fall of 2018 one Detroit urban farmer, Marc Peeples, a 32yr old black man who resides near Detroit’s state fairgrounds site in the Northeastern part of

the city made national headlines when a garden he planted at a nearby unmaintained playground garnered negativity from three neighboring white residents who continuously reported People’s activity to the police. In a March 2018 police call, one white neighbor claimed People to be in the garden with a gun, only to be discovered by the patrols of three police cruisers that People was in fact carrying a rake that he was using to clear fallen leaves (Zaniewski, 2019). The case that became known as “gardening while black” went to court. People’s white and female neighbors had accused him of stalking, gang involvement and child sexual abuse, all of which remained unfounded and lacked evidence of any kind. The judge residing over the case nullified all charges against People, stating “[f]rom the bottom of my heart, I believe race was a motivating factor and an injustice has been done to this man” (Burch, 2018). The power of white women’s claims to violence, in People’s case of “gardening while black”, exemplifies that affect of carcerality white femininity is capable of eliciting. The production of racially motivated urban natures of injustice whiteness and embodiments of femininity that uphold racism through reproducing white supremacy necessitate learning urban spaces and urban political ecologies, as Doshi says, through the position of those most vulnerable to state interventions into the production of space; and in the case of Detroit, knowing the contemporary post-bankruptcy land regime through the stories of black women farmers.

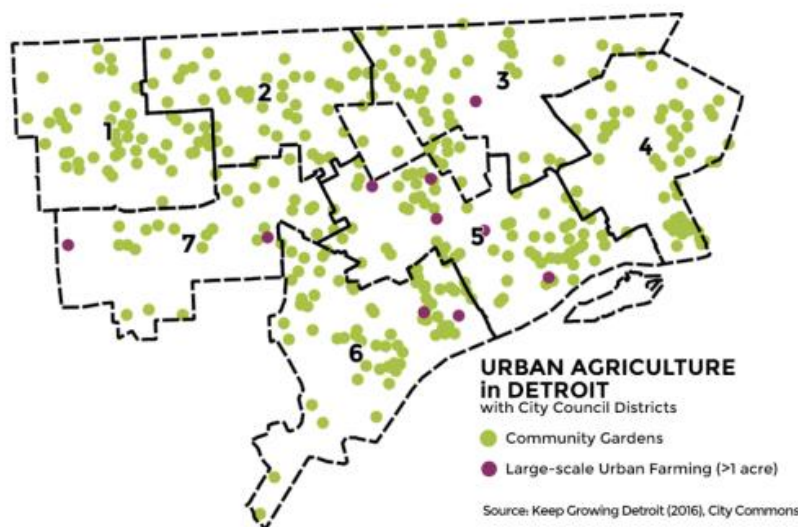


Figure 2. Map of Detroit community gardens hosted by community groups, faith-based organizations, and non-profits, and larger scale farm operations (over one acre in size). Produced by Alex Hill of Detroitography.

Detroit's history of racial dispossession and segregation converge with the contemporary realities of mass vacancy and absentee deed holders and municipal maintenance crews. For those who care for the approximately 1,400 urban farms in the city today, the scene has been set for do-it-yourself (DIY) production of urban natures that reflect the skills and desires of urban farmers, and their abilities to contend with the remnants of political and the actual material structural remains that marks the city's open land parcels. Farmers routinely uncover household and industrial objects when tilling soil, as well as remaining structural elements of buildings that previously stood on these sites. In Heynen's 2017 third progress report "Urban political ecology: The feminist and queer century" featured in *Progress in Human Geography*, he argues that urban political ecology (UPE) needs to keep pace with the continuous production of uneven natures in cities, "it must continue developing in relation to the embodied and heterodox politics central to these metabolic changes" (Heynen, 2013, p. 1). These embodiments, presumably, are within forms of feminist and queer struggle and social reproduction that lead to the formation of urban

In the previous progress report "Urban political ecology II: The abolitionist century", Heynen declares that an antiracist, postcolonial and indigenous turn are needed within UPE "to elucidate and extrapolate the interconnected white supremacist and racialized processes that lead to uneven development within urban environments" (Heynen, 2016, p. 839). Mitchell et al. connect socially reproductive work of everyday living to the embodiment of precarity through tentative, shifting, and vulnerable social reproduction to solidify the increasing social-spatial inequalities; a coupling that makes clear the kinds of value we produce only to be devalued through neoliberal subjecthood "in relation to the current regime of accumulation and in relation to the state (Mitchell, Marston, & Katz, 2003). Through attending to the work of everyday life and the micropolitics that shape the conditions of this work made available through feminist political ecology (Truelove, 2011), direct commentary from women in Detroit's urban agriculture community is included here to allow for a clear perspective of conditions through which these black farmers are producing urban natures that contest the city's current regressive land regime of regulation and monetization. To more clearly demonstrate the power relations, interdependent

engagements, and individual-state negotiations that produce the social and material production of uneven urban environments, this research has focused on Doshi's (Doshi, 2017, p. 126) framing, "what it would mean to learn urban political ecology through the experiences" of struggle, from those whose social reproduction is in constant movement toward more secure, just, and liberated urban natures? Through the lens of feminist political ecology, this article examines how the constitution of our relationships to land and the kinds of labor we engage in construct urban natures of the future. This article approaches the land question in Detroit through resident's experiences of looming displacement and community land uses, focusing on the city's urban agriculture community and the relationships black women farmers have to land. In particular, models for spatial thinkers to engage more directly in collective theorization of racialization and property relations to produce theory that is useful for those engaged in land struggles beyond academic contexts. Additionally, this article contributes to discussions on dispossession and urban 'degrowth' by examining the relationship between informal claims to property and the inadvertent reproduction of economic disinvestment.

### **The land question**

The land question of twenty-first century Detroit is a by-product of the last one hundred years, in which the agentic coordination of racial supremacy manifest in restrictive housing covenants, wage disparity, school and neighborhood segregation were defended by both white residents, local government and by federal military forces<sup>8</sup> and transformed a city of African American prosperity into moniker of white and capital flight (Dillard, 2007; Hackworth, 2016a; Keynon, 2004). The land question of today is, as Mayor Mike Duggan has said, 'a paradox' in the financialization being pursued by staff in Detroit's Planning and Development Department and members of elected government (DeVito, 2017). According to this unified front of revitalization-focused civic leadership, the amount of open space held by the city's land bank in 2018 presents opportunities as well as some degree of challenge for how civic infrastructure, policing, and

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<sup>8</sup> During the 1967 Detroit race rebellion, the US federal government unleashed the National Guard on Detroit's African American residents as a disciplinary measure against uprisings spurred by the police-invoked murder of three African American teens.

basic services will continue to be viable across a 139.9 square mile city with varied population density (Eisinger, 2015).

Detroit emerged from chapter nine civic bankruptcy and the rein of state appointed emergency management in 2014. The city held the potential to form a new blueprint of possibility for North America's 'post-industrial' cities; with a large stock of vacant housing and razed and open property parcels, a large urban agriculture community, the potential for new political leadership, much needed upgrades to old infrastructure, a long history of African American musical and cultural talent, and a community brimming with activists both young and old. Instead, post-bankruptcy civic leadership has repeated painful histories of uneven development. Local government oversight of the city's 100,000+ razed, vacant, or forfeited property parcels has taken a turn since the 2013 civic bankruptcy, diverging from disorganization visible to the public eye into a remarketization program supported by public offices and quasi-governmental land bank authority. What Schindler calls Detroit's 'degrowth machine politics', the city's trickle-down agencies driving uneven economic growth to mitigate further decline and marketize the city's future (Schindler, 2016), hinges on the remarketization of decades-long amassed tax-foreclosed, forfeited and otherwise left behind properties. In 2018, Detroit is home to 670,000 people, and approximately vacant 90,000 property parcels including 40,000 structures - residential, commercial and industrial buildings -foreclosed or forfeited for outstanding taxes or absentee ownership. One of the forefront cities in conversations about degrowth and 'right-sizing' the service based and infrastructural footprints of previously heavy industrial urban economies (Gallagher, 2008; Pothukuchi, 2017), Detroit's city government solicited the involvement of international planning firms and private development foundations to assist with post-bankruptcy blight reduction and consultation in planning concentrated revitalization zones, not dissimilar from Clinton-era 'empowerment zones' (Eisinger, 2015; Fraser, 2017). As of 2013, 47% of Detroit's taxable property base had entered some stage of foreclosure between 2008 and 2012 (Deng, Seymour, Dewar, & Manning Thomas, 2018).

The Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), established in 2008 is the city's largest property holder with more than tens of thousands of vacant lots in holding (Pothukuchi, 2017). In the United States, land banks operate as governmental or non governmental agencies that

accumulate and temporarily manage vacant land or housing for the purpose of conversation in rural areas, or neighborhood stabilization in urban centers. Their purpose is to conserve and stabilize pricing, and to recirculate properties back into the market through public or private sales. The DLBA is the governmental office of the City of Detroit responsible managing the sales of the city's stock of vacant homes, razed parcels, or otherwise foreclosed properties. The Land Bank receives the majority of its stock of properties from the Wayne County Treasurer's Office, following the annual county tax auction. The land bank also houses the Blight Removal Task Force, a program that identifies and demolishes 'blighted' structures. The task force began receiving national attention in 2015 and 2016 for accused misuse of federal 'hardest hit fund' dollars and overspending on demolition contracts to businesses that were proven to be closely tied to familial and business relationships with city and land bank employees.

The DLBA is one of two authorities through which urban farmers negotiate land acquisitions, the second being the forfeited property auction held by the Office of the Wayne County Treasurer each autumn in the annual auction of tax foreclosed properties. Though Detroit's land bank was established in 2008, the office was not mobilized as an authority for land sales until after the city's 2013 bankruptcy filing. Rising property values based on DLBA calculations continue to act as a barrier to farmers being able to secure vacant parcels they have stewarded often for years to decades at a time. The Land Bank has estimated that home values neighboring federally funded demolished homes increased by 4.2% from 2014-2015 (Neavling, 2017). This means that as the city accumulates homes through tax foreclosure and follows through with either resale or demolition of vacant structures, the end result is rising property values of previously defaulted homes, or the removal of blighted structures altogether, both ultimately resulting in the potential for increased tax revenue for the city.

The Detroit Land Bank Authority was created in 2008, five years after the state of Michigan created the Land Bank Fast Track Act (Act 258 of 2003) a catchment tool for counties to accumulate and manage a wave of mortgage foreclosures resulting from a state-wide influx of subprime mortgage sales in the early 2000s. The land bank fast track act enabled any county or governing authority to create a land bank that would be used to preside over the governance of forfeited foreclosed properties. The State of Michigan General Property Tax Act, the act that

outlines the rights, assessment criteria, and interest in property and the collection of related taxes, Section 23(5) of Act 258 indicates that only “qualified” cities may create fast track land bank authorities. Act 258 states that, a “qualified city” must contain a first class school district” (Michigan, n.d.); defined by any district that serves 100,000 students or more. In July 2016, Detroit housing activist Robert Davis filed a complaint to the Wayne County Circuit Court after uncovering what he believed to be a provision in the State of Michigan’s laws governing land banks, proving Detroit’s ineligibility to operate a fast track authority to begin with (Guillen, 2017). Ultimately, Davis sought *writ of quo warranto*<sup>9</sup> of the Detroit Land Bank Authority’s power on account of the city’s deteriorating education district. In September 2008, Detroit schools recorded 91,827 students for the 2008-2009 academic year when the land bank was founded. In 2017, the district served 60,000 students in 106 schools (Detroit Public Schools, 2018). Despite the persistent drop in enrollment Judge David Allen of the 3<sup>rd</sup> district circuit court in Wayne County denied Davis’s filing in October of 2016, citing that the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) had been in operation for eight years without challenge and was serving a need in the city.

Over the course of the last decade, and in a particularly abrupt wave following the city’s chapter nine bankruptcy filing in 2013, national media attention narrativized that Detroit, resurfacing from bankruptcy, was a city of possibility; not despite, but because of the city’s large stock of tax foreclosed property and open land in public holding. The lifestyle section of an August 2015 edition of the New York Times, titled “Detroit: last stop on the ‘L’ Train” encouraged Brooklyn’s artists and hipsters to leave the New York City to pursue their dreams in Detroit without the burdensome high rents weighing them down (Conlin, 2015). At the time, the city planning department was being quietly investigated by the FBI for the misuse of Obama-era ‘hardest hit funds’<sup>10</sup>; funds dedicated to retaining occupants in households vulnerable to foreclosure were being used to fund the demolitions of vacant homes throughout the city.

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<sup>9</sup> Quo warranto is a form of legal action used in a dispute to resolve whether a specific person or piece of legislation has the legal right to hold power of public office or governing authority

<sup>10</sup> ‘Hardest hit funds’ were made available by the federal government to states most deeply impacted by the economic downturn following the 2007-2008 mortgage crisis. The intention of the funds was to keep families at risk of losing their homes securely housed.

Writing on the city's recent ability to attract a young entrepreneurial class, Conlin noted "the city seems like a giant candy store for young college graduates wanting to be their own bosses" (Conlin, 2011). Stephen Vogel (2005, 17), former Dean of Architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy, stated:

My love for Detroit began with the hearty souls who occupy the city because they are reminiscent of the rural farming families among whom I spent my childhood. Their inventiveness, individualism, persistence, and ability to deal with enormous daily frustrations are a constant wonderment. The 'frontier' mentality that dominates large areas of Detroit is illustrative of great opportunity. It is also a mentality that is less concerned with race than with individual fortitude. There are a host of creative urban experiments taking place throughout the city that illustrate this individualism. These include large-scale urban farming enterprises, guerrilla gardening, ad hoc public transportation systems, green building experiments, 'found object' constructions, food cooperatives, co-housing enclaves, and vigorous art and music installations and performances. The city is ripe with opportunities for cultural experimentation – with or without the approbation of government. (Vogel, 2005, p. 17)

Vogel's reflection represents a distinct moment in Detroit's pre-bankruptcy history, in which the financially and politically strained city government lacked the resources or organization to adequately manage already vast quantities of vacant property parcels and were without the administrative resources to govern vacant parcels that were at the time largely held by a state-wide land bank authority. Vogel's congratulatory attitude toward the arrival of entrepreneurial creative types who 'rough it' in Detroit's neighborhoods reframes acts subsistence by long term residents into creative expressions of entrepreneurial enlightenment by newly arrived residents; a perspective that Vogel says is 'less concerned with race than with individual fortitude' (Vogel, 2005, p. 17). How does Vogel define value? Who produces value and how is it measured? The ability to approach a 139 square mile city with such gentrifying frontiership, is as Smith (2005, 32) describes "the renovation of the past," or as Schulman (2012) describes, emblematic of gentrification's process and culture of replacement.

Safransky examines Detroit's 'new urban frontier' as a process of erasure, that is produced through the 'material and discursive work of presenting landscapes as in need of improvement by non-local actors' (Safransky, 2014, p. 237). Decolonial geographers take a similar position as Safransky, critiquing metropolitan schema to identify the legacies of colonialism throughout society and in space (Radcliffe, 2017). Just as Safransky reorients Detroit's urban frontier into contested settler-colonial space, postcolonial scholarship generates directed analytical insight into relationships of power, "including the abandonments and durabilities of imperial power- and remains alert to alternative articulations of/within power" (Grosfoguel, 2007; Radcliffe, 2017, p. 330). Further, Safransky states that applying the label of *frontier* suggests a place that is awaiting inhabitants and whatever form of transformation they happen to produce, importantly pointing out that ways of living in such frontier spaces that already exist are nullified, understood as deficient or a burden on the future. Central to real structural vacancy representative of Detroit's 'frontier' has been the removal of the past, through demolition, lack of infrastructural maintenance, and the ongoing disinvestment of public services are necessary components of bodily and social control defined by critical race studies theorists as "carceral racism" and "social death" (Gilmore, 2002; Patterons, 1982). These acts of control over remnants of the past produce a distinct form of death in the form of a future built out of carceral practices.

The most basic of resources, land and specifically control over land and its uses are broadly understood within urban studies as determinants of economic production and growth, wealth distribution, as well as cultural and nationalist territorialisation and colonization (Stilwell & Jordan, 2004; Wilson Gilmore, 2007). Contemporarily, 'the land question' makes reference to struggles for resource distribution, indigenous reconciliation within decolonial commissions, and questions concerning the displacement of people and the encroachment of development into agrarian, forested and conservation lands by urban expansion (Holt-Giminez & Williams, 2017; Redmon, 2017). A reoccurring discussion among Marxist political ecologists and economists, the land question examines the function of land in the context of political and economic regime changes that transform social relations among people and land, though particularly in modern societies by often bypassing indigenous removal and colonization. Safransky points out that while the land question has been central in critical scholarship on rural social justice movements and landless farmers movements of the Global South, conversations on agrarian and land reform

in the Global North continues to be under examined (Safransky, 2018), especially in urban settings. Monica White, sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin and board director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, describes the agrarian land of the South in the United States as a complex place for black Americans, embedded with the trauma of the history of slavery (White, 2017). How this history translates into the contemporary urban experiences of black communities in Northern cities is visible in the ‘poverty-induced challenges’ of poorer quality education, higher rates of unemployment, housing foreclosure and limited access to nutrient rich foods all experienced exponentially more so within African American communities in Northern border cities (Hilbert & Werner, 2016; Newman & Safransky, 2014; White, 2011b).

### **Theorizing with stewards**

Residents in Detroit’s neighborhoods have stewarded unmaintained property parcels, reconstituting social relations to property through acts of social reproduction with what Gandy calls ‘old urban nature’<sup>11</sup> (Gandy, 2012). The voluntary stewardship of vacant property and homes in Detroit was described by Kinder as ‘self provisioning’ in “DIY Detroit: Making Due in a City without Services” in what Kinder calls the ‘quintessential do-it-yourself-city’ (Kinder, 2016, p. 24). Hackworth similarly investigates the ‘collapse’ of the city’s ‘social economy’, and the subsequent action of community members taking on ad hoc operations of basic maintenance in their neighborhoods (Hackworth, 2016a). While both Hackworth and Kinder tend to discuss these activities as ongoing and rooted in the near present, ‘self provisioning’ or DIY uses of Detroit’s vacant or underutilized lots has a much longer history. Users of open land today carry on more than a century old tradition of utilizing surplus space for personal and community use by Detroit residents. Rather than situate do-it-yourself urbanism in Detroit as a response to recent austerity measures, the cyclical nature of ad hoc surplus property use has continuously been in response to food shortages, high rates of unemployment, unprecedented vacancies and

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<sup>11</sup> Referencing the old trees and ‘wilderness’ of an out of commission North London cemetery, Gandy cites urban ecologist Ingo Kowarik’s concept ‘old urban natures’, “comprising elements of the original landscape which have never been built on, and which have subsequently become a pivotal aspect to the ecological significance of the site (Gandy, 2012, p. 728).

sometimes crime beginning in the 1890's. What has changed is the scale at which land-based responses to these myriad issues has taken place and the level of governance (if any) that has been implicated, and under what political contexts and systemic formations of racial social relations. By investing time in theorizing with residents through their experiences of property access and distribution, the stories and vignettes of farmers shared here reflect the political context city residents live in on a daily basis, and the urban natures being crafted out of Detroit's post-bankruptcy property regime.

In 2008 Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine* featured an article about a group of mostly young and white Detroit residents who had made efforts to clear and began growing food on two vacant parcels in Detroit's Cass Corridor neighborhood (Owens, 2008). The community garden, then known as Birdtown, inspired by a pet shop located next door was grown on parcels over which growers did not hold legal title. The sale of the garden in 2011 to a new neighboring dog daycare facility created concern and a growing sense of precarity among the city's urban agriculture community. Beginning in 2008, the collective of growers who maintained the two parcels where Birdtown stood began discussions with city council to block the sale of the parcels to the neighboring business owner (Sands, 2015). Having invested eight years of unpaid collective stewardship into the parcels, growing food and hosting community events, collective members pleaded a case of sweat equity to city council. Owners of the adjacent dog daycare, 'K Nine to Five' were granted approval by city council to purchase the parcels in 2011, for the cost of \$11,200 (Wattrick, 2011). Though the group of urban gardeners had been in conversation with city council members and attempted to purchase the parcels on several occasions, the sale of the parcels to a neighboring business signaled to Birdtown's stewards and the urban farming community that sweat equity and long term stewardship of properties would no longer be enough to stake lasting claims to excess city land in Detroit. The following year, Ronny, an east side farmer arrived at their farm one morning to find the site has been bulldozed, presumably by a hired demolition crew contracted by the city's planning department to conduct derelict home demolitions in Detroit's neighborhoods. Eviction tactics by the Detroit Housing and Revitalisation Department have included the bulldozing of farms on open parcels, industrial mowing by city maintenance crews of fruit and vegetable cultivation sites, discontinuation of water service, and denial of rights of first refusal promised to farmers by the Planning and

Development Department. Two former members of the Birdtown collective reflected in a 2017 interview that their being denied the ability to purchase the property was an intentional disenfranchising tactic through legally enshrined rights over property. Following the 2013 bankruptcy, urban agriculture practitioners were faced with a new redevelopment agenda that shifted the city's previous strategy of decreasing parcel vacancy through voluntary stewardship by community members, to a property ownership model. Birdtown and the bulldozing on Ronny's farm have been markers in time in Detroit's urban agriculture community, offering a reminder that the voluntary stewardship of land in the city by farmers has entered a new era in which formal legal title to land is the only security provided to farmers who want assurance that their labor will be acknowledge and their claims to sites legitimated.

A tool of the post-bankruptcy regime change was the development and adoption of the city's 'Urban Agriculture Ordinance' in 2013. The ordinance established a set of bylaws for the operation of urban farms, that included restrictions over livestock and animal husbandry, fencing, the maintenance of property edges, water usage, and permitting requirements determined by acreage. However, the amendments made to city zoning bylaws for the inclusion of agricultural land use were produced with limited group consultation with farmers. After growing food without oversight from the city in some cases for decades, upon the passing of the agricultural ordinance farmers are now expected to alter their farm sites to adjust to new city regulations outlined in the newly adopted Urban Agriculture Ordinance passed by Detroit City Council in 2013. Since the passing of the ordinance, farmers have expressed concern that the introduction of the new bylaws place undue financial and organizational burden on a population that was largely farming precariously, without ownership over properties and subsequently no responsibility to adjust to the ordinance. Farms that meet the standards of the agricultural ordinance and already own the properties on which they far are eligible for by-right zoning change, which has largely been of residential properties gaining zoning allowance for primary agricultural use. However, farms would only be eligible for this change of use after gaining ownership of the properties they grow on.

Bringing informal property stewards onto the role of taxable deed holders, what Safransky calls a 'civilizing mechanism on the frontier' (Safransky, 2014, p. 237) accomplishes the re-entry and

accumulation of farmed parcels back into revenue generation in three distinct ways. First, identifying informal stewards and coercing them toward purchasing parcels decreases the city's future load of potential claimants to adverse possession.<sup>12</sup> Second, the sale of vacant parcels to urban farmers generates a new source of low revenue generation through vacant parcel sales, paid by people who have tended to city-owned property, often for years at a time without any compensation. And third, the sale of city owned parcels specifically for urban agriculture forces farmers to apply for a \$1000 'by right use change' and rezoning fee (City of Detroit, 2012), enabling the city's 2013 adoption of the City of Detroit Urban Agriculture Ordinance to be enforceable on newly rezoned primary-agricultural parcels, and subsequently allows urban farmers to be fined, creating an additional source of revenue generation through bylaw enforcement.

Cecile grows salad and field vegetables with her husband at Sister Acres Farm on 16 parcels in Detroit's North Corktown neighborhood and has been stewarding the parcels since 2007. The properties Cecile has been trying to buy for the last seven years increased in price following the city's bankruptcy when the parcels were transferred from the City of Detroit and Wayne County Treasurer's Office to the Detroit Land Bank Authority. Prior to the bankruptcy, the planning department accepted multiple purchase applications from Cecile between 2010 and 2012 when she initially began trying to gain ownership of the farm she operates with her husband. None of the applications or a signed and submitted cashier's cheque from Cecile elicited a response. Once the deeds were transferred to the Detroit Land Bank Authority in 2014, the parcels Cecile was trying to purchase increased in value by 13-70%. One of the properties, priced to sell for \$100 as recently as 2014, was estimated to sell for \$7000 in 2015. In an October 2016 interview, Cecile spoke about the inaccessibility of property access in this way: "This is our land! We just don't own it. But this shit, [*possession*] is 9/10<sup>th</sup> of the law, and what they gonna

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<sup>12</sup> Adverse possession laws in the State of Michigan, outlined in Act 236 of 1961 states that any person may assert claim to title of one or more parcels or structures by adverse possession for more than 15 years is entitled to any equitable relief or right in law granted to any legal property holder. However, prior to the amendment of Act 236 in 2016, the timeframe for claiming rights over one or more parcels or structures is possessed adversely for the period of seven or more years. In Michigan, possession must be visible, exclusive, and uninterrupted in order for rights to be granted adversely rather than through ownership.

do about it? Put another farm here? No! *Please.*” Evoked again by Cecile is the sentiment that Black Detroiters hold presence and power over the land in the city, just as was stated by the former Panther who claimed “we got the land!”. Cecile explained that at this point, the city should be paying her outstanding wages that would have otherwise gone to city employees who never visited the farm to conduct basic maintenance, like mowing and plowing, maintaining trees for hydro access or digging up pavement to fix water main breaks; all tasks Cecile and her husband have independently taken on in the absence of city maintenance crews.

“Why should I give y’all (the city) any money? We should write their ass a bill. We’ve been keeping it maintained. Not allowing anyone to sell drugs or do drugs off of it, or do sex work out in the yard because people are trickin’ out the casino on a regular basis. We teach people how to farm and be self-sufficient. We grow vegetables in a place where there is hardly a grocery store. We’re neighborly. There is a play area for kids that we built and little kids come by and play. We teach them about animals. People are asking me for money? No. I’m not giving anyone a dime. We’re city workers. We do a little bit of everything; security, tree maintenance, parks and rec, snow and garbage removal, policing. We’re vigilant over here!”

Cecile’s sentiment poses an interesting question about the amount of value that urban agriculture and its practitioners have contributed to land and the city in general through their unpaid labor, the maintenance and care of the city’s land-based infrastructure, and by increasing access to fresh foods in their neighborhoods. Although Cecile acknowledges that the city has accessed the value of property where she grows food and that formal ownership is possible, though at a much greater cost than what was being asked ten years ago, Cecile believes that her ability to grow food in the city without formal ownership for over a decade has been a form of reparations, referring to the Special Field Order No. 15 of agrarian reform promised by the US federal government to provide aid to former slaves following emancipation; part of the not yet complete work of Reconstruction.

Garden Club, Monique’s urban farming site is actually a multi-part project, coordinated by a collective comprised of Monique and her partner, a former Black Panther, as well as trusted

friends, neighbors and political allies. In a June 2017 interview, Monique called the garden her “gateway”, the project that catalysed the rest of Garden Club’s work in the community, including anti-foreclosure and anti-water shut off campaigns, as well as a neighborhood meeting space and an outdoor performance stage. She says “we have to have something here for the kids to do, that teaches them something. Otherwise, they’re gonna find something else to do on their own and get up to no good.” Monique and her partner had shaped their programming offered through Garden Club to meet the direct housing, social, artistic, and recourse needs of their neighbors. They model their own political practice after the survival programs of the Black Panther Party and the concept of intercommunalism theorized by Doctor Huey Newton. Although the members of Garden Club fundamentally believe in the decommodification of land, there have been moment’s in the garden’s history when purchasing property was attempted for the sake of securing the longevity of the space, that provides food and educational opportunities in the neighborhood. Monique attempted to purchase the six parcels her farm grows on in 2010 while the Birdtown Collective was navigating one of the first farm purchases in the city’s urban agriculture community. She was told simply that the city registry office had lost the deeds and therefore could not conduct the sale. The projects of Garden Club continue to operate, and in 2018 the collective built an outdoor stage for live neighborhood performance and as a place for residents to convene. Garden Club continues to invest in the parcels they use and believe that as long as they are serving the needs of their community that their use of the parcels will not be challenged by the city.

Near the city’s eastern Detroit-Grosse Pointe border, Willow grows and forages for food on vacant lots surrounding her family home. Born and raised in Kenya, Winnie graduated from a Pan Africanist high school and moved to the United States to attend college at Michigan State University. In utilizing the city as foraging grounds for medicinal and edible plants, Willow applies an ethic to the growth of plants and access to land; that regardless of what property plants may be growing on, food and plant-based medicine are common grounds for healing and feeding ourselves. In a May 2017 interview Willow explained:

“realizing that freedom, for many of us urban farmers of color in Detroit, shows up in this unconscious and unintentional recreation of this way of living that resembles the ways of

living of our ancestors deep down that lineage. Proximity to land that nurtures and feeds is just one of these, just as is proximity to chickens and ducks, goats and cats... We ain't about urban farming in the non-profit industrial complex sense of the term, to create beauty in urban spaces, to create "community" and grow salad greens for an almost exclusively white owned, staffed, patronized restaurant in Downtown Detroit. We here, doing this, because this is what freedom, re-indigenization, decolonization, post-capitalism feels like, for us. This is *not* just *urban farming*, this is a building of a new way of being”.

These black women farmers in Detroit’s agricultural community frame the use of unowned farmland in three distinct ways that allude to the cultivation of food in the city as a form of resistance against urban austerity, a deficit of basic amenities, and colonialism identified within the authority of the city government. Framing urban agriculture as an act of decolonization and access to land as belated (though individual) reparations, demonstrates

In a 2017 interview, Director Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network described the recent land deals made between the DLBA, the Planning and Development Department with both Recovery Park and Hantz Woodland farms, white owned agricultural businesses in Detroit, as a mechanism for the continued holding of power over city property by white business proprietors and white-led organizations. Criticism from residents neighboring both farms, located in two eastside neighborhoods, and from the urban agriculture community have expressed concern that Hantz Woodlands and Recovery Park represent a subsection of farmers in the city who are purchasing land under the auspice of farming with the intention to speculate. Whereas the city planning department and the DLBA refuse to sell individual properties to long established farms that directly serve a need in their neighborhood, the level of cooperation shown by the mayor’s office and the DLBA in selling thousands of parcels to two large scale for-profit farms has made small scale growers especially skeptical, and widely see these land sales as a racially segregating urban farming through privileging white-lead organizations with access to purchasing land.

What these farmer vignettes of black urban-agrarian property relations reveal are the various tiers of agricultural land use and acquisitions the Detroit Land Bank Authority and planning department are willing to engage in and with whom. In 1996, Rocheleau et al. wrote “[a]ccess to resources-whether by de facto or de jure rights, exclusive or shared rights, primary or secondary rights, ownership or use rights- proves to be an important environmental issue for women virtually everywhere” (1996, 291). Though a clear understanding of axes of power is made here, early feminist political ecology research is rightfully critiqued for its exclusion of genuine engagements with race and racialization. Markers of race and particularly moments in which racialization and gender meet at a juncture necessitate analysis that understands how race and racialization shape the relationship between gender and the environment (Mollett & Faria, 2013). Despite some indication that the city will negotiate land deals for farming, national leaders in Black urban food sovereignty located in Detroit have continued to struggle to secure access to farm sites that explicitly serve the needs of food insecure homes and neighborhoods. The claims to property evoked by these growers suggests that sweat equity, reparations and meeting the food needs of the community are all reasons Detroit growers believe they should be granted formal rights to stewarded land. The critical variables of gender, race, and history of racism and social control in the urban environment these farmers work within all shape their processes of influence over urban natures, the struggle to maintain ecological livelihoods, and the prospect of sustainable development in their community (Elmhirst, 2011; D. Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996). The subject positions of these farmers who embody black femininity are bound in the kinds of socially productive labor they engage in, and subsequently knit together through the markers of gender, race, and class that result in the devaluation of their socially productive labor and experiences of uneven resource distribution (Doshi, 2017). Doshi says these multiple and interconnected relations to power and of difference shape urban political ecologies through socio-spatial segregation and structures of discrimination that are both gendered and racialized (Ibid).

Cecile’s assertion that she is owed payment for the nature of work she conducts and the civic benefit of her skills and “vigilance” demonstrates clear awareness among Black women farmers of the city’s willingness to use unpaid black labor for beautification, greening, and general civic maintenance. Without in turn recognizing the value of that labor or providing compensation or

exchange, we can see that learning the city and urban political ecology through Cecile's experience demonstrates that the social reproduction of black urban geographies is in part defined by black women's labor exists within a vacuum of racial capitalism. Not only is Cecile's labor not monetarily valued, but her equity-based land claims are met with dramatically reassessed prices of the very land onto which she has produced the value that is being assessed against her. Farmers see the value of their labor as having earned them rights to property as compensation in exchange for their labor or as material reparations for historical and continued racial injustice. Cecile's story in particular elucidates the importance of examining gender within feminist political economy (Mollett & Faria, 2013), particularly as it relates to social reproduction and the role of this social reproduction in producing spaces that are defined by racialization. Monique and Willow's testimonies center building decolonizing relationships with land, and building critical resources for disinvested neighborhoods. Both allude to farming labor being part of their political work within the black radical tradition and decolonization, and use a political framing of their work that, in the spirit of black geographies that, has the potential to rewrite the state (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). How both Monique and Willow identify personal and institutional power relations in respect to their position to land and agricultural labor, is critical in understanding subsequent desires and necessities that are shaping environmental change and formulating emerging urban natures (Jarosz, 2011).

## **Discussion**

Richael Faithful (Faithful, 2017) describes the search for land of one's own as an active and central part of the black American identity. In particular, Faithful describes this search for land as one that removes relationships of "collective exploitation" of black people to landholders in particular. For Faithful, the model of land ownership under capitalism within North America predestines all property as sites of trauma. Posing black America's history of dispossession in dialectical relationship to property as "haunted," Faithful also frames the ownership of land by black Americans as perpetuating harms indigenous peoples initially carried out by white colonial forces. He states that "[b]lack folks returning to the land must recognize the reality that they are part of a complex web of land ownership in which they inherit ethical burdens created by white

colonialism” (Faithful, 250, 2017).

Speaking about landless peasant movements, Faithful sees the direct actions of occupying land by peasant farmers as the politicization of land reclamation by historically dispossessed groups. The greater mission of occupation is not necessarily of mass mobilization toward black land ownership, but as Faithful describes, of the “construction of an agrarian citizenship among urbanites” (225, 2017). This suggestion is one of a transference of tactics that Faithful sees as possible between rural and urban, and as necessary in urban residents making broad and active claims to space for the sake of reunification with land by historically dispossessed people. On place and belonging, hooks suggests that the places Black communities have been offered for subsistence in habitation are within the boundaries sanctioned by segregation and restrictive housing covenants in US cities (hooks, 2010). To confer a sense of belonging, the farmer testimonies offered here incite the necessity to approach urban social relations to property through liberatory means, that specifically address the racial violence of the property system through abolition, rather than remaining confined within social-economic structures built by the commodification and capitalization of land that converge on black placelessness, or construct place for the purpose of Black subjugation, exclusion and punishment (McKittrick, 1994). However, the various barriers farmers experience in purchasing land, from economic incapacity to administrative disorganization and disciplinary oversight, limiting farmers access to purchasing property also limits their ability to engage in property taxation and subsequently to contribute to municipal revenues. The paradox of what ought to be done with Detroit’s surplus land parcels, a problem of over-accumulation, is a crisis the city is framing as an issue of revenue generation and the need to harness taxation as a stream for civic income generation in addition to the implementation of more modern and revitalizing planning strategies. Wilson Gilmore’s definition of crisis, a moment of systemic change in which an outcome is produced through struggle, struggle being a ‘politically neutral word’, can exist at all scales of organization throughout society (Wilson Gilmore, 2007, p. 54). Withholding the opportunity for small scale and Black farmers who are already caring for so many vacant property parcels in Detroit because of their intended agricultural use, is producing a climate in which Black farmers are drawing on the legacy work of Black land struggles to make claims to land the city in unwilling to formally

sell or hand over right to.

The problem arising from over accumulation - what makes surplus crisis - are not only economic, but also political, and therefore social. The idling of workers, the development of far-flung (labor or commodity) markets, and the immobilization of capital in devalued land are problems that require political organization (Wilson Gilmore, 2007, 57). Suggesting projects of state building and citing Pulido's (2000) 'subaltern activism', Wilson Gilmore urges that political organizing holds the potential to produce new social relations between land and labor that, if replicable, can form the foundation of a new social order (Hall & Schwartz, 1988). In Harris's (1993) "Whiteness as Property", property is understood as parallel to systems of domination and subordination over Black people and communities. Harris (1993, 1716) states that "whiteness, initially constructed as a form of racial identity, evolved into a form of property" and produced a global culture of placelessness for Black communities. This 'placelessness' is for McKittrick (2006) a moniker of what it means to be Black in the world and raises the important question of how geographers will halt the naturalizing of experiences of dispossession and placelessness among Black communities? What small scale growers experiences in Detroit's suggest more so than placelessness is that of precarity of place, defined by tentative and voluntary uses of property that are constantly undergoing reassessments in market value, creating an environment that both alienates growers from their own labor and turns growers into active sources of disinvestment in their own communities through their inability to be taxed for land they care for but do not own. The precarious property relations experienced by these growers are in the unclear future of their farms, the real possibility of displacement, as well as the unacknowledged and unremunerated labor that has contributed to the maintenance of city lands.

Hall criticizes race-blind articulations of property relations, those often ascribed to by municipal planners (Roy, 2016), and states that property "reproduced class, including its internal contradictions, as a whole -structured by race", and these divisions remain the site of capital's continuing hegemony over property" (314, 1980). As Hall suggests, as much as the reconstitution of property is bound up with land, we have to understand property as the origin of race and racialization in the first place, and understand racial justice as intrinsically entwined with land justice. Small scale black-led farms in Detroit continue to harvest food that feeds

neighbors and communities regardless of legal ownership to land. Though land sales in Detroit reflect the opposite of the so-called urban unification plan of the current political administration, the racial division of land sales for agriculture identify both the site of hegemony as well as possible out roads for challenging power over property. The continued use of land not legally owned by growers for food cultivation introduces an additional internal contradiction to the social relations of property in post-bankruptcy Detroit. Regardless of new governance structures enforced by bylaws and punitive fines, adverse possession and the repurposing of property left fallow remains uncontested and allowable within Detroit's land governance schematic, alongside more formal claims to legal ownership that continue to reproduce social relations to property that are divided along class and racial lines.

As Detroit stands on the edge of this latest stage of redevelopment, the involvement of Detroiters in planning and economic processes that will determine the city's future, particularly in the redistribution of property and development of open space, has the potential to upend the city's history of racial injustice and economic disparity. The continued use of city property without legal ownership by small scale Detroit farmers demonstrates that the ability to access land enables some degree of autonomy without pandering to city zoning and bylaws, however, stewardship without ownership does not grant access to the formalized legal rights imbued in property law. Growers are framing their use of property within terms that align with the political work of black self determination, the delivery of land reparations, and the decolonization of land through communing with plant life and ancestral food practices. The use of urban land for collective benefit and capacity building could be the pathway to a more equitable urban future that more deeply reflects progress toward the realization of abolition; for this is what growers in Detroit are demonstrating through their everyday work of growing food in struggle against the monetization of disinvested city land. These acts of resistance through urban land urge further ontological questions about challenging whiteness as property and necessitates further discussion about what the configuration of what decolonized urban space could look like, and whether in fact is it already in the making.

## Article Five

### **‘The Detroit School’: Racial capitalism and theorizing the urban through degrowth**

In 2012, faculty and students the University of Michigan’s Taubman School of Urban Planning established a lecture series titled, The Detroit School, and began inviting scholars whose interdisciplinary research addressed the city’s challenge, realities, and opportunities. In the inaugural year of the lecture series, Margaret Dewar and June Manning Thomas, professors at the University of Michigan’s Urban Planning program, presented their edited book *The City After Abandonment* (Dewar & Thomas, 2013), and Bob Beauregard of Columbia’s School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation gave the lecture “What is Detroit? From Laboratory to Lens”. The speaker series was a follow-up initiative to a decision made by the University of Michigan in 2011 to hire an interdisciplinary faculty cluster whose work would develop literature on urban studies through research conducted on Detroit. The vision was to create a “Detroit School” of urban theory that would encompass “the challenges and rewards of doing research in Detroit and Detroit-like-cities, individually and with students” and “thoughts on what we are learning, and could be learning from research and teaching on Detroit and the greater metropolitan region” (Detroit School, 2015). The initial question driving the “Detroit School” cluster hire and the deployment of the speaker series was to investigate how considering Detroit and the metropolitan region, and similar cities change the questions being asked in the interdisciplinary field of urban studies. Over the course of the last eight years, the ongoing Detroit School speaker series under the leadership and curation of Margaret Dewar has driven a quiet though assured agenda of the development of a school of urban theory based on degrowth urbanism. The most recent generation of degrowth urban ecologies suggests that the uneven distribution of resources and resulting socio-political conflicts are constitutive of a degrowth transition (Kallis & March, 2015); distinguished by ungovernmentalized subjects and Latouche’s uncritical reproduction of local-national-global differentiation within capitalism that posits degrowth as a localization project of post-capitalism (Hornborg, 2016). The work of Detroit-focused scholars on degrowth follows Latouche in having a place-based analysis at the scale of the urban (Latouche, 2009), however, localization is not a common framework within this body of literature in relation to degrowth.

## **New Geographies through positioning and self-knowledge**

Not long after the onset of the 2007-2008 mortgage crisis, Ananya Roy issued a challenge to fellow urban and regional studies scholars to draw on the capacities of our imaginations and creative epistemological approaches to produce ‘new geographies’ and conceptual vectors for knowing the worlding processes, productions of space and evolving dynamics of urban and regional research (Roy, 2009). Roy drew from investigations of cities in the global South to articulate particular area-based knowledges beyond the confinement of Euro-American city-thinking, “produced in the crucible of a few ‘great’ cities: Chicago, New York, Paris, and Los Angeles” (Roy, 2009, p. 820). Relatedly, Doreen Massey, echoing Althusser, urged that at the time of the 2007-2008 economic crisis a fracture was created that created a point of conjuncture that began with the failing of the banks and widened by the multiple dimensions of society that make up the “real struggles in people’s lives” (Massey, Bond, & Featherstone, 2009). Massey believed that the onset of the Great Recession opened up new opportunities to think about humanity, ethics, and the broader ideological hegemonic framework of life; she wanted us all to look for cracks in the consensus (Rutherford & Davison, 2012). The relative separation intellectuals create from being with people in struggle, whom academics *could* find themselves among, requires greater intention and a willingness to be in the movements and crises we analyze to construct theory. This article takes Roy’s call for constructing new geographies, and Massey’s directing of academics back to the streets as prompts for how to imagine constructing urban theory for this time and anytime critical analysis is called for in addressing inequality in the urban form. Roy and Massey’s challenge to geographers to find new forms of engagement and epistemological maneuvers to construct new geographies is to me a reminder to remain theoretically nimble amid growing urban inequality. The idea of seeing or making something anew out of theory or creatively as a form of resistance is an epistemological practice embedded within feminist theory, Afrofuturist thought, and magical realism. These are practices and genres that constantly work toward liberation and seek to influence and contribute to more just and equitable futures (Laws, 2017; Van Veen & Robinson, 2018). Poststructuralist feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, a lesbian poet and writer from the Global South encouraged reflexivity as a self-knowledge practice. Her writing explored the hybridity of borders, in their geopolitical, linguistic, gendered, and ethnic formations. The tone of her essays was reflexive and encouraged

the practice of self-knowledge to build critical connections across junctures of nationality, identity, race, gender, and belonging. The act of writing for Anzaldua was a practice of multiplying our ways of knowing. Her self-knowledge practice was modeled consistently throughout her revered texts *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* (1981), co-authored with Cherrie Moraga. Both texts frequent feminist geography course syllabi and are drawn on by feminist geographers in discussions of urban hybridity, the paradoxical oppression, and liberation of space, coloniality, and the obscured geographies produced by Eurocentric universalism (Daigle & Ramirez, 2018; Everingham, 2018; Waitt & Markwell, 2008). Self-knowledge is a practice that is equally concerned with assessment, measuring, calculation, and comparison as ‘worlding’ or of finding new geographies; of understanding how we may come to know others differently by more intimately knowing ourselves and where we are from. The self-knowledge practice offered by the postcolonial feminist scholarship of Anzaldua, as well as intersectional feminist scholarship committed to anti-racism and anti-classism (Fields & Fields, 2012; Hooks, 2010) can be a tool for spatial thinkers to elucidate our misalignments in moments where knowledge practices grounded in the whiteness of Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and the security of institutional affiliation may unknowingly result in the repurposing of postcolonial, Black geographies, or experiences of struggles in communities to which we do not belong through clever turns of phrase and the privilege of naming theory as we will. Anzaldua’s motive in examining questions of nationality, power, and identity hybridity through self-reflexive writing is to turn the reader toward a shared practice of critically interrogating our own identities as readers. Through self-knowledge, Anzaldua attempts to produce awareness among readers of self-knowledge, self-ignorance, and practices of knowing others

This review is organized into three sections that engage exclusively with literature produced on Detroit to identify how scholars are characterizing the city, and consolidate the various examples scholars are turning toward to define degrowth. These three Detroit-focused sections are followed by a discussion section that engages broadly with scholarship on austerity urbanism, racial capitalism, and Black geographies drawing from scholars outside of those who have written on Detroit. These particular theoretical bodies are engaged in service of analysing Detroit-focused scholarship on analytic terms that dialectically reflect the contexts from which

Detroit-based research begins; acknowledging a history of racial segregation and racialized violence that has been both economic and physical, as well as civic financial hardship and the use of bond financing to float civic services and municipal workers' pensions. This review asks what geographies or spatial theories are being produced through Detroit-focused scholarship, and what level of engagement has Detroit-focused scholarship had with the politics of decolonization, Black liberation, and anti-corporate sentiment that inform grassroots activism against degrowth-driven austerity and neoliberalization?

### **Defining Detroit**

Detroit-focused scholarship across urban studies and geography has characterized the city, politically, economically, racially, and infrastructurally and otherwise. Seeking descriptors that allow the reader to understand the scholarly position from which research was conducted and the depiction of the city in relation to the scholar's analytical agenda will be examined here. Identifying how Detroit is being defined will provide some clarity or need for further investigation as to what is being said in describing a city as 'Detroit-like'; what covert undertones or overt presumptions present themselves across the interdisciplinary research of Detroit-focused scholarship? And how, I will ask, do these depictions inspire modifiers or re-considerations for common questions asked among urban studies scholars? This section also reviews the various foci of Detroit-focused scholarship, and areas of investigation scholars have attended to in their research.

Jamie Peck describes Detroit as having become a metaphor for contemporary urban crisis contributed to by the biggest municipal bankruptcy filing in United States history, unprecedented white flight, a long and continuous process of deindustrialization marked by ongoing job losses and plant closures, neoliberal dispossession, and "as a byword for the serial failure of mainstream schemes for urban renewal" (Peck, 2016, p. 1201). He cites a new generation of scholars fueled by the Great Recession and Detroit's subsequent mortgage and tax foreclosure crises whom he credits for recycling narratives that reflect dystopian collapse, the renaissance of the rustbelt, and the dire work of the grassroots keeping their city alive against the odds of austerity (2016).

In North America, the terms post-industrial and deindustrialization have become synonymous with the manufacturing region surrounding the Great Lakes, comprised of the Golden Horseshoe of Southern Ontario's manufacturing sector and the area now commonly referred to as the Rust Belt on the American side of the border (High, 2003). A number of the cities in this cross-border region have experienced population decline and household and municipal scales of the financial perils of decline of their industrial economies. The terminology of "post-industrial" and "deindustrialisation" hold a variety of meanings across urban geographic and urban studies literature relating to degrowth, though urban studies and geography scholarship on Detroit has tended to focus specifically on three areas; the city's land base in relation to deindustrialization, the outflow of population, and the surplus housing stock.

Detroit was once one of the top five most populated cities in the United States, though since reaching its peak population in the 1950 census of 1.8 millions, racially motivated white flight, loss of manufacturing jobs, and the effects of racially motivated disinvestment amounted to deep population decline with a total decline of 61%, or 700,000 by 2010 (Census, 2017). From the onset of the 2008 financial crisis until 2012, Detroit's residents exercised further outmigration due to the high rates of property forfeiture in the watershed mortgage foreclosure crisis. In 2018, the city's recorded population was 673, 104. With an approximate loss of 1.2 million people over the course of the last seventy years (Schindler, 2016; Tabb, 2015), the city has gained a reputation of having been abandoned, though such classifications do the work of erasing black geographies and of treating the city's black population as though their continued presence is not to be counted. On the structural origins of Detroit's politics of water inaccessibility and racism, Kornberg (2016) describes the city as "abandoned" and as having a "demolished industrial base". This surprising overture published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* relies on some of the early tropes of Detroit in contemporary urban studies as a city without people or a municipality lacking the capacities to support a population. This analysis of deindustrialization as leading to abandonment takes liberties to forego acknowledging other forms of working-class labor, professional sectors, and reproductive labor that all keep cities operating regardless of the presence of a manufacturing economy. Abandonment is a particularly challenging trope to accept given Detroit's position along an international border and the various

supply chains and subsequent forms of transport and industrial employment these forms and flows of capital produce.

For an older generation of Detroit's scholar-activists, the decline of the city's manufacturing base left behind "poisoned and abused" land, and primed economically depressed neighborhoods for the onset of informal economic ventures in drug production and dealing (Boggs et al., 2014). However, despite losses in manufacturing, Detroit-focused scholarship that works alongside community and demystifying perceptions of abandonment have pushed back against this particular narrative. Popular as of late has been the pivot toward recognition of a population that never left or who were forced to leave, and spaces that may be underutilized but are not vacant and without value. As far as automotive manufacturing goes, metro-Detroit and the Southeast Michigan industrial sector produced 2 million cars and trucks in 2017, with 1.7 million of those vehicles produced in the metro-Detroit region. Michigan continues to produce more vehicles than other states with the majority of original equipment manufacturer and technology centers headquartered in Metro Detroit (Detroit Chamber of Commerce, 2018). Claiming that automotive manufacturing no longer takes place in Detroit is false, though the scale of the automotive sector in the city has decreased since the 1960s. Scott Martelle opens his text, *Detroit: A biography* (2012) by detailing the process of Detroit's colonization, and the violent removal of indigenous people once settlers had a strong enough foothold in the regions fur trade. This colonial account of Detroit, often negated from historical accounts of the city, provides a layer of settler-colonial context to the racialized land struggles we are witnessing in Detroit today. Tiya Alicia Miles' (2017) *Dawn of Detroit: A chronology of slavery and freedom in the city of the straight*, provides an in-depth history of the use of slaves within the regions early industrial expansion, not just as laborer but as instrumental figures in the development of Detroit's economy. Miles also details the relationship between indigenous people, land settlement, and enslaved black people and indigenous removal. These texts enrich contemporary discussions about dispossession and gentrification within Detroit-focused scholarship by contextualizing the temporality of land struggles in a period of Detroit's history that is often left in the past. Lucas Kirkpatrick, a former Michigan Society of Fellows Scholar completes this pivot in "Urban Triage, City Systems and

the Remnants of Community: Some “Sticky” Complications in the Greening of Detroit” (2015). Kirkpatrick begins the contextual narrative of Detroit, describing the city as spatially defined by a “zone of abandonment” of 20 square miles that wraps around the city’s core commercial district (2015, 226). He uses the terms “panoramic ruins”, “dramatically burned-out and overgrown homes”, and “hulking industrial ruins”, all to arrive at a halting provocation that “this space is not empty” but contains families, active community organizations, and political activity (Ibid).

In 2011, Detroit’s then-mayor David Bing announced the Detroit Works Project (DWP), an initiative that would ‘right-size’ Detroit’s infrastructure through land use changes and the consolidation of the city’s population. The plan necessitated forced displacement with no solid plans for residential relocation. This plan and the subsequent 2013 release of the Detroit Future City (DFC) Strategic Framework (Detroit Future City, 2013) announced the removal of essential city services to 137,000 residents and service upgrades to only 47,600, largely in areas immediately surrounding business districts rather than in residential neighborhoods. Safransky and Newman’s “Remapping the Motor City and the Politics of Austerity” (2014) push back against the DWP and DFC mapping projects that disregard residents and would result in mass displacement by focusing on the work of Uniting Detroiters, a workshop series that invited residents to collaboratively create maps that defined their own uses of space. Newman and Safransky (2014) reflect on how participants in Uniting Detroiters rejected the city’s use of the terms vacant and derelict, for the sake of respecting inherent value in city land beyond monetarily productive or taxable use. Newman and Safransky’s “Remapping the Motor City” does the important work of revealing the continued work of Detroit residents who are challenging dispossession and the devaluation of their neighborhoods. Representing Detroit as a contested city with social justice-driven community leaders reinforces the realities of struggle and strong black leadership rather than despair and exceptionalism through tragedy. Monica White’s (2011) writing about black women farmers provides another example of Detroit residents using open land as a form of resistance. The focus here on black women transforming land into greenspace to self-provision food depicts Detroit’s emerging urban natures as both black and feminist, instead of space in the city being defined by unproductive land use, blight, and demolition. White’s examination of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network

(DBCFSN) demonstrates how a black-led agricultural non-profit continues to push back against racism, poverty, and disinvestment by elected officials through reclaiming unused lots to secure a food source for the black community (White, 2011a). White's depiction of DBCFSN members communicates clear intention by black Detroiters to create their own solutions to resource insecurity, in this case insufficient access to grocery stores. White characterizes addresses the issue of food insecurity and land vacancy, both matters of degrowth urbanism, as actionable through resident engagement by cultivating land to carry on traditions of black foodways and cultures. White's work demonstrates the resourcefulness and commitment to community building by Detroiters facing an urban economic climate that, at the time, had yet to be jumpstarted by the involvement of foundation founded development that has since driven gentrification and further displacement. White, Newman and Safransky importantly portray the collective struggle Detroiters engage in to steer the city's future toward more racially and spatially just outcomes, demonstrating that those not benefiting from the limited development that was taking place in Detroit at the time were not void of hope and energy to build toward a resourced and self-determined future.

Interest in the kinds of urban natures that are produced through processes of deindustrialization, some Detroit-focused scholarship has examined the afterlives of industrial manufacturing and the kinds of recourse or influence these losses have had on the city's landscape. The brownfields and empty lots that follow the closure of manufacturing sites, and particularly the accumulation of such sites for redevelopment into green spaces are emblematic for Fraser (2017) and Safransky (2014) of the forms of urban environmental change that can result from the loss of industry (Fraser, 2017; Safransky, 2014). For Safransky, the large stock of land that frequently represents losses in manufacturing and population decline in images of the city's landscape, requires attention to how whiteness and settler colonialism "which have been absorbed into political and legal-judicial institutions, discourses, myths, symbols, and national metaphors" misrepresent open land like that in Detroit as wild or empty (Safransky, 2014, p. 237). Here Safransky is defining Detroit as racially and colonially contested space; not just a city of former manufacturing power lost to automation and manufacturing flight, but as occupied land settled through acts of erasure through indigenous removal and black dispossession. In this way Safransky depicts Detroit as a space of racialized land contestation driven by coloniality and

white supremacy, in addition to forms of monetization that make land in the city's current redevelopment regime inaccessible through remonetization and gentrification, which are extensions of coloniality in and of themselves. Addressing the popular narratives of pre-bankruptcy *decay* and emerging urban natures Millington addresses the particular socio-natural processes and relationships and new ecological imaginaries produced by widely photographed and distributed images of Detroit's iconic urban ruins. Noting the intention of journalists and photographers of creating images free of human subjects, Millington takes note of how photographs or ruin reinforce the perception of abandonment and effectively construct the city's decline "in almost purely architectural terms" (Millington, 2013, p. 238) and the wholesale abandonment of the city's population. Urban natures depicted in images of Detroit ruins are described by Millington as portraying utopic futures of a re-wilded city, ruins as sites for aesthetic appreciation, visions of a non-human world, and an overall feral city. In light of these catastrophizing depictions of a city left to nature, Millington calls for a model of urban environmental politics of historical and anti-essentialist understandings of natural processes, which he says is critical in building toward more just urban futures. Further, Millington adds:

*While recent efforts to bring nature back in the city have worked to destabilize longstanding binaries made between cities and their natural environments (See Karvonen, 2011; Kinder, 2011), there is more work to be done to ensure that environmental politics retain their critical orientation and embeddedness in broader structures of class and race. In the case of Detroit — where efforts are currently underway to seriously dismantle the city through the normative and managerial ideal of 'right-sizing' — one has to wonder about the ways in which seemingly natural limits are being used to justify political interventions into cities" (Millington, 2013, p. 293)*

Kami Pothukuchi work with Detroit's urban farmers describes the greening projects that have resulted from community-driven initiatives as part of the agenda of transformation afforded by the post-industrial landscape that holds potential for residents and policymakers to "create an alternative form of urbanism" (Pothukuchi, 2017, p. 1184). These 'alternatives' in Detroit, still relatively small in scale, ranging from the use of green spaces as conflict resolution zones, impromptu art spaces, rehabilitated homes, youth-led community gardens and outdoor parks and

seating areas established by neighbors (Baker, 2018; Boggs & Kurashige, 2012; Kinder, 2016). Such projects have importantly demonstrated the productive social relations and Black self-determination that can also result from disinvestment and redefine geographies that are emblematic of post-industrial urban landscapes (Newman & Safransky, 2014; White, 2011a, 2011b). The physical landscape and the large tracts of demolished residential structures, foreclosed homes, low property values, and informal property uses coalesce in Detroit into a common framing of the city's surplus land as detrimental to civic economic solvency, though Pothukuchi (2015) looks to the work of farmers to reframe surplus land as an opportunity for post-industrial geographies being defined by greening projects and small scale community initiatives. How Detroit's emerging and ever-present urban natures are defined for broad audiences, policymakers, and for academic consumption hold both consequence and potential for how ongoing calls of grassroots organizations to decolonize, to keep Detroiters in their homes, and to retain a majority Black city through population retention are received and reinforced.

Safransky's "Land Justice as a Historical Diagnostic" importantly connects financial management with racialization, pointing out that the removal of political power from locally elected representatives during Detroit's emergency management gave the state "sweeping powers over city finances and operations" (Safransky, 2018, p. 506). Historical diagnostic is a justice-seeking approach to postmodern forms of analysis, influenced by Avery Gordon's call for "alternative diagnostics" to account for political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions of dispossession (Gordon, 2008). Aligned with Safransky, Kinney's *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America's Postindustrial Frontier* (2016), examines the way Detroit's rebirth story of the last decade is ideologically bound to investments in the production of whiteness. The cautionary of this text is in the likely possibility that urban redevelopment in the neoliberal era will continue to reproduce uneven geographies defined by race and class disparities because of the race-neutral planning models that define contemporary revitalization regimes.

Open space in Detroit is not a bankruptcy-era phenomenon but has been an ongoing quagmire within the city planning office since the 1967 race rebellion. At times various programs created by city hall have even facilitated tentative lease agreements for farmers and residents carrying

out community projects on open parcels. Residential use of vacant properties enabled the city to curtail their own maintenance duties and allow residents to take care of vacant property into their own hands is one of myriad urban natures in Detroit, though it is not distinctly degrowth-driven, unless Detroit and degrowth scholars are willing, as Safransky urges us (2018), to take a historical diagnostic approach to urban land. One of the features of Detroit's unprecedentedly large vacant land base has been the informal use of property by residents for individual and neighborhood resource development. Photographers and video crews from Germany, France, and the UK regularly make unannounced appearances at Detroit's urban farms, collective living houses and at outdoor art installations to make a spectacle out of improvisational uses of land and buildings. These forms of land procurement and stewardship have produced theorization's of land-based 'creative class' urbanism (Bain & Baker, 2017), progressing from early 2000s discussions about Detroit's ruin tourism and urban disaster explores documented in countless photo stories and academic interludes claiming the city as a fertile frontier (Millington, 2013; Solnit, 2007). My research on residents repurposing of vacant properties discusses a century-long tradition of Detroiters stewarding property that the city has otherwise left unmaintained. I speak to these informal and semi-formal uses of property in my article "A century of Grace", addressing the leadership of Grace Lee Boggs in the establishment of the youth direct action program Detroit Summer that has influenced further youth urban gardening programming city-wide.

Kinder's *DYI Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services* (2016) details how Detroit residents have 'domesticated' public services through self-provisioning activities in lieu of the public services most urban residents depend on for amenities such as snow removal, street lighting, park maintenance and oversight of vacant properties. Kinder (2016) adds that the actions of 'self-provisioning' residents ultimately seek to maintain and regenerate the functioning of formal markets, through the mimicry of once publically-provided services to emulate the presence of municipal authority. Kinder's apt and compassionate critiques of 'self-provisioned urbanism' present accounts of the under-resourced improvisational work residents have taken on to maintain the functionality and safety of their neighborhood's blocks. Pointing to the national rise of urban neoliberal governance and the introduction of market-based programs to redistribute services, Kinder drifts into a scale of analysis that confuses degrowth market behaviors with

larger analysis of neoliberalism that is usually applied at the scale of national and regional manufacturing. The neoliberal movement toward market-based governing and the availability of foundation grants for neighborhood-level projects, Kinder says created the conditions for residents to ‘bring resources to their blocks that otherwise went somewhere else’ (Kinder, 2016, p. 196).

### **Degrowth and financial narrative**

The ‘Grand Bargain’ of the Detroit municipal bankruptcy proceedings presided over by Judge Rhodes addressed Detroit’s debts to thousands of creditors and was found eligible for bankruptcy protection through proven insolvency in 2013 (Vlasic, Davey, & Williams Walsh, 2013). Tabb explains that the tax shortfall resulting from the financial collapse in the city led state-appointed leaders to initiate the bankruptcy (Tabb, 2014). In Tabb’s 2015 article “If Detroit is Dead, Some Things Need to be Said at the Funeral”, Tabb does the work of worlding Detroit through 1990 census data that ranked Detroit having the highest rates of poverty of 77 US cities with populations greater than 200, 000. Tabb digs into the forensics of urban decline and describes how urban death is quite different than biological death in that cities do not disappear as those do who pass away. Noting that Detroit’s population has grown back to the 700,000 range, Tabb describes urban death as unlikely to provide substantive change for low-income, high crime, the government abandoned neighborhoods, though select revitalization remains possible over time. Tales of Detroit’s rebirth, Tabb claims, are made by both conservatives and liberals, though he locates the challenge of distributional struggles in Detroit and “similarly afflicted cities” as the result of political choices made far beyond city limits. Tabb depicts the urban austerity in Detroit as a decision delivered onto the city, and not resulting from within. The city’s bankruptcy filing in 2013 may be one of the starker examples of a decision made about Detroit from beyond elected civic leaders. The bankruptcy played its own role in depicting Detroit as a failed city and deserving of disciplinary measures to bring the city out of the red.

The chapter nine bankruptcy filing became well known nation-wide when Judge Rhodes issued the possibility that the city’s art collection, housed at the Detroit Institute of Arts would potentially be sold to private buyers to recover debt losses. Although the municipal payroll of

Detroit city workers was minimized from approximately 26,000 in 1960 to 10,500 in 2012, the number of municipal pension recipients has increased to 21,000 in that same period (Desan, 2014). The \$18 billion dollars in debt liabilities held by Detroit at the time the bankruptcy was pivoted toward the city's municipal retirees (Lee et al., 2016), who were ultimately made out to be greedy members of an entitled middle class responsible for the city's financial suffering. Through interviews conducted with members of the appointed emergency financial management team involved in the city's 2013 bankruptcy proceedings, Sarah Phinney demonstrates the tendency to place blame for the city's creditor debt on Black pensioners of Detroit's public service (Phinney, 2018). Although prior to the bankruptcy filing Detroit maintained a steady revenue of \$1 billion annually, 45% of that revenue was directed toward retiree pensions and health benefits and was expected to reach 67% by 2017 (City of Detroit, Office of the Emergency Manager 2013, 24). Though pensions were chronically underfunded, the city's majority black and female retirees were largely blamed for fiscal insolvency. In this example, degrowth characterized through a shrunken tax base and the eventual insolvency of the city was blamed on Black women who earned their pensions through providing public services that were funded by tax dollars. Phinney demonstrates the importance of examining how race is framed in the narrative of struggling degrowth urban economies, and how public offices justify austerity programs as though a defensive strategy against racialized communities upon which the burden of blame, as well as the lean outcomes of austerity, are placed. Assigning the responsibility of the city's insolvency to the once-guaranteed pensions of Detroit's civic workers and retirees who are comprised by a majority African American population displaces, as Leong suggests, "measures that would lead to meaningful social reform" (Leong, 2013, p. 2152) by downloading hardship through the extraction of value onto a racialized population. The reductions of Detroit's retiree pensions in the city's Grand Bargain is but one example of economic extraction justified by the necessity to reduce municipal creditor liabilities and the municipal debt load while forcing retirees to carry the brunt of the economic burden and social responsibility.

There is a complexity to the coupling of value in the form of capital and in interchangeably using the words value and capital as though they are one and the same. Capital is depicted in Detroit's degrowth urbanism in relation to housing as being capable of circulation as well as fixity (Akers, 2013; Akers & Seymour, 2018; Hackworth, 2016b; Tabb, 2014, 2015), inflation, and as

an object of extraction- and often though not always reproductive of racial dispossession. Degrowth in the form of “widespread vacancy and abandonment” undermines, says Akers (2013) the growth-driven urbanism of North American city formation. Hackworth examines Detroit’s market-based strategies to address land abandonment and the interventionist design of vacant property governance through the use of “spot condemnation” which has enabled Detroit and Wayne County to acquire and demolish homes on demand (Hackworth, 2014). The hotly debated post-bankruptcy home demolition program, directed at homes that have had occupants evicted, contributes to a form of dispossession based in neighborhood identification, and the erasure of landscapes that hold meaning and memories for residents with the hope of increasing property values of a redeemable housing stock. Dispossession is not always a matter of losing ones’ home but may be the result of forms of degrowth implemented by the state, such as disinvestment in critical resources that make basic necessities like water unattainable or dangerous. Being dispossessed of critical resources may not result in the kinds of dislocation associated with the dispossession of one’s home, though certainly impact one’s ability to survive or remain where they live. Pulido’s urban environmental racism work holds the state accountable for the “production of social difference in creating valuing” through environmental inequality that Pulido states constitutes the disinvestment of racial capitalism (Pulido, 1983, p. 524). In her recent publication on the Flint water crisis, Pulido calls the event and ensuing public health crisis part of the everyday functioning of racial capitalism and environmental racism. Pulido argues that the lives of the people of Flint are so deeply undervalued by the state that the city’s financial solvency took precedence over the health and wellbeing of citizens and the proper and safe usage of hard infrastructure.

Austerity urbanism, according to Peck, is the deepening of neoliberal urbanism since the onset of the 2007-2008 financial crisis (Peck, 2012; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Peck conceptualizes austerity urbanism as operating through the financial restructuring of municipal fiscal expenditures to reduce budgetary deficits and overall costs of operation in times of economic crisis as directed by the state (Peck, 2012). Yolanda Pottie-Sherman describes the economies of *Rust Belt* cities including Detroit as sites for austerity measures of increasingly restrictive urban financing as compounded debts have prompted “new agendas of “enforced or extreme economy” (Pottie-Sherman, 2018, p. 439). Responding to Peck’s assertion that austerity urbanism resulted from the

intensification of economic crisis following the 2008 financial crisis, Schindler questions whether ‘austerity urbanism’ is possible in cities where severe economic decline had preceded 2007-2008 (Schindler, 2016). Addressing Detroit, Schindler suggests that the interscalar coalition of post-bankruptcy redevelopment-focused growth funding is intended to improve quality of life indicators amid Detroit’s ‘irreversible degrowth’. Sources of funding are comprised by what Schindler refers to as ‘degrowth machine politics’ (2016), constituted by private foundations that collaborate with city offices and local businesses. Schindler believes these private-public partnerships can retreat urban politics out of the austerity Peck believed was a defining feature of Detroit School urban theory. Schindler’s trust in private-public partnerships strikes a conflict in how this particular Detroit-focused scholar understands how austerity measures and their accessory programs are configured. In Schindler’s assertion that foundation-funded development could usher Detroit out of economic hardship, he overlooks the ways tax abatement for new developments in the city have increased the tax burden for residents, with taxes being used to fund for-profit building projects for private corporate entities. Schindler’s ‘degrowth machine politics’ addresses rising tensions between local actors and elitist extra-locals who sought to financially benefit from redevelopment initiatives or to recover investments in municipal bonds. Making the argument that market-oriented governance does not always follow economic crises, his assertion that local government, as well as citizen intervention, will generate community and foundation driven ‘place(re)making’ solutions neglects to acknowledge the relationship between capital investment, returns, and extractions of capital in the money form rationalized and enabled by racialization and modes of disinvestment that constitute racial capitalism. Schindler also missteps by understating the role that Detroit’s bankruptcy and subsequent state-appointed emergency financial management had in attracting the growth coalitions of foundations, tech start-up firms, and federal post-recession *hardest hit* dollars that have dramatically marked select city neighborhoods through consumer-driven homogenization and the aesthetic reimagining of commercial, sports, and entertainment districts.

## **Conclusion**

Defining degrowth urbanism in Detroit through the process of deindustrialization situates the city regionally within the Midwest industrial region that has experienced losses in the manufacturing

sector steadily since the beginning of the 1970s and alongside former manufacturing heavy urban economies (Bluestone & Harrison, 1984). Outside of Detroit-specific theorizations of deindustrialization, Mah takes a highly aestheticized approach to industrial decline by establishing that “post-industrial” or “deindustrialized” spaces are characterized by an aesthetic process of aging and general decrepitude that take place over time. Given that mass unemployment, factory closures, abandonment, and longer-term decline of industrial sites happen over a period of several years and sometimes decades, Mah’s concept of “ruination” defines industrial decline or post-industrial landscapes as processes in addition to embodying a material aesthetic (Mah, 2010, 3). Giving heed to the process-orientation of urban landscape and population change, Mah’s temporal and process-based approach to ruin offers the same dispersive understanding of place as Massey’s ‘fractal’ analysis. Dialectically thinking through urban land changes enables the ability to situate historical process alongside contemporary challenges facing residents and the inherent relativity of growth or a lack thereof.

What can be drawn from the multiple definitions of deindustrialization and representative of degrowth in Detroit is that if deindustrialization is understood as the respatalization of sites of manufacturing and the globally interconnected scales of capital that enable manufacturing’s movement elsewhere, “post-industrial” refers to the resulting conditions of economic, social, familial, and regional hardship, as well as the foundation for change that has yet to come. Although mostly focused on larger global relationships to economic re-spatializations, the larger contributions on the post/deindustrial discussions offer by Smith, Cowie, Heathcott and Mah ultimately concur, as Doreen Massey states “to reimagine things as processes” (Massey, 2005, 20). What post-mortgage crisis Detroit-centered definitions of deindustrialization reveal is that perhaps ‘the post-industrial’ and ‘deindustrial’ urban scholarship in North American has arrived at a moment that commands critical analysis in deeply localized frameworks, and of places as holding multitudes of internal as well as external processes of economic and regional change. Decolonial geographers Daigle and Ramirez (2018) urge spatial thinkers to take on the practice of thinking beyond economic regionality and Eurocentric spatial categorizations, and to recognize the specificity of place through colonial histories and afterlives of colonization. As Safransky (2018) suggests in her introduction of the historical diagnostic as a analysis for urban land, depictions of what Detroit’s deindustrial landscape have to offer to urban studies and the

questions urban spatial theorists work with is for stronger consideration of coloniality, acknowledgements of multi and contested nationhood, and the centuries long process of erasure as residents deal with ongoing racial dispossession today. Degrowth thinking in Detroit has maintained relatively tenuous attentiveness to the politics of labor and multi-national rescaling and movement of integrated supply and manufacturing chains. Can degrowth be adequately measured without examining a city's relationship to the global economy, to manufacturing supply chain networks, to international labor unions or foreign investment? Few contributions on Detroit's 'degrowth' urbanism dissent from addressing neoliberalism as a foundation for institutional influence over public policy that directly reflect and fortify the political and economic ascendancy of dominant groups of people in society; be they manifest in land contracts, water shut offs, the privatization of garbage and recycling collection, or the redistricting of education funding statewide (Hackworth, 2016b; Kinder, 2016). However, what can be learned by Detroit-focused scholarship through scaling up critiques of the effects of neoliberalism beyond the greater metropolitan region is work yet to be done.

Vacant land a housing, remapping critical infrastructure, and privatization of services are commonly identified through Detroit-focused research and as signposts of disinvestment and housing insecurity that are broadly categorized as austerity. According to Pulido, urban austerity is both a condition produced by the abandonment of capital, as well as an imposition in policy passed down from the state (Pulido, 2016). A common undercurrent of post-financial crisis literature on Detroit addresses the consequences and outcomes of population loss and subsequent justifications for austere market responses. The forced dependency on tournament financing, grant-providing funding agencies and "financially hollow branding initiatives" are hallmarks of the deep cuts to public sector indicative of austerity urbanism (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Hackworth, 2016a; Pottie-Sherman, 2018, p. 439; Tonkiss & Tonkiss, 2013). Although Detroit's population decline began in the early 1950's, nearly one quarter of the city's population left the city either from lack of opportunity or dislocation between 2008 and 2012. Peck states that cities with such a shrunken tax base have few options but to turn toward welfare crumbling austerity measures (Peck, 2012). The intensification of socio-spatial inequalities driven by urban austerity measures function to reduce government spending through the close fiscal management of residents and local government (Van Lanen, 2017). Distinct in its time-space demarcation,

austerity urbanism is a package of political and economic conditions resulting from the deepening of neoliberal urbanism following the 2007-2008 financial crisis (Peck, 2012; Pottie-Sherman, 2018), though increased financial oversight in Detroit was not implemented so directly until 2013 as part of Detroit's Grand Bargain. Austerity urbanism can have the effect of increasing spatial segregation demarcated through the racialization of disinvestment and decreased oversight demonstrated by Ranganathan's (2016) and Pulido's (2016) work in Flint, MI (2016; Ranganathan, 2016), as well housing and income vulnerability that particularly impact single mothers (Watt, 2018).

Although Ranganathan and Pulido have conducted work specifically on Flint and not Detroit, Dewar and the University of Michigan's Taubman College have determined that Detroit's Metropolitan region of Southeast Michigan and cities "like Detroit" are classifiable within the umbrella of the school itself. If we look toward urban austerity in Southeast Michigan to arrive at what the University of Michigan classifies as cities as "like-Detroit", the four other Michigan cities that experienced state financial management and have the highest rates of household poverty may serve as appropriate examples in examining degrowth urbanism outside of Detroit proper. These five cities combined also account for the majority of Michigan's black population (Akers, 2013), which cannot be treated as incidental. The racial undertones of the Taubman College's proposition that there is something to be learned from Detroit and "Detroit-like" cities may be mis-stepping a critical opportunity to specifically investigate austerity driven urban formations in cities with a majority Black or people of color population.

Detroit-focused scholars who address racial capitalism through investigating the extraction of value in tax foreclosures and the production of surplus land importantly address the difference in material losses the accumulation of property by the county tax authority produces for Black and communities of color. What accumulation comes to look like overtime in a degrowth economy largely hinges on the extraction of capital and subsequently of value from Black and people of color neighborhoods, institutions and basic municipal necessities (Akers & Seymour, 2018; Phinney, 2018; White, 2011a, 2017). Using Leong's understanding of the operations of social capital as always relative to market relations (2013), racial capitalism as a framework enables the attentiveness needed in degrowth scholarship to work with the common thread of austerity

urbanism that runs throughout much of the Detroit-focused research reviewed here.

Understanding the role of racial difference in enabling capital accumulation (Bonds, 2018), is essential to addressing racial capitalism within degrowth scholarship, and a point of analysis that may be the contribution that Detroit-based degrowth scholarship has commonly approached, if it were to be considered a body of literature. Whereas examples of civic residential duress are direct results of the loss of municipal capital in the dollar form, some Detroit scholars have conducted the careful work of analyzing these signposts of austerity urbanism through markets rather than the speculative capital of foundations or altruistic donations (Akers, 2013; Akers & Seymour, 2018; Baker, 2018; Kinney, 2016; Phinney, 2018).

If Detroit-based degrowth theory has made a particular contribution to urban theory, it has been through making explicit the role of racial capitalism inside of austerity urbanism in the extraction of value from the urban landscape and the racialized social relations manifest in physical, institutional and economic inequality. However, beyond Safransky (Safransky, 2014, 2018) rarely has Detroit-focused scholarship from white scholars engaged with the struggle for decolonization or recognized indigenous land claims alongside forms of racial capitalism that impact the city's majority black population today. What Safransky's work indicates is a personal practice of what Anzaldúa called self-knowledge that has situated her own analysis of Detroit within a settler-colonial framework in which Safransky identifies settlers as holding inordinate power over the production of space, the means of production, and narrative power over place (2014, 2018). In packaging austerity urbanism, land abandonment and vacancy, racial dispossession, the seizure of democratic representation, and foundation funded urban remapping representative as forms of degrowth urbanism, my challenge to the Taubman College Detroit School coordinators is to take up Safransky on her historical diagnostic analysis the reflexive work of racially positioning ourselves as scholars alongside residents who have withstood decades of racial violence. In the case of the Detroit School, my concern is that a lack of historicization has potentially led to the repackaging of evolved though similar tactics that Black communities specifically, as well as immigrant and people of color community have experienced in cities since the rise of black urbanism following reconstruction. Looking back toward Roy and Massey's encouragement to seek out new geographies, Anzaldúa's practice of self-knowledge and the work of decolonial feminist thinkers is an additional and crucial lens to implement as we

imagine, seek out, or find geographies anew. If we are looking specifically at Detroit and “Detroit-like cities”, my concern is that what has been classified as degrowth may in actuality be a systematizing of indigenous and Black urban experiences of removal and dispossession reframed so as to be more broadly applied to cities that are intentionally not classified by racial composition. McKittrick’s critique of the term urbicide, a descriptor of material consequences resulting from cities being sites of armed conflict and war, states “urbicide, seemingly depersonalizes acts of violence—the term inadvertently erases the genocidal contours of city-death by drawing attention to the violence against and the destruction of urban infrastructure—it is a very human, and therefore specifically racialized, activity” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 952). Just as the human cost of life and racialization of violence is erased in describing the collateral damage of urban infrastructure during times of conflict, there is an erasure taking place in ‘degrowth urbanism’ scholarship from Detroit of a long history of urban inequality that does not yet broadly acknowledge forms of spatial control, neighborhood demolition, two tiered or denied service provisioning, and myriad forms of urban inequalities that have always impacts Detroit’s black residents and forms of managing the growth and movement of black communities. My curiosity is in whether degrowth is just a way of renaming experiences of spatial control that have in part comprised urban racial inequality historically. Taking geographies or cultural phenomenon that already exist and renaming them for the sake of making a knowledge claim is a colonizing tactic that geographers need to bring their attention to, critically and self reflexively (Daigle & Ramirez, 2018; Naylor et al., 2017).

The cautionary McKittrick offers geographers is to be aware and not ignore forms of anti-black violence that “brings into focus the human and dehumanizing elements of geographic thought” (2011, 953) so as to not erase black geographies. Using the term degrowth to describe urban austerity measures that involve remapping, forced displacement, infrastructural breakdown and loss of essential services all sound like the racial projects of segregation, redlining, and ghettoization called by another name, perhaps because we now see that these processes can reach beyond pinpointedly effecting black, indigenous or communities of color. In the case of the attempt to build a Detroit School of degrowth urbanization, this exploratory body of urban theory presents as a race-neutral repackaging of forms of racial violence seeking to produce a new geography without first considering the further racial implications and erasure of ignoring

histories of spatial control and racial segregation. Thought Detroit-focused scholars reviewed here have indicated racial capitalism to be at work in the city's housing market, in the bankruptcy proceedings, through infrastructural disinvestment and forced displacement; degrowth as a classifier or school of urban theory needs to do the heavy lifting of assessing whether new geographies ought to be produced to describe tried and true though evolved processes of urban development motivated by racial exclusion and white supremacy. The contributions my own work makes to the growing body of contemporary literature on post-financial crisis Detroit in the age of austerity urbanism are epistemological, theoretical and praxis-based. Through the variety of methodologies exercised to carry out the cases that comprise this dissertation, consistent effort was made to ground theory within the myriad forms of socially reproductive work being carried out by Detroit residents. The inductive research that comprises the articles was attentive to the rapidly shifting socio-economic landscape in Detroit at the time that data and observation were being collected. Although initial research questions guided this work, the evolution of the post-bankruptcy property market and the concerns and strategic though sometimes triage responses of residents became the basis for theorizing (Charmez, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In the spirit of recognizing the space-time connection between spatial struggles (Harvey, 1990), my articles focus on the spatial tactics taken up by community elders and inspiration drawn from people's political histories within the black radical tradition.

Whereas Safransky's (2018) historical dialectic takes particular interest in histories of oppression that should act as context for contemporary theorization and praxis concerning land, a thread throughout the three articles presented here is the importance of people's relationships to space as an epistemological tool, of knowing places through people through the spatial struggles in which they are engaged. I demonstrate three distinct ways of knowing places though people in these dissertation articles that prioritize forms of knowledge production built out of relationships and upholding legacies of struggle as ontologically central in knowing a place. This is accomplished through the feminist biographical investigation of Grace Lee Boggs and her enduring legacy on direct action in Detroit. A more collaborative approach was taken through action research conducted from within the board of directors of the Tricycle Collective; through which our decision making processes as activists and my personal self reflection provide pointed

considerations about accountability to anti-racism as people whose work was directly impacting the production of space in the city, as well as the real material conditions of precariously housed people. Lastly, the ethnographic interview data shared in the final article from conversations with black women in Detroit's urban agriculture community provide insider insight and analysis that I imagine as filling in the purpose spaces and cracks that theory alone cannot fill.

Though Safransky does not make mention of David Harvey's work on space and time connections and geographical imagination, both pursue a historical geographic approach for the sake of critically getting to the core of social constructions that comprise the production of space. The continued focus on socially reproduction work throughout these dissertation articles has served the purpose of placing the struggle for land and housing by Detroiters today within the context of the work they are engaged in or have done to challenge disinvestment and austerity. Since definitions of objective space and time are mixed up in socially reproductive processes (Harvey, 1990), fellow Detroit-focused scholars have identified this particular time in relation to development in Detroit within the framing of austerity urbanism. The analysis through which I present ideas and theorizations about Detroit remains centered on the actions of residents who are resisting racial capitalism and austerity urbanism, and direction toward action from a theoretical perspective. This centering of action comes out of the radical undercurrents within critical geography and political ecology, to address the urgencies within urban politics at hand in both theoretical and empirical senses. The following sentiment from Swyngedouw and Heynen particularly resonates with the theoretical practice I carry out as a spatial thinker;

To the extent that an emancipatory urban politics resides in acquiring the power to produce urban environments in line with aspirations, needs and desires of those inhabiting these spaces-the capacity to produce socially the physical social environments in which one dwells- the question of whose nature is or becomes urbanized may be at the forefront of any radical political action. (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003, p. 915)

Fellow Detroit-focused scholars tend to examine the common themes of this school, property politics, financialization and the extraction of capital, infrastructure and planning, and neoliberal politics as the scales at which these systems and institutions operate themselves. If we can acknowledge as urban geographers that place itself is a geographic institution within policy

relevance (Gale, 2015), dynamism in how it is our theory and praxis navigates across the various scales of affect of policy, from the institution to the neighborhood, reflects a research design model that Rocheleau calls “ political ecology in the key of policy”, that entails the following five hallmarks: 1) the use of multiple methods, 2) the integration social and biophysical analysis of power, 3) multi-scale analysis, 4) empirical observation and data gathered at the household and local level, and 5) chains of explanation combining structure and agency (D. E. Rocheleau, 2008). Not dissimilar from Burawoy’s extended case that emphasizes prolonged ethnographic engagement and multidimensional investigation, Rocheleau’s hallmarks are keystones for effective community engagement in investigations involving the impact of policy.

Detroit-focused scholarship tends toward working in abstraction at the scale of institutions or systems that feel beyond the realm of influence through individual action by residents. Conducting intimate and interpersonal scales of research focused the efforts of collectives, communities and individuals is critically important in interjecting socially reproductive labor into how macro-level structural inequalities are experienced in people’s lives on a daily basis. My time in Detroit has shown me the importance of engaging at the scale of the neighborhood. My theoretical tendency is to produce theory at a scale that feels within the realm of control that residents may effectively intervene within and build on through collective power. Working within this level of theoretical movement underlying the structural and institutional realities of austerity and racialization, my critical realist approach to research situates my thinking within the traditions of Marx and Lefebvre, both commonly found within contemporary critical geography (Roberts, 2001). This scale and the subjects of my research differentiates my work from fellow Detroit-focused scholarship in that my interest lies within Piers Blaikie’s claim that research, and specifically political ecology research ought to be useful (Blaikie, 2012). The question that follows should be for whom should theory be useful for and in what ways?

As evidenced in the article that focuses on the foreclosure prevention action research I conducted as a member of the Tricycle Collective and more directly on the process of working within a feminist housing collective, my intellectual practice and knowledge production are in service of working class people and the material, social, and economic struggles that constitute that particular subject position today. To be in alignment with working class struggle commands an

anti-racist orientation, in research and praxis that acknowledges the distinct challenges faced by black and people of color driven by racial capitalism, global histories of dispossession, and the creation of diasporas driven by colonization and the expansion of capital (Gilroy, 1993; Leong, 2013). As suggested by Kobayashi (2014), we have to practice anti-racism and knowing places through racial discrimination by working with the scholarship of Black geographers, and I would add decolonial and Third World feminist scholars as well. The necessarily complimentary frameworks of race and class analysis have always come together for me in Marxist and feminist theory, and it is from within these intellectual tendencies that I situate my research. I am humbly aware of the founded critiques of Marxism's early days of race-blindness and feminist theory's ongoing and necessary work toward race and class consciousness, particularly from feminist perspectives from within academia. These tools, flawed as they are, are what I actively chose to work with for their commitments to justice and equity foregrounded by a commitment to the advancement of humanity.

Doing the work of critical race theory throughout my dissertation research necessitated ongoing discussion and reflection among other white anti-racist scholars, and with black and people of color who were willing to offer their time these conversations. What my research offers to fellow Detroit-focused scholars is the encouragement to acknowledge the ways we ourselves may be participating in complacencies that contradict the sorts of justice-oriented or critical race research we produce. A question I pose to fellow Detroit-focused researchers who are not black is, how are you engaging with black geographies in your work? What ways of rewriting the state toward acknowledging carcerality and black struggle does or can your work contribute to, if not now than in the future? Who are you in conversation with, and what is the quality of those relationships? What are we offering to relationship and what are we taking away from them?

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## Appendix

### List of interview participants

Interview Participants	Date Interviewed	Interview Location
1. Alicia Alvarez Center	2/18/2017	University of Michigan, Detroit
2. Amy Eckert	11/17/2016	Fish Eye Farm, Novi, MI
3. Andy Chae	11/17/2016	Fisheye Farm, Novi, MI
4. Willow	5/15/2017	The Twisted Fork, Grosse Pointe, MI
5. Cathy Snyg	10/4/2017	Private residents, Detroit, MI
6. Emily Staugitis	6/4/2017	Oloman Café, Hamtramck, MI
7. Erika Linenfelser	18/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
8. Erin Kelly	3/14/2017	Beyond Juice Bar, Southfield, MI
9. Greg Willerer	15/09/2016	Sister Acres Farm, Detroit, MI
10. Jerry Hebron	11/23/2016	Oakland Ave Farm, Detroit, MI
11. Karanja Famodou	10/10/2016	D-Town Farm, Detroit, MI
12. Kate Devlin	20/10/2016	Spirit Farm, Detroit
13. Kathryn Lynch Underwood	15/11/2016	Coleman Young Center, Detroit, MI
14. Katie Hern	10/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
15. Mahala Clayton	10/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
16. Malik Yakini	12/6/2017	DBCFSN* Office, Detroit, MI
17. Margot Dalal	3/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit MI
18. Mark Covington MI	15/5/2017	Georgia Street Collective, Detroit,
19. Mark Sudean	21/1/2017	Source Booksellers, Detroit, MI
20. Marsha Philpot Battle	16/5/2017	The Playhouse, Detroit
21. Meghan Strickland	14/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
22. Michelle Oberholtzer	14/12/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
23. Mike Score	16/1/2017	Hantz Woodland Farms, Detroit, MI
24. Molly Hubble	8/2/2017	Northern Lights Lounge, Detroit, MI
25. Monique	7/6/2017	Private Residents, Detroit
26. Nfr Esters	14/12/2017	Private residents, Detroit
27. Niam Edwards	10/3/2017	Voices for Earth Justice, Detroit, MI
28. Nick Leonard	11/1/2017	Green Garage, Detroit, MI
29. Noah Link	19/6/2017	Food Field, Detroit, MI
30. Cecile	21/10/2016	Private residents, Detroit, MI
31. Paul Wertz	9/2/2017	Private residents, Detroit, MI
32. Richard Feldman	27/4/2017	The Boggs Center, Detroit, MI
33. Rosie Sharp	6/12/2016	Shipherd Greens, Detroit, MI
34. Shea Howel	26/4/2017	Avalon Bakery, Detroit, MI
35. Tepferiah Rudan	10/3/2017	Keep Growing Detroit, Detroit, MI

36. Victoria Olivier  
MI

20/3/2017

Detroit Future City office, Detroit,

37. Wayne Curtis  
MI

6/6/2017

Cass Community Commons, Detroit,