Rui(N)ation: Narratives of Art and Urban Revitalization in Detroit

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the City of Detroit as a case study for analyzing the complex role that artists and art institutions are playing in the potential re-growth and revitalization of the city. I specifically look at artists and arts organizations who are working against the popular narrative of Detroit as “ruin city.” Their efforts create counter narratives that emphasize stories of survival and showcase vibrant communities. By focussing on artist-led and institutional initiatives, I emphasize the importance of art in both community and narrative-building.

This research has taken the form of a written dissertation and two adapted projects, and positions scholarship on urban revitalization and critical race theory in relation to gentrification. Using existing socio-political theories, I carry out a critical analysis of Detroit specifically because it is a real-time case study of a post-industrial city in the process of major revitalization. There are many cities in the United States that have and are currently experiencing similar transformations, but Detroit is distinctly significant for two important reasons. Never in the history of the U.S. has a city like Detroit, once so economically prosperous, declared bankruptcy. Secondly, Detroit fell so hard during this bankruptcy and the time leading up to it, that a space opened up for new opportunities, creativity and innovations born of resourcefulness due to the lack – lack of food, lack of housing, lack of clean water, lack of people, etc. So now, all eyes are on Detroit. What has the city, its institutions and organizations done? And what effect has this attention had on the grassroots movements, artist and community projects that grew in the spaces created by this bankruptcy? Detroit represents a city filled with possibility: the possibility to tell a different story of recovery.

Keywords: Detroit, urban revitalization, ruins, neoliberalism, community, narratives, insider, outsider, art institutions, public programs, gentrification, bankruptcy, photography, identity, race

1 On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 Bankruptcy protection, marking the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the United States.
Summary

This dissertation is about the role of art in the revitalization of Detroit. Specifically, I look at the role artists, art projects, and the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) have in shifting the negative narrative of Detroit from “ruin city” to a people-centred narrative. I look at projects by artists from Detroit, both those currently residing in and those returning to the city. Their art includes photography, film, and installation work and allows the people of Detroit to tell the story of their city from their own perspectives. Additionally, I examine how the bankruptcy of Detroit affected its art museum, and the types of exhibitions, programming, and revitalization efforts resulting from this event. By focussing on artist-led and institutional initiatives, I emphasize the importance of art in both community and narrative-building.

This research has taken the form of a written dissertation and two adapted projects – a guest panel of arts and culture workers from London, Windsor, and Detroit; and an exhibition of artist Suzy Lake and filmmaker Orland Ford’s work on Detroit. There are many cities in the United States that have and are currently experiencing similar transformations, but Detroit is distinctly significant for two important reasons. Never in the history of the U.S. has a city like Detroit, once so economically prosperous, declared bankruptcy.2 Secondly, Detroit fell so hard during this bankruptcy and the time leading up to it, that a space opened up for new opportunities, creativity and innovations born of resourcefulness due to the lack – lack of food, lack of housing, lack of clean water, lack of people, etc. So now, all eyes are on Detroit. What has the city, its institutions and organizations done? And what effect has this attention had on the grassroots movements, artist and community projects that grew in the spaces created by this bankruptcy? Detroit represents a city filled with possibility: the possibility to tell a different story of recovery.

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2 On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 Bankruptcy protection, marking the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the United States.
Epigraph

“A book or a work of art – culture – cannot by itself change the world, but by asking the questions that matter, it might attempt to be an act of articulation against violence, both the brutal and the casual kinds. It might aspire to starting a conversation through which together we might find common meaning, and words that free.”

– Jeff Chang, *Who We Be: The Colorization of America*
Dedication

To my “revolutionary mama;” without you, none of this would be possible.
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Introduction

“The Stories we tell about a place form a kind of DNA – shaping what that place is and what it can become.”
- Detroit Narrative Agency

As I drive east along the seemingly endless Grand Boulevard, away from Detroit’s urban core, through neighbourhoods with small houses, large houses, abandoned houses, and run-down houses, past the giant industrial island of the GM Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly plant, under the iconic Packard Plant’s arch, over bumpy pothole pocked asphalt, I realize that I don’t know how to use my GPS and that I probably should have asked for more detailed directions. For example, how long will it take to drive from my architecture tour of the Fisher Building on West Grand Boulevard to the Aquarium on Belle Isle? How many miles will this be and does it really take me through so many different areas of the city? But really, I understand miles as well as I do my GPS and how does one accurately describe what to expect along Detroit’s grand thoroughfare?

There I was “lost” in Detroit, by myself for the first time, and forced to stop and ask for a new set of directions, having lost all confidence in the originals. I pulled to the side of the road just past the Packard Plant where the boulevard becomes residential again and approached two women, an elderly mother and her daughter sitting on their porch enjoying the hot August day. It was in this moment of fear of being lost, trepidation at approaching strangers, and intense awareness of my position as an outsider in this city that is so very exhausted by its gawking visitors, that I learned what Detroit is.³ Detroit is a city where the faces of two women sitting on their porch light up at a stranger approaching them to ask for directions. Detroit is a city of generosity of spirit, of giving even when you have nothing but directions left to give. Detroit is a city filled with people who care – about their neighbours, their communities, their homes, their culture, and

³ I have been acutely aware of my position as a white, female, academic, outsider since I began my research on this PhD project and I have made every effort to approach my work in a careful, respectful, compassionate manner. My auto-ethnographic method permeates this dissertation to both acknowledge my subject position in Detroit, as well as to emphasize the power and importance of story-telling – and in a dissertation about story-telling and narrative creation, it has been important to include my story about Detroit. My story of Detroit, as a white, female, academic, outsider is not without complications because of my privileged position.
strangers approaching them on a Sunday afternoon in August. Detroit is people who care about their city. People who have been there all along, residing at the margins of the ruin photography and abandonment narratives that have come to define their city.

On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 Bankruptcy protection, marking the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the United States. Many stories of unemployment, poverty, violence, abandonment and exodus resulted in substantially decreased land values and empty homes left to looters, vandalism, arson, and the blight that came to be associated with Detroit’s downfall. Suburbanization, industrial decentralization of the auto industry, desegregation, and race riots were several leading factors in the early years of the “downsizing of Detroit.” The continual decrease in population and rising unemployment rates resulted in a decaying and deserted city.

Scott Martell explains that:

[l]eft behind are the financially isolated and immobile – the uneducated and undereducated and those with pressing medical, psychological, or drug problems. Without access to reliable transportation, they also lose access to suburban jobs. In Detroit, the problem is compounded by the spread of its geography and an inadequate public transportation system.

The shrinking tax base has continued to take a toll on the city’s services leaving many residents without water and electricity. At the time of the bankruptcy, approximately 40 percent of street lights were out, the average police response time was 58 minutes; only a third of the city’s ambulances were in service and the violent crime rate was at 2,137 incidents with a homicide rate of 48.2 per 100,000 residents.

The narrative of Detroit as “ruin city” has now become stale and yet there are ongoing misconceptions regarding the state of the city. Too often, in relation to the topic

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5 Scott Martell cites the 1967 Detroit Rebellion as “a powerful propeller behind already existing forces, exacerbating racial and class divides drawn by the national trend toward suburbanization, industrial decentralization by automakers and other industries, and local white reaction to housing desegregation.” Scott Martelle, *Detroit (A Biography)* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012), 195. Mark Binelli states that even today, blame for Detroit’s demise is placed on the Race Riots of 1967. Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 112.
6 Martelle, *Detroit (A Biography)*, 225.
of this dissertation, I am asked, why Detroit? I almost always answer by recounting the preceding story, describing the kindness of strangers that has come to define the city for me. My experience of Detroit, the one lying below the surface of the negative images, stereotypes, statistics, and abject narratives, is the counter narrative of survival and thriving that has emerged with the help of community groups and artists projects. A narrative of opportunity seized and created by the communities of Detroit with the goal to capitalize on the space that Detroit’s bankruptcy and abandonment opened up. With opportunities to create a different type of revitalization – a type that breaks the cycle of revitalization-by-gentrification, thus becomes a story of the margins re-inhabiting, repopulating, and reenergizing a new sense of “city.” This dissertation analyzes the role of the arts and the emphasis on creativity and creation in a process of revitalizing Detroit.

In order to understand the counter narratives emerging from Detroit, the negative narratives that have been pouring out of the city for decades must be examined. Negative representations include the proliferation of stories and imagery of ruin, decay, blight, and white flight that have dominated discussions of Detroit since the 1950s. These negative representations reinforced the city’s negative reputation as a dangerous but also empty, uninhabitable, and undesirable city. There was a popular resurgence of images of Detroit’s ruin around the time of the recession in 2008/2009. These images objectify the city and deny the subjectivity of the people who live there. The term “ruin porn” was coined after James Griffioen used it in an interview with Vice Magazine, to describe the proliferation of images of ruin coming out of Detroit. As over-used as it has become, it accurately describes the objectifying nature of this type of photography. Griffioen, a local blogger and photographer became somewhat known for his Detroit ruins.

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8 I have classified these types of images as perpetuating negative representations and thus a negative narrative of the city. These images often times lack (human) context and either erase or deny the presence of people living in the city. The danger of this is that the social and political issues affecting human beings are omitted in order to discuss, speculate, and celebrate revitalization projects that will bring people and tax dollars back into the city.

9 “But you get worn down trying to show them all the different sides of the city, then watching them go back and write the same story as everyone else. The photographers are the worst. Basically the only thing they’re interested in shooting is ruin porn.” Thomas Morton, “Something, Something, Something, Detroit,” Vice, July 31, 2009,  https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/ppzb9z/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8.
photography after Vice UK published a series he produced that documented an abandoned public school.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Literature Review}

Literature and art on urban ruins often focuses on the aesthetics of decay resulting from post-industrial and post-modern fallout and the practice of urban exploring.\textsuperscript{11} The common themes that emerge focus on the idea that ruins are manifestations of a failed modernity and our interest in them is a reflection of our nostalgia for the past. The book, \textit{Ruins} (2011), from the series, “Documents of Contemporary Art,” is exemplary of the discourse on ruin and begins by defining the 21\textsuperscript{st}-century thus far, as a century of ruin. Beginning with the collapse of the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, followed closely by the crash of the housing market and recession in 2008, this century has regularly been defined by images of destruction and abandonment and a resulting urban decay. The post-industrial, rust-belt city like Detroit, with its high unemployment and foreclosure rates, has become the poster-child of this century. Naturally, Detroit’s declaration of bankruptcy thrust the city and its decades-old ruins back into the spotlight. Within the first paragraph of the introduction to the aforementioned book, Editor Brian Dillon points to Detroit as the ‘prime example’ of this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Ruins}, like much of the literature on this subject, looks at the physical ruins of the past century as “an allegory for global or regional political forces.”\textsuperscript{13} These ruins act as a manifestation of our current political and economic climate, and as a warning regarding what our present (structures, ways of life etc.) could potentially lead to and become. The essays in the collection perpetuate a narrative of ruin as sublime – that which we are most fascinated with because it terrifies us – it is a physical reminder of our potentially imminent demise.

\textsuperscript{10} Traffic to the site tripled for a week, which in internet time is a long time. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Urban exploring is the exploration of abandoned man-made structures and became popular in the early 2000s. It can be highly dangerous and is usually illegal trespassing. Often times it results in the photographing of these spaces, categorized as ruin photography.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 11.
Dylan Trigg’s book *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (2006) takes up this theme of sublime ruins while looking at them in relation to the subjects of memory, place and nostalgia. Trigg, like others writing on ruins, begins his story with modernity and the assumption that modernity was rational and defined by the notion of progress. His argument is that ruins are the physical evidence that this belief was wrong, or rather “that the modern ruin redefines progress by embodying decline.”\(^{14}\) This book seems to be a celebration of the ruin and its physical presence as a reminder of the inextricable link between progress and decay, rationality and ruination. Marshall Berman quoted in Camilo Jose Vergara’s photo documentary book, *American Ruins* (1999) writes, “Urban ruination is serious; it is real; it is not a stage set; it has spiritual authenticity. Symbols of modern life have turned into symbols of death. There is nothing like it in the suburbs. Getting down to the bottom of things puts you in touch with some kind of ultimate reality.”\(^{15}\) Yet the problem with this work and Berman’s romanticized abstraction of reality, is that it overlooks the lives that are affected by ruins – the people who live alongside them and what implications ruins have on their daily lives.

In his essay describing Dave Jordano’s process of inserting people back into the landscape and narrative of Detroit, photographer Dawoud Bey, celebrated for his depictions of life and the people in Harlem, New York, explains that:

> The photographs of Andrew Moore and others [Vergara, and more recently, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre] that visualized Detroit at some point gave rise to the genre of Detroit ruin porn; large scale color photographs, made with large format cameras that described in exquisite detail a Detroit that is almost post-apocalyptic, and generally makes use of the same subjects and locations repeatedly. Certainly it didn’t appear that life in any normal sense continued in Detroit; the city appears to be effectively depopulated in those photographs.\(^{16}\)

Here, Bey pushes the question, why do these images persist, and explains that it comes down to a level of ignorance about a place and a lack of genuine engagement with the

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local population. Images of Detroit’s ruin are not necessarily a misrepresentation of the city, rather a one-dimensional point of view.

Oscillating somewhere between a negative and realistic outlook Dora Apel’s book, Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline (2015) is a critique of the proliferation of images and narratives of ruin that have been coming out of Detroit. Apel asks: in all of these images of abandon and ruin, where are all the people? Where are the images and stories of the people who are living through this economic disaster and amongst the ruin and decay? What kind of art is being made with regards to the life that still very much exists in Detroit? Apel uses images of Detroit (photography, advertising, television, documentaries, video games and film) to explore the ways in which this type of ruin imagery plays into society’s anxiety over the failure of capitalism. Detroit is the poster child of failed capitalism, and the proliferation of imagery of the city – the decay, the abandonment, and the detritus – are proof of this failure. This book acts as a warning that the failure of capitalism is not just Detroit’s problem, but perhaps a cautionary tale of what is to come for other North American cities (or what they have already come to be).

Dillon’s work looks at how ruins point towards our future. He sees the ruin as filled with potential that can help us to envision a radical future. Ruins are filled with “unexplored temporality” and “utopian promise.” But what about right now? What about the people currently surrounded by ruin? Outside of the aesthetics and literature on ruins, how do we envision a future for the citizens, the inhabitants of these cities filled with ruin?18

17 Jordano, Detroit Unbroken Down, 18.
18 Svetlana Boym defines her concept of “ruinophilia” as a 21st century phenomenon and a fascination for ruins that, “relates to the prospective dimension of nostalgia, the type of nostalgia that is reflective rather than restorative and dreams of the potential futures rather than imaginary pasts.” She explains that modern ruins as viewed through a 21st century perspective encourage a critical questioning of the ideals of modern progress and “make us aware of the vagaries of progressive visions.” She positions the radical aspect of this type of nostalgia in relation to urban development (and revitalization if you will). She examines ruined spaces (in Berlin and Budapest) that have been taken over by artists etc. and preserved in a functional way rather than for conservation. This act has a way of preserving important histories not to celebrate them but to critically reflect on them as well as time, what time means to people, and what kind of future can be envisioned. Additionally, this recycling and quasi activist take-over of spaces resist capitalist revitalizations and preservations of spaces, in other words, gentrification.
This is where my research is located. My work intends to bridge the gap between the ruin discourse of Dillon and Trigg with the Detroit and people-specific approach of Dora Apel. The discourse on ruins emphasizes that they exist as a physical manifestation of modernity’s failure and thus, such discourse has come to define Detroit, the poster child of modern progress, as a failure. My project intends to dismantle this narrative by looking at how counter-narratives have the potential to affect positive change for the revitalization of Detroit. These counter-narratives include voices like that of filmmaker and Detroit Narrative Agency cohort member, Orlando Ford, who explained his frustration with the perpetuation of ruin imagery in the media. He described an example from the New York Times website:

They had this [video] a while ago about scrappers. These guys were digging in this return pit – digging out scrap metal to sell. It looked like prospectors from the 1900s. I’m like, that’s not my frickin’ city! That’s just a bunch of guys who wanna get dirty every day and don’t want a job – I mean there aren’t that many jobs. It’s just interesting that they pick that subject matter and then that’s the video clip that plays for seven minutes on the NY Times website. I find that highly offensive.

My research considers how artists, like Ford, are addressing the people problem of this equation of ruins, and my case studies illuminate what artists are doing to perpetuate a different kind of narrative for the city of Detroit; a narrative that is about more than empty ruins.

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19 The case studies I have analyzed for this dissertation include photography, installation, film, and curatorial projects that insert people and their personal experiences and stories into art about Detroit. I have positioned these specific projects and these methods of creating counter-narratives as “positive” in relation to the proliferation of negative narratives of Detroit – those encountered in ruin porn. Ruin porn captures beautiful images of Detroit’s ruins without asking critical questions about the state of the city and the population residing there.

Methodology
The City of Detroit is itself a case study for analyzing the complex role that artists and art institutions are playing in the potential re-growth and revitalization of the city. I am specifically looking at artists and arts organizations who are working against the popular narrative of Detroit as “ruin city.” Their efforts create counter narratives that emphasize stories of survival and showcase vibrant communities. Many of these narratives include individuals who are fighting to save Detroit while taking advantage of this period of potential growth to make their neighbourhoods safe and livable spaces. My study offers fresh insight into the question of how art produces counter narratives to the familiar trope of the ruined city. By focusing on artist-led and institutional initiatives, I emphasize the importance of art in both community and narrative-building. We have seen how beautiful images of ruin have had the power to perpetuate the negative stereotype of Detroit as a ruin city. It is time we now focus on different images and projects that provide an alternative vision of the city.

This PhD research has taken the form of a written dissertation and two adapted projects, bringing scholarship on urban ruins, narratives and counter narratives, aspects of critical race theory, neoliberalism and urban revitalization, and museum studies and contemporary art into conversation with one another in order to develop an understanding of the capacity of art to communicate and perpetuate narratives, both negative and positive. I examine how artists, cultural workers, and community activists in Detroit are working through the lens of Afrofuturism to weave their own narratives that envision a future for African Americans in Detroit. Using existing socio-political theories, I have carried out a critical analysis of Detroit specifically because it is a real-time case study of a post-industrial city in the process of major revitalization.

My research methodology has included meeting with and interviewing artists, curators, community activists, and an interpretive specialist at the DIA. In addition to this, I visited various exhibitions; attended conferences, presentations, workshops, and information sessions; and took part in guided (and self-guided) tours of the city. Four main artists’ projects anchor my research: Suzy Lake’s *Performing an Archive* (2014/2016), Dave Jordano’s *Detroit Unbroken Down* (2010-2015), the Detroit Narrative Agency (DNA) and two films supported by the project, and Complex Movements’
Beware the Dandelions (2015-2016). In addition to these, I examined three exhibitions at the DIA: *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit* (March 15 – July 12, 2015), *Photographs from the Detroit Walk-In Portrait Studio by Corine Vermeulen* (November 14, 2012 – May 31st, 2015), and *30 Americans* (October 18, 2015 – January 18, 2016), as well as the museum’s latest initiative, the DIA Plaza and Midtown Cultural Connections Project. I have used interview material – both first and second hand interviews, exhibition reviews, relevant literature and discourse, and my own observations and visual analyses to examine these projects in relation to their narrative-shifting potential.

My research afforded me an understanding of what it meant for artists like Jordano and Lake to return to their city of origin and engage in projects that take the city, the built environment, the people and their stories as the subject. My analysis of the DNA Project and *Beware the Dandelions* is an important counter to Jordano and Lake’s projects because they involve story-telling and narrative-building from within Detroit. These project encompasses works from native Detroiters attempting to tell the story of their city from inside the city.

Attending conferences in Detroit became an important aspect of my research. The Allied Media Conference brings together people from across North America in an attempt to discuss and devise creative solutions to “the most significant problems of our day.”\(^\text{22}\) This conference tackles issues of marginalization – racism, poverty, displacement, homophobia, as well as environmental, educational, and economic issues in both an educational and interactive format. The conference includes presentations, workshops, discussions, performances, dinners, and social nights, and takes place over the course of four days. Through my annual attendance at this conference I was introduced to projects and open source tools that became central to my research.\(^\text{23}\) Additionally, the ability to network and interact in creative, problem-solving workshops helped to broaden my understanding of the issues facing Detroit and other cities like it. The IdeasCity Detroit Conference, organized by the New Museum, was the culmination of a week-long residency that brought together emerging practitioners from the fields of art, community activism, design, and technology. The objective was for the residents to engage with

\(^{22}\) AMC Program and Workbook, 2016.

\(^{23}\) For example, the DNA Project and Alyssa Machida’s Dreamscape Workbook.
various communities in Detroit and come up with creative solutions to the problems affecting these areas. The conference was a day-long event during which the residents presented their projects, what they learned from the people they engaged with, and the difficulties they faced. The day also included panel presentations and discussions by professionals in various arts, culture, design, and political fields. Again, this conference was invaluable to my research because each group presented many issues pertinent to my field of study. Furthermore, the emphasis on working with the communities and people of Detroit has guided my research in that direction, helping me to understand the importance of the various narratives coming out of Detroit.

There are many cities in the United States that have and are currently experiencing similar transformations, but Detroit is distinctly significant for two important reasons. Never in the history of the U.S. has a city like Detroit, once so economically prosperous, declared bankruptcy. Secondly, Detroit fell so hard during this bankruptcy and the time leading up to it, that a space opened up for new opportunities, creativity, and innovations born of resourcefulness due to the lack – lack of food, lack of housing, lack of clean water, lack of people, etc. So now, all eyes are on Detroit. What will the city, its institutions, and organizations do? And what effect will this attention have on the grassroots movements, artist and community projects that were planted in the spaces created by this bankruptcy? Detroit represents a city filled with possibility: the possibility to tell a different story of recovery.

**Art and Urban Revitalization in Detroit**

My study shows a complex field of creative practices developing within an arguably once dead city. I have focussed on two sectors with different motivations: communities and art institutions. Both sectors are generating counter narratives to the trope of the dead city or ruin city. My work has explored these narratives, the motivations for their creation, and how they are impacting the revitalization of Detroit. Situated within this context, and at the nexus of this dissertation are artist’s projects that are working to espouse counter narratives. Many of the projects challenge viewers to consider the ‘problem of Detroit’ (previously understood as the abandoned, derelict, bankrupted city) as a site of lived
experience, rather than as a people problem – and to consider a social welfare issue that involves the neglect and marginalization of entire communities.

I have organized the first chapter around two photography projects by artists returning to Detroit. Detroit native Suzy Lake’s work, *Performing an Archive* (2014/2016), represents a ‘coming home’ to a very different city than the one she left when she came to Canada, in 1968. This project combines Lake’s photographic practice with archival and mapping work to achieve a genealogy of Lake’s family and the city she grew up in. Through an analysis of this project, I consider what it means for a city to be observed and often times gawked at by outsiders and how this phenomenon is examined through the lens of Lake’s camera. Another Detroit native, Dave Jordano’s 2015 AIMA / AGO Photography Prize-winning photograph series, *Detroit - Unbroken Down* (2010-2015), depicts survival rather than the more popular theme of ruin that has come to define Detroit. His photographs of the people of Detroit picture the human experience of post-industrialism and emphasize the strength of the human spirit over hardship and struggle. Jordano’s series develops the human story of what is going on in Detroit.

In chapter two I examine the work of two collectives based in Detroit. The Detroit Narrative Agency (DNA) has approached the subject of narrative from an intimate, inside perspective. The project is the result of a collaboration between local artists, community members, and organizers, and aims “to change the stories that form the future of [Detroit].”24 Using moving image productions (film, video installation, emerging multi-media forms, etc.), DNA is intended to create an ‘authentic’ narrative of Detroit, by the people of Detroit. This project’s insider perspective stands in contrast to Lake and Jordano’s outsider perspectives and has become a platform for people living, surviving, and thriving in Detroit, to tell their own stories. *Beware the Dandelions* (2015-2016) is a mobile art installation that functions as a performance, workshop space, and a visual arts exhibition, and was premiered in three cities across the United States from April 2015-October 2016.25 This project combines the various talents and specialties of the Detroit-based art collective Complex Movements and aims to build resilient communities through

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art, story-telling, and engaging community workshops. *Beware the Dandelions* teaches participants how to resist marginalization at the hands of corporate revitalization of urban space, through community-building.

The final chapter focuses on the role of one art institution in the revitalization of the city. The Detroit Institute of Arts has been at the centre of Detroit’s bankruptcy narrative because of the widespread awareness of the potential deaccessioning of the museum’s collection to pay down city debt. In the thesis I analyze this highly charged issue and its solution, which involved complex and intersecting forces within the politics of the city, and among its museum boards, donors, and the state of Michigan. Furthermore, I examine several museum initiatives and exhibitions aimed at inclusion and accessibility, including the 2007 overhaul of the Institute’s education and exhibition programming as well as the more recent 2018 DIA Plaza and Midtown Cultural Connections Project initiative to create user-friendly spaces outside of the museum. Finally, through the lens of Alyssa Machida’s Dreamspace Project, I propose not only a re-thinking of the museum but an approach to urban revitalization that includes a reconsideration of entrenched beliefs and processes closely tied to colonial histories of oppression. Art and art institutions alone cannot change the imbalance of wealth, power, and access, but they can provide a platform, a means, and a space in which to discuss and debate issues that affect us all.

In addition to the written dissertation, my research has taken the form of two projects. The first project was a discussion panel, *Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities* (April 20, 2017) that brought together three cultural workers from London, Windsor, and Detroit on the subject of art, communities, and revitalization. Nicole (Nicki) Borland, Program Director at LondonFuse, a not-for-profit online and print (ShortFuse) publication that promotes local art and culture, discussed the role of small, local publications in celebrating and promoting community and cultural connectedness. Detroit-based artist and a community advocate Halima Cassells presented her perspective on a city that many people fear and do not understand, and her role in changing that negative narrative. She shared her involvement in organizations like the Oakland Avenue Artists Coalition, O.N.E. Mile project, Incite Focus Fab Lab, Center for Community Based Enterprise, and the Free Market of Detroit,
and how, through these collaborations, she has helped to build community and give a voice to marginalized people living in Detroit. Finally, Jessica Cook, Education and Public Programs Coordinator at the Art Gallery of Windsor, presented an overview of her artistic practice, community engagement work, and she discussed her work at the University of Windsor that includes building a model that incorporates Indigenous practices of education through engaging with and understanding nature. The panel resulted in a rich, multi-faceted conversation about arts, culture, collaboration, and community growth.

The second project involved curating the exhibition, *Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford* (June 8-30, 2018) at McIntosh Gallery on the Western University campus. Bringing artwork by Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford into conversation, the exhibition included six works by Lake from her *Performing an Archive* series (2014/2016) and Ford’s short film for DNA, *Where the Heart Is* (2017). Both of these projects are discussed individually and in greater detail in the first two chapters of this dissertation in terms of the outsider-insider narrative creation. The exhibition responded to images of Detroit as a ruin city, those which aestheticize and make a spectacle of decay and poverty in Detroit. The exhibition brought together two artists who, through their work, propose a counternarrative to prevailing ideas about the post-industrial city.

I have considered the aforementioned case studies and adapted projects as helping me to analyze and understand the interests and motivations of the various groups working to revitalize Detroit. My aim was that they would assist in answering my over-arching questions: what role are the arts playing in the revitalization of Detroit? And how are the arts affecting and shaping a new narrative of Detroit. Each group has an agenda and through my analysis of these case studies, I have come to understand how these agendas are operating, and to recognize their potential to create real, sustainable change in a city that has been on the brink for decades.
Chapter 1. Beyond Ruin: Photographing Home in Detroit

"be easy.
take your time.
you are coming
home.
to yourself."
- the becoming by Nayyirah Waheed

Introduction

A tiny figure dressed in black hopscotches across the picture plane. Chalk marks are just barely visible on the concrete sidewalk that stretches out in front of a dilapidated century home. The windows are boarded up, the green paint is chipping, and the front porch is collapsing in on itself. To the immediate right is a well-maintained, contemporary home. Its siding and shutters very much in tact – not a single sign of chipped paint. A lovely little fence divides the two houses and the very different realities that each represents. Our girl, mid jump, seems to be flying out of the picture – away from this ominous-looking house whose decay looms over her, threatening to swallow her. The audio tour accompanying the DIA’s winter blockbuster exhibition, 30 Americans (2015-2016) asks the viewer to consider the following question: is she skipping away from her present reality to her shiny, new future? Or, is this her reality? Like that of many American children growing up in declining or already declined cities living alongside ruin everyday of their lives. The green house in this photograph stands as a reminder that cities all over America seem to be collapsing in on themselves.

As I stand in front of Xaviera Simmons’ photograph, Appear, Appease, Applaud (Also, Perhaps, Maybe) (2008), in an intimate corner of the special exhibitions gallery at the DIA, contemplating the layers of complex meanings and potential interpretations of this image, I question the power of photographs to determine our understanding of a place. Specifically, as I stand in a museum in Detroit, I question, what have photographs done for Detroit? What have photographs that picture the ruin and decay in Detroit, done for Detroit?

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Xaviera Simmons is a Brooklyn-based artist. This photograph was not taken in Detroit, rather it was taken in Syracuse. I use it here as an example of the ruins that plague many post-industrial cities across America.
This chapter analyses photographic projects that provide a counter narrative to popular images of ruin in Detroit and explores the power of photographs in determining our understanding of a place while questioning, how have photographs that picture the ruin and decay in Detroit shaped ideas about the city? Images of Detroit’s ruin have been steadily pouring out of the city for over a decade now and have arguably played an important role in initiating interest in the revitalization of the city. However, these images aestheticize and make a spectacle of the decay and poverty in Detroit. This spectacularization is being countered by images that include the people residing and thriving amongst the perceived decay. Images like those by award-winning photographers and returning Detroiters, Suzy Lake and Dave Jordano testify to human resilience. This chapter examines alternative narratives of Detroit in art projects from artists with different relationships to the city. I examine what it means to return to Detroit to photograph it by looking at the very different approaches of Suzy Lake and Dave Jordano in their respective projects and subsequent publications, *Performing an Archive* (2014-2015) and *Detroit - Unbroken Down* (2010-2015). Both artists utilize carefully staged, portrait-style photography to tell their stories of Detroit.

The question of picturing Detroit’s ruins has been examined by artists, journalists, bloggers, and scholars alike. Two important works in this discourse include, Dora Apel’s aforementioned, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* and Rebecca J. Kinney’s *Beautiful Wasteland: The Rise of Detroit as America’s Postindustrial Frontier* (2016). Both address this concept of beauty of ruins in different ways. For Apel, the beauty is part of a sublime depiction of ruin, a place for our greatest fear - that of the decline of Modernity, to play out safely within the picture frame. However, for Kinney, the beauty lies in the potential for regeneration and renewal in images that picture a postindustrial frontier, void of human presence. In *Beautiful Terrible Ruins* Apel analyses our fascination and, often times, fixation on images of disaster and ruin. She explains that “[t]he anxiety of decline may be understood as the dark side of modernity, which is founded on a set of universalist values stemming from the Enlightenment that supported ideals of progress and rationality through science and technology.”

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of modernity’s idea of progress. Industrial disinvestment has ushered in this decline and left many cities in postindustrial ruin. Empty industrial spaces come to define these cities and become sites of visual interest and a morbid fascination with ruins develops. Images of these ruins become sites where this anxiety of decline can be safely played out. One can look at images of Detroit’s ruins for example and tell themselves that this is not their own reality, that their city and their experience is and will be different.

Apel’s premise is that “the anxiety of decline feeds an enormous appetite for ruin imagery. But it matters whether we understand ruination as historically inevitable, the fault of its own victims, or as the result of industrial disinvestment and capitalist globalization.” In the case of Detroit, most images of ruin will have you believe Detroit’s downfall is the fault of the people of Detroit – corruption, bureaucratic mismanagement, an unruly population, etc. rather than a greater problem that defines the current economy – greed. Industrial production uses cheap, non-unionized labour in the global south where employment standards are lower, while large corporations profit from cost-cutting practices, tax exemptions, government bailouts, etc. The proliferation of ruin images, especially of Detroit, distract us from the difficult reality that the system is broken. Our neoliberal economy and political system cause income inequality and the decline pictured in these photographs. In Beautiful Terrible Ruins, Apel uses images (photography, advertising, television, documentaries, video games, and film) of Detroit to explore how this type of ruin imagery plays into society’s anxiety over the failure of capitalism and argues that, “[d]espite the narrative that seeks to marginalize the city as responsible for its own decline, Detroit has become emblematic of failing cities everywhere as the paradigmatic city of ruins.” Furthermore, the book is a critique of the proliferation of images and narratives of ruin that have been coming out of Detroit, begging the questions: in all of these images of abandon and ruin, where are the people? Where are the images and stories of the people who are living through this economic disaster and amongst the ruin and decay? What kind of art is being made with regards to the life that still very much exists in Detroit?

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28 Apel, Beautiful Terrible Ruins, 9-10.
29 Ibid., 11.
In *Beautiful Wasteland*, Rebecca J. Kinney explores the notion of Detroit as an American frontier, its history as such in terms of historic settlement to booming industry and the current understanding of Detroit as an empty postindustrial space to be gentrified. This philosophy of frontierism is inherently linked to the notion of the American Dream – to go to a land of unlimited possibilities where if you work hard enough you can achieve success and wealth. The American Dream involves struggle and work with the belief in the inevitability of a positive outcome:

The frontier, one of the most powerful and enduring American narratives, signifies both progress and possibility; it is a physical location, but just as important, it is a way of orienting ourselves toward the world, a means of looking forward both temporally and ideologically. It is a place to stake claims and (maybe) realize success, but perhaps more important, it is a place to locate dreams.\(^{30}\)

Kinney posits that the intense interest in Detroit is a reflection of the belief in the American Dream and Detroit as an example of it. The narratives of Detroit thus parallel those of other American postindustrial cities.\(^ {31}\) She outlines the cycle of Detroit’s rise, fall, and rise again, as an example of the persistent belief in an inevitable ascent or rebirth and conceptualizes this as a postindustrial frontier. Drawing her conception of the postindustrial frontier from Neil Smith’s urban frontier, Kinney’s term references “deindustrialized urban place as a space of newly imagined possibility.”\(^ {32}\) The newly imagined possibility however, involves further marginalization and displacement of already marginalized people by those with wealth and power.

Kinney explains that this concept is related to cultural narratives that are inherently linked to America’s history of slavery and racial tension and that one of the main goals of this book is to illustrate “how the dominant story of Detroit’s rise, though a story that hinges on privileged access to institutional benefits based on whiteness, is


\(^{31}\) Ibid., xxv.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., xx. Neil Smith’s concept of the “urban frontier” takes the gentrification of New York City as its example and explains that this is a process of “taking back the city from those who are deemed as ill-using it, namely the working class, the poor, and people of color – through the consolidation of public policy and private capital that privileges development.” His work argues that the urban frontier advances through the actions of those with wealth and power.
frequently told as a story not about race.”\textsuperscript{33} She argues that contemporary narratives of Detroit’s rise are just a redeployment of the narrative of the American Dream as a race neutral project, and that it is in fact, white privilege that enables this perception of racial neutrality.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Beautiful Wasteland} explores how and why the “dream of Detroit” is revived, its link to American determinism, and the racial logics that underpin these narratives.\textsuperscript{35} Kinney explains that: “…the city’s evidence of a full range of human life and experience – its epic highs and devastating lows – [set] up Detroit as a perfect backdrop to continually reimage the American frontier.”\textsuperscript{36} This book, like Apel’s, comes out of a desire to understand the fascination with Detroit’s ruins and to position Detroit as a universal example for the American experience of decline and possibility of rebirth.

In her pursuit to analyze the concept of Detroit as postindustrial frontier, Kinney compares the late 1980s/early 1990s production of images of urban spaces as dangerous, crime-ridden ghettos to those more pastoral images of Detroit as empty, wide open space. She positions Camilo José Vergara’s photographs of Detroit from the 1990s as central to “shifting representations of Detroit from a landscape of fear to frontier.”\textsuperscript{37} Vergara, like his recent successors, photographed Detroit in a way that removed people from the picture frame and thus advertised an empty Detroit – a frontier as Kinney would describe it, ready to be re-settled and revived. She explains that at the time Vergara was photographing Detroit, there was in fact still one million people residing in the city and that representing Detroit as empty is “deeply linked to the racial tropes of place and renders a majority black population that was previously seen as hyper-visible, now seen as invisible, nearly disappeared.”\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, this depiction of the empty city was essential in laying the foundation for the contemporary reimagining of Detroit, what Kinney terms “regenerative frontier.”\textsuperscript{39}

Storytelling has become an important part of creating narratives counter to those of ruin and frontierism. Richard Delgado, a civil rights and critical race theory professor,

\textsuperscript{33} Kinney, \textit{Beautiful Wasteland}, xx-xxi.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., xxii.
\textsuperscript{35} Kinney, \textit{Beautiful Wasteland}, xxvii.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., xxviii.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 44 and 46.
introduced storytelling into legal scholarship in his article, “Story-telling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative” (1989). The article explains how stories are being used to create bonds within groups of marginalized individuals in order to introduce a different, more subjective narrative that works to break down dominant narratives that define Western society. In his article, Delgado explains that “stories create their own bonds and represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings.” Stories are used by those Delgado has termed “outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized,” as a means of countering dominant narratives of oppression. Through their work, Lake and Jordano act as narrators for outgroups in Detroit, employing different photographic methods to counter the dominant narrative of ruin city and to picture their very different experiences of Detroit.

Suzy Lake is well-known for her self-portraiture, and in her work tracing and photographing her roots in Detroit, she calls into question the culture of gawking at Detroit, the ruin city. In Performing an Archive, Lake photographed herself photographing various locations in Detroit. Each location represents somewhere Lake’s family lived or worked and was mapped out using archival and familial documents. At first the photographs seem to play directly into this narrative of looking at Detroit from the outside, the gawker narrative. But instead what Lake has achieved in these photographs is the feeling of the artist being looked at by the city. They seem voyeuristic in a way and while observing them, one can almost hear a whisper, a city asking, “what are you looking at?” My discussion of Lake’s series considers this question and evaluates how her work either answers it, or asks the viewer to reconsider their preconceived notions of Detroit in an attempt to answer it.

Jordano was unsatisfied by his original attempts at photographing Detroit and wanted to delve deeper into the city’s struggles. Each portrait in his series is accompanied by a description regarding the individuals pictured. His portrait style imbues the sitters with a sense of dignity and empowerment. This work helps viewers to understand the

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41 Ibid., 72.
problems facing the city through the individual stories of human suffering, surviving, and thriving. By analyzing these projects I formulate an understanding of what it means for artists like Lake and Jordano to return to their city of origin and engage in projects that address the city, the built environment, the people and their stories as the subject. Furthermore, I consider how these engagements with the city and the people form a powerful counter narrative to that of Detroit as ruin city.

1.1 Picturing Home: Suzy Lake

In 2013 Suzy Lake was awarded the Dazibao Prize in recognition of her work and for her participation in the Mois de la Photo à Montréal with *Reduced Performing* (2008/2011). The result of this prize was the project, *Suzy Lake: Performing an Archive* (2014/2016), the publication of a book by the same title in the Daziboa’s *Les portables* series, and two subsequent exhibitions of the work.\(^{42}\) Lake’s *Performing an Archive* combines archival research, mapping, and an adaptation of her signature style of self-portraiture to explore her identity as it relates to the city of Detroit. This body of work, which includes thirty photographs and maps dating back to the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries, has been called a “coming home” for Lake who was born in Detroit but who has been living and working in Canada since 1968. It is an attempt to situate her present self and insert her physical body into the places of her past. This project is a search for identity in a decaying urban landscape that, through its exploration of the working class neighbourhoods of Lake’s childhood, bears witness to the quiet revitalizations transforming Detroit.\(^{43}\) Lake explores what it means to be from a place misunderstood by outsiders and calls into question the culture of gawking at and objectifying Detroit.

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\(^{42}\) The exhibitions were not originally part of the plan at the time of Lake’s reception of the Prize. The works from this project were organized into an exhibition by curator of the McMaster Museum of Art, Ihor Holubizky, and Suzy Lake.

\(^{43}\) I use the phrase “quiet revitalizations” to describe the revitalization of Detroit taking place within neighbourhoods, communities, and on individual levels. These quiet revitalizations are taking place on a much smaller scale than the Corporate sponsored revitalization of the downtown core. They are quiet because they are not highlighted by mainstream media and are taking place behind the scenes of the bigger revitalization projects. Lake refers to this as “discrete rejuvenation”. This type of revitalization is more significant because it is representative of strong communities and a pride that forms the foundation of Detroit neighbourhoods. It has the potential to be more sustainable than the Corporate driven rejuvenations because it is driven by people, rather than capital.
This “coming home” project on Detroit is only a homecoming in the sense that it is the first time Lake has focussed so extensively on her native city in such a personal way. Before this, Lake had worked with the Detroit Institute of Arts for her *Extended Breathing in Public Places* project\(^{44}\) where she photographed herself on the steps of the DIA and in the Rivera Court. *Extended Breathing in the Rivera Frescoes* (2013-2014), records an hour long performance in the court where Lake stood completely still in front of the west wall of Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* Murals (1932). Her camera recorded the movement of the people surrounding her perfectly still body. This series ties Lake’s practice as a performance artist and photographer with her past in Detroit and examines the physical strain of remaining still in a world that doesn’t stop.

Lake stresses that because her family is still in the Detroit area and she frequently visits, “it will always feel like home beyond just hometown.”\(^{45}\) While the *Performing an Archive* series is an exploration into Lake’s family history and roots in Detroit, it is not the “homecoming” of a long lost daughter, out of touch with the city that formed her. Rather, it is a long awaited opportunity for the artist to picture the city she loves, map the evolution of the neighbourhoods of her childhood, and document the “discrete rejuvenation”\(^{46}\) of residential areas outside of the downtown core.

The *Performing an Archive* project was a long time coming for Lake and began with the idea of documenting the roofing and sheet metal shop her grandfather established and her father took over, the A G Marx Company. “This roofing and sheet metal business supported two generations,” thus it was important to Lake to explore this part of her family history through her artistic practice.\(^{47}\) In 2013 the project was finally realized when Lake was offered a Canadian Residency through Peter Rozek and North American Souvenirs.\(^{48}\) North American Souvenirs is an “arts collaborative whose mission is to connect people to neighborhood spaces and cultural heritage with fully immersive

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\(^{44}\) This is an extension of Lake’s *Extended Breathing* project (2008-2010).


\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Lake, interview: “My brother and I would go with him on Saturdays to sweep up. When in university engraving class, I got my copper from him for free.”

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
art installations,“ and is funded with the support of both non-profit and corporate sponsorship.

The Canadian Residency program ran from 2013-2015 and included Canadian artists: Daniel Barrow, Shary Boyle, David Hoffos, Jessica Korderas, Meryl McMaster, Kristine Moran, Kelly Richardson, Jon Sasaki, and of course, Suzy Lake. These artists worked to promote Canadian visual arts in Detroit. The philosophy behind the residency was to promote international cultural investment in a “Detroit/Windsor Binational Region” by providing opportunities for Canadian artists to work via a residency program in the US.” This desire to promote Canadian art across the border was echoed in an interview I conducted regarding Lake’s work in Detroit, with Jaclyn Meloche, curator of the Art Gallery of Windsor. Hence, this project was also part of a larger force behind Canadian art production and promotion in the United States and especially in border cities like Detroit. Lake was offered two weeks of research time in March 2013 and another two months that summer to execute the project. She explains that the historical research of locating the specific properties took much longer than expected and was further complicated by the fact that the address system of Detroit changed in 1921. Thus, Lake conducted most of her research using documents from the late 1800s.

The focus of this project broadened from the documentation of the A G Marx Company and became about the subtle visible revitalizations taking place in Detroit neighbourhoods through a tracing of Lake’s genealogy within them. Much like Dora Apel, Lake sees Detroit as an example of the problem of the North American industrial urban centre and wanted to represent this through her photographs. Apel explains that

50 Meryl McMaster’s residency in Detroit opened her up to the vibrant communities of artists living and working in Detroit and shifted her negative misconception of the city. Additionally, she spent time reflecting on the Great Lakes, Canadian-American relations, and the activities of Indigenous people during the time Detroit was settled. Benjamin Hunter, “Meryl McMaster’s Next Chapter,” Canadian Art, July 27, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/features/meryl-mcmasters-next-chapter/. Although this PhD project considers place, concepts of frontierism, and the displacement and erasure of people, due to the scope of the project I focussed on contemporary erasure of African Americans. Future projects and writing on Detroit will consider Indigenous artists’ projects as well as the bigger historical picture of histories of Indigenous displacement and erasure beginning with the European settlement of this area in 1701.
51 North American Souvenirs.
52 Lake, interview.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
ruin photographs have constructed an idea of Detroit as “the paradigmatic example” of the image of the “postapocalyptic deindustrialized city.”\(^{55}\) Detroit is the stand-in for all deindustrializing cities in North America, as Apel refers to it, “the universal signifier of urban decline.”\(^{56}\) Images like those taken by Lake, work to counter this process. She was enthusiastic about the progress she was witnessing and wanted to spread the word because, as she explains, “Detroit formed me.”\(^{57}\) For her, this project was both about retracing her ancestral heritage throughout the city and forming a positive narrative.

Lake’s work focussed on the effect that large financial investments by business and government in the downtown core were having on the residents of Detroit. She explains that the recent investments in the city have given hope to the people who have struggled to stay in the same place, the people who have been in Detroit all along.\(^{58}\) She further explains that these quiet revitalizations are subtle yet significant.

Most of these residents don’t have the funding for home renovation, but one can see efforts of up-keep that hadn't been there for decades. Litter is picked up, gardening, inexpensive repairs, and paint are more apparent. I felt this was significant of hope. It is significant that the change is more thorough than what is visible to an outsider. It is significant of urban renewal in Detroit’s own way of countering several decades of despair. I wanted to bring this to light.\(^{59}\)

By photographing these neighbourhoods, Lake has depicted personal gestures of urban renewal that are not often seen or talked about. It is precisely this renewal that many believe will determine the successful revitalization of Detroit. Ihor Holubizky, Senior Curator at the McMaster Museum of Art, explained that the renewal Lake observed was grass roots, not imposed by government, municipal or otherwise and that although all local governments are aspirational, their desire to create a “sense of well-being” often fails.\(^{60}\) “Very often it doesn’t work, because the job of politicians is to be elected, again and again. I don’t think they can directly affect it, it is the people who individually and in some kind of loose collective consciousness decides that: “we are here, this is where we

\(^{55}\) Apel, Beautiful Terrible Ruins, 6.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
\(^{57}\) Lake, interview.
\(^{58}\) Lake, interview.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
\(^{60}\) Ihor Holubizky. Interview by author. In-person interview. Hamilton, ON, June 20, 2017.
live and we want it to be better.”\textsuperscript{61} The things that make a liveable city include simple things like respecting your neighbour, taking pride in your neighbourhood, making it a place you want to live.

The project depicting renewal was told through the lens of Lake’s familial genealogy. This very personal, biographical approach was new to the artist, whose career has been defined by her performances in front of the camera. Lake is always the figure in the photos, but never the actual subject of her work, at least not in the expected way. Through her photographic performances she has explored themes of identity, feminism, ideal beauty, the passage of time, the aging body, the aging artist, etc. She explained that she “generally work[s] from a metaphor so it is an easier [opening] for an audience to enter concepts behind the work on their own terms. [This] is the first time I have used the biographical to do so.”\textsuperscript{62} This approach makes \textit{Performing an Archive} intentional and weaves a personal narrative into the discourse of “urban decay.” Lake chose this methodology and the specific locations, as she explains, “to separate my choice from presumed ‘random decay’ aesthetics.”\textsuperscript{63} This adds a dimension to the work that acknowledges the inhabitants, past and present, of Detroit.

Lake explains that the people of Detroit are very important to her work and through this project she wanted to convey that Detroit is a “poor city, not a derelict city.”\textsuperscript{64} Images of Detroit often depict the emptiness of an abandoned city, an aesthetic and a narrative that Lake resisted perpetuating through her work. My initial survey of this work had me wondering, what makes Lake’s photos of Detroit different from those of ruin photographers like Marchand and Meffre or Lake’s Canadian contemporary, Ian Brown? How does this project differ from the spectacularizing images of the ruins of Detroit?

\textit{Performing an Archive} is comprised of thirty photographs of different properties significant to Lake’s genealogy. Of these, fourteen were extended into collages including maps and what Lake titled “from my rooftop” photos, snapshots taken from the rooftop of her studio in the direction of a specific mapped location. Each property is indicated

\textsuperscript{61} Holubizky, interview.
\textsuperscript{62} Lake, interview.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
among twelve maps copied by Lake from an 1896 real estate map book. The central photographs in this project are carefully staged self-portraits of Lake photographing her chosen sites. She stands posed with her camera in a side profile or turned completely away with her back to the viewer. Each photograph is set up so that her figure appears small in the vast, seemingly empty landscapes of Detroit. By playing with the scale of her own figure in these landscapes, Lake places the viewer in the role of voyeur.

In Chapter 7 “Seeing Race,” in her book, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (2001) Kelly Oliver discusses notions of vision and seeing in terms of the power dynamic of property and ownership. Using Fredric Jameson’s claim that “the visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination…” she argues that “it is not the visual itself that is pornographic but indeed our thinking about the visual, our conceptions of what it is to see.” She explains that “[p]ornographic seeing is voyeuristic looking that treats the seen or looked at as an object for one’s own pleasure or entertainment.” Many have argued that ruins photography functions exactly this way – hence the term “ruin porn” – by treating the city of Detroit and the people as objects for pleasure and entertainment. It is precisely this way of looking (and photographing) that Lake critiques in the construction of her photographs.

189 Pierce Street, 1892 (2014/2016) is an image of Lake standing in what looks like a field of Queen Ann’s lace. This vacant block’s identity is revealed by the telephone wires and street lights (that more than likely have no power going to them) that frame it and the two-storey apartment building and church approximately two blocks away in the distance. The houses that once formed this neighbourhood block are long gone, replaced by the delicate-looking but resilient weedy white flowers. Lake is engulfed by this green and white landscape, the vastness that has come to define the city of Detroit. However,

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65 Lake did indeed photograph each location she was posed photographing. She shot without knowing if she would use the photos. In the end, they served no purpose and were not used in the project.
66 Kelly Oliver, Witnessing Beyond Recognition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 156.
67 Ibid., 156-157.
68 Ibid., 157.
69 At the time of the bankruptcy, 40 percent of Detroit’s streetlights were out. JC Reindl, “Detroit Rising: And then there were streetlights,” The Detroit Free Press, November 11, 2015. [Link](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2015/11/12/detroit-street-lighting-project-update/31850609/).
the careful staging of her photographs use this trope of the “wide open spaces” of Detroit to situate the viewer as an observer rather than reiterate that Detroit is “empty.”

![Figure 1.1: Suzy Lake, 189 Pierce Street, 1892, 2014/2016. Image appears with permission from the artist.](image)

The scale that Lake uses in these photographs lends itself to a feeling of voyeurism. Her figure is small and takes up very little space in comparison to the rest of the landscape. The viewer feels as though they are at a distance watching Lake photograph Detroit. Her petite physical presence juxtaposed with the empty lots of Pierce Street reveals her use of the “wide open spaces” or “abandoned Detroit” tropes popular for many ruins photographers of the city. Her process of careful staging to convey a sense of voyeurism challenges the viewer to consider how Detroit has been pictured previously and how our morbid curiosity with the ruins of Detroit have been a form of voyeurism, whose very nature is objectifying and invasive. Thus, the viewer is invited to reflect upon the destructive nature of this narrative of Detroit as ruin city and question what is missing from these images, what stories are not being told as a result of their dissemination?

In chapter two, “Picturing Ruin and Possibility” in Beautiful Wasteland Kinney analyzes Vergara’s use of the “wide open spaces” trope in his photographs that picture Detroit’s ruins. She analyses several images in which the people of Detroit are rendered invisible. Kinney draws a comparison between Vergara’s use of emptiness and the contemporary visions of Detroit’s ruins in the works of Merchand and Meffre and
Andrew Moore. She asserts that Vergara’s images laid the groundwork for these successors. In *The Work of Giants Moulders Away/Detroit Skyline* (1991), neighbourhoods surrounding Detroit’s downtown are flattened, empty spaces are dotted with a few buildings and a parking lot. The skyline is photographed from a rooftop, providing an aerial perspective that further distances the viewer from the land – and life – below. The viewer is thus positioned as a voyeur, pondering the possibilities offered by this wide open space. Kinney asserts that, “his portrayal of the landscape shows Detroit as possible because of the depth of its ruin, which lays the groundwork for a full-scale narrative of possibility.”70 Unlike with Lake’s work, the viewer is not aware of their voyeuristic position. There is nothing in this photograph that causes discomfort or even pause for the viewer. Their viewers’ position is not upset by the presence of the artist’s figure and thus they are left with a nice aerial shot of Detroit’s skyline and the space to insert themselves into a conquerable frontier, an imagined renewal. Kinney’s analysis points to the same problem emphasised in Lake’s photographs: the lack of human presence depicted in images of Detroit’s ruin perpetuates a negative narrative that Detroit is empty, free for the taking.

Upon closer examination of the *Performing an Archive* series, the viewer becomes aware of another presence, one that can be seen not in the physical embodiment of a figure but in the sometimes carefully and sometimes crudely maintained properties. Figures other than Lake can only be seen in two out of the thirty works and it is in these images that another theme becomes most apparent. The city itself seems to observe Lake observing the city, flipping the voyeur narrative back upon itself.

In the work, *1093 Seyburn Avenue, 1915* (2014/2016) Lake’s back is completely turned away from the viewer as she photographs the empty lot where her Great-great-Uncle Gustav Schneider’s house once sat. Beside the empty lot stands the thing that Lake is not photographing, a red brick house; an indication of what remains of the neighbourhood. In the foreground a woman rides by on a bicycle, head turned away from the viewer, looking at Lake. Although she rides by in a blur, it seems apparent from her body language that she is questioning both Lake’s presence in this neighbourhood and why another white person has come to photograph the empty spaces of her city. And

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there it is, Detroit, the people of, the city itself, looking at Suzy Lake, looking at them. This photograph demonstrates the process of gawking at Detroit, its ruins, its “derelict” and empty spaces, and makes me think, what if Detroit is asking Suzy Lake – and everyone else photographing its ruins, “what are you looking at?”

Again, Lake’s careful staging of the photograph reveals her motive to pose this question as well as to present a counter narrative to that of the abandoned ruin city. At first glance this seems like another photograph of Lake photographing another empty lot where a family home once stood – which in part, it is. Lake is indeed exploring this part of her family history, physically inserting herself into it. Additionally though, Lake uses carefully chosen visual cues to present the current story of this neighbourhood. The red of the woman’s bicycle and hair reflect the red bricks of the house; two indications in this otherwise empty photograph, of what and who remain in Detroit. Like the red brick house, this red-haired woman demonstrates a vibrant human presence in a city many have depicted as abandoned and derelict.

Kinney analyses Vergara’s image, Row Houses on Alfred Street, 1998 (1998) to show how, when figures are represented in his photographs, they are used to perpetuate a revanchist narrative for Detroit. The abandoned row houses with their blown out windows loom over three male figures, two of whom sit on the curb facing the houses, passing something between them, the third figure faces the camera, looking off into the
distance. The men seem unphased by the looming ruin, the decaying history that surrounds them. This implied apathy is meant to portray to the viewer that the people of Detroit are disinterested in Detroit. Kinney explains that, “[f]or the viewer, the devastation is raw and provocative, and by portraying what looks like the indifference of local denizens, Vergara emphasizes Detroit’s landscape as a location of difference and a sparsely populated population unmoved by what Vergara presents as widespread devastation.”  

This depiction of an unmoved, sparse population lends itself to notions of revanchism – “or taking back of the American city.” The narrative perpetuated by images like this is that the city is waiting to be reclaimed from an almost non-existent, indifferent population. This stands in stark contrast to Lake’s image that constructs a depiction of a city whose people question her presence and agency in their city; a city that is very much still alive. Lake has carefully constructed an image that is critical of the very thing Vergara and others like him have done.

In the second image that depicts an additional figure, 723 Newport Avenue, 1913 (2014/2016) Lake stands on the sidewalk outside of a metal chain-link fence. She is posed photographing the front of a green house. Performing an Archive is comprised of three types of scenes: empty lots where homes once stood, industrial or institutional spaces, i.e. A G Marx Company, or locations that now have schools or offices where homes once stood, and homes, both abandoned and occupied. This is an example of the last alternative cited. Looking out at Lake photographing her home is a woman sitting on her porch swing. The chipped and worn paint of the front door and window frames give away the age of this home, indicating that it, like many properties in Detroit, have seen better days. However, the freshly painted front steps and maintained property declare a sense of care and pride of homeownership.

71 Kinney, Beautiful Wasteland, 53.
72 Ibid.
The presence of the woman on the porch looking out at Lake photographing her home struck me as invasive and I questioned Lake’s process and seeming entitlement. Did she think she had a right to photograph these homes and private properties because they once belonged to her family? And is the agency of the artist and the integrity of the project enough to excuse this invasion? In Kelly Oliver’s definition of pornographic seeing she explains that “[t]he seer maintains a willful ignorance about the interconnection or interrelationship between himself and what he sees.”73 The gaze is one-way from the seer (the subject) to the seen (the object) and there is no acknowledgement of the seen’s subjectivity or agency – or humanity for that matter, and thus the relationship between the two as subjects. This type of seeing denies the seer’s connection to what they see and thus the subject is entitled to treat the other as spectacle.74 Furthermore, Oliver explains that with seeing comes responsibility. “When [seeing] involves other human beings, then it brings with it ethical, social, and political responsibilities.”75 What is happening here regarding ruin porn, and the very thing Lake is highlighting in this series is this denial of responsibility. Images of ruin separate the

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73 Kelly Oliver, Witnessing Beyond Recognition, 157.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
seer from their responsibilities as human beings to acknowledge and doing something to
effect real social and political change.

Upon closer observation it becomes apparent that the person on the porch was
smiling out at Lake, and Lake in turn smiles back, her body language easy, almost jovial.
This subtle exchange reveals a relationship, an interconnection between the women; both
are in fact seers. Lake uses the presence of this woman she came to know as Patricia in
the same way that she uses the presence of the girl on the red bike in *1093 Seyburn
Avenue, 1915*, to reveal a criticism of the dominant ways of seeing perpetuated by ruins
photography, and to criticize the narrative of Detroit as ruin city. Additionally, Lake
reveals another narrative: that of the discrete or quiet revitalizations taking place in the
neighbourhoods of the city. Here, she pictures an aging but maintained property that
reflects the presence of people, of lives being lived in the home.

Lake described the process of photographing the various neighbourhoods as a
relationship-building and story sharing process.

The minute I would pull out my camera and tripod, residents would come out to
see what I was up to. They were astounded that my family may have lived in their
home over one hundred years ago. So they would tell me just about everything
they could remember about the neighbourhood during the time they lived there. It
was a remarkable connection that made the project very real to me - both on the
genealogical aspect and revitalisation. They often straightened up their porches, or
put away lawn mowers. They were excited to be a part of the photograph. So, for
example, I often refer to my Aunt Theresa's property as 'Patricia's house'.

Patricia’s is the face smiling from her porch swing in Lake’s photograph *723 Newport
Avenue, 1913*, and rather than suggesting an invasion, this is an image of an exchange
between two women who have more than a modest green house in common. In a city like
Detroit where history and place are so important to the identity of its inhabitants, it is this
thread that ties these women together briefly, as described in the image.

Through my correspondence with Lake, I learned that the book version of this
project, *Performing an Archive* (2015) differs from the subsequent exhibitions, both in
what was included in the publication and the motivation behind the images that were

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76 Lake interview.
included. This small, sixty-four page hardcover publication includes twenty-six images of the thirty total properties photographed by Lake. Fourteen of these are accompanied by the aforementioned “from my rooftop” photos - the snapshots taken by Lake from the rooftop of her studio in the direction of the mapped locations. The inside cover liner is printed with an image of a map of the city with pink and yellow tabs indicating addresses with dates of residence. A two-page image of a collage of Post-it notes, paper tabs and maps indicating locations to be photographed concludes the series of photos. Both maps give the reader a vague idea of Lake’s archival and mapping process.

The exhibited works and those found on Lake’s website differ from the book version in their inclusion of the fourteen extended collages comprised of the map indicating the location of the photographed site and the “from my rooftop” snapshot taken in the direction of the site. It is unfortunate that these collages were omitted from the book because they give the viewer both a more comprehensive sense of Lake’s process as well as a greater understanding of the spatial geography and history Lake pictures in this series.

For Lake, as I mentioned earlier, this was an opportunity for her to realise an important personal project. This project would explore her roots as well as provide the outside world with an insider’s perspective of a city’s slow rejuvenation in small but important ways. However, the publishers of this book saw an opportunity to cash in on what I would consider an already glutted market of ruin porn. A book of pictures of Detroit’s ruin, according to publishers, would sell. “They were regularly insistent on the book representing Detroit ruin because it would sell. The collages that [were part of the exhibitions] were more representative of the stamina of these 19th century working class buildings. They wanted to eliminate the historic family narrative, historic real estate maps, and notions of urban recycling.”77 The archival and mapping work completed by Lake and largely omitted in the book were as important to this project as the photographs. Fortunately, Lake resisted pressures from Daizbao, and was able to include the two aforementioned maps and “from my rooftop” snapshots in the final published book. And was given the opportunity to fully realize the Performing an Archive project in her own way in the form of an exhibition.

77 Lake interview.
The inception of this exhibition can be attributed to McMaster Museum of Art’s Senior curator, Ihor Holubizky and his desire to display this project. Though he won’t refer to himself as the curator of the *Performing an Archive* exhibition\(^{78}\), it was on his suggestion that Lake agreed to it. He explains that he had gone to visit Lake in her studio upon hearing of the Detroit project and he simply asked her if she “would think of it as an exhibition.”\(^{79}\) She didn’t hesitate and began to devise how these “location” works were going to be expressed in terms of an exhibition.\(^{80}\) McMaster Museum of Art partnered with the Art Gallery of Windsor to display this work there. Holubizky explained that, “It was a logical place for it to be, perhaps more logical than Detroit... Enough separation but always looking towards.” He is referring to Lake’s position as a native Detroiter living and working in Canada and to this sense of looking back to her home from across the river that separates the two countries and Lake’s two worlds.

For a project that was not originally conceived as an exhibition, the selected works from this series suited their space on the gallery walls and in the surrounding plinths. On display at McMaster Museum of Art from May 5\(^{\text{th}}\) – August 20\(^{\text{th}}\), 2016 and again at the Art Gallery of Windsor from February 11\(^{\text{th}}\) – May 7\(^{\text{th}}\), 2017, *Suzy Lake: Performing an Archive* was an opportunity for visitors to step inside Suzy Lake’s Detroit - and a little bit into Lake’s process for this project.\(^{81}\) The photographs were displayed with corresponding maps and the aforementioned “from my rooftop” snapshots, radiating from the “main” map that seems to have directed Lake’s work. A series of 8.5 x 11 photocopied and highlighted sections of a map of Detroit City ca. early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century are laid out on brown paper… with post-it notes and tabs indicating locations to be “shot.” Complete with names, addresses, and their relationship to Lake, this map gives the viewer an indication of how Lake organized her work as well as a view into what her studio space would have looked like. Inside the plinths were more maps that Lake used in the process of this project.

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\(^{78}\) Jaclyn Meloche. Interview by author. Skype interview. London, ON, August 3, 2017. Meloche explained that Holubizky did the layout for the McMaster exhibition with Lake’s dealer Georgia Sherman, and that he did not want to be identified as curator, rather simply listed as “organized by the McMaster Museum of Art.”

\(^{79}\) Holubizky, interview.

\(^{80}\) Ibid.

\(^{81}\) From here on McMaster Museum of Art will be referred to as MMA and the Art Gallery of Windsor as the AGW.
The post-industrial parallels between Hamilton, Windsor, and Detroit were not lost on anyone involved in organizing this project that so intimately explores “place.” Each city’s dependency on industry, steel in Hamilton, automotive in Windsor and Detroit, ultimately led to its declines. Now, each city is experiencing their own renewal efforts. Hamilton is experiencing an influx of “young professionals” from Toronto as rising rent and property costs make it a more affordable place to live. Windsor is placing a greater emphasis on arts and culture with the University’s School of Creative Arts new facility opening in January 2018.\textsuperscript{82} Detroit, like Hamilton has been experiencing renewals and population growth, or a “bohemian gentrification”\textsuperscript{83} for years now. The matter of how these renewals will unfold, however, and in whose interest, is a much more complicated issue that each city will have to address.

Lake’s exploration into the working class neighbourhoods of Detroit echo those of the exhibiting cities. In fact, the MMA’s concurrent exhibition, \textit{Hamilton} by Joseph Hartman was another body of photographic work that explored Hamilton by someone returning and celebrating the grit of the city. Hartman explains, “I love Hamilton's gritty personality, it's what makes this place so interesting.”\textsuperscript{84} These photographs lie somewhere between documentary photography and a perfectly framed aestheticization of working class spaces and highlight the relationship between Hamilton and Detroit, as well as the different approaches each artist took.

The exhibitions were laid out differently (due to the differences in the gallery spaces) but they both achieved the feeling of standing with Lake in the neighbourhoods of her ancestors, looking at her, looking at Detroit. At the MMA the photographs were displayed around the perimeter of the main gallery space, radiating from the aforementioned map and surrounding the plinths with the archival maps in them. At the AGW the works were displayed in the Street Gallery which lent itself to the “street” subject of Lake’s work. Meloche described her process,

I wanted to think of this street in the way that she thought of it in her work. She stood on one side of the road and took a photograph, or across the street and took

\textsuperscript{82} The centre brings together music, visual arts, architecture, media arts, etc. and is located in the repurposed space of the Windsor Armouries. \url{http://www.uwindsor.ca/soca/}.
\textsuperscript{83} Mark Binelli, \textit{Detroit City is the Place to Be} (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 15.
\textsuperscript{84} “Hamilton,” Joseph Hartman, accessed August 5, 2017, \url{http://josephhartman.ca/hamilton.html}. 
a photograph. I organized the work basically, all around the large paper map that she had the post-it notes on that identified the locations of the homes and buildings and so forth. So this was the centre piece in the centre of the Street Gallery. And then the rest of the work was organized to grow out of that. In a rectangular way – almost like a city block.\textsuperscript{85}

The organization of the exhibition lent itself to Lake’s vision and she was pleased.

Holubizky explains the feeling achieved by Lake’s photographs, of standing with Lake, “she’s there for scale like a history painting… She’s there for intentionality in which she is implicated in it. She implicates herself back into it. It’s pretty complex… to do the most complex thing in the most ordinary way. But not so ordinary.”\textsuperscript{86} Ordinary because they appear at times to be snapshots, or our observation of an artist at work, but not so ordinary because these are finished works of art with multiple layers of looking woven into them. Furthermore, Lake is implicated in the history of the landscape, her family’s own history, as well as implicated in the act of observing or even gawking at Detroit’s history, its ruins. So too then are we implicated in this act of looking. But it is through this multi-layered process of looking in combination with Lake’s careful attention to the details within each frame, that we are made aware of what she wants us to see, the “discrete rejuvenation” - the stories of hope and survival within these working-class neighbourhoods and the dominant narratives of decay that are choking out the positive realities and human stories of Detroit.

\subsection*{1.2 Stories of Home: Dave Jordano}

Detroit native Dave Jordano’s 2015 AIMIA / AGO Photography Prize\textsuperscript{87} winning photograph series, \textit{Detroit - Unbroken Down}, depicts survival rather than the more popular theme of ruin that has come to define Detroit. His photographs of the people of

\textsuperscript{85} Meloche, interview.
\textsuperscript{86} Holubizky, interview. The actual size of the photographs range from 50.8 x 76.2 and 50.8 x 101.6, or “larger than a book but smaller than a canvas,” as Holubizky described them. So the actual scale or size of the photographs do not give you the sense that you are standing within the space – there isn’t that feeling of being engulfed that large-scale art works have. Rather, it is Lake’s scale within the images – a very small figure within a vast landscape that gives the viewer this sense.
\textsuperscript{87} The AIMIA / AGO Photography Prize, formerly The Grange Prize launched in 2007, is awarded in recognition of the best in Canadian and international contemporary photography. Winning photographers are granted a monetary prize as well as an exhibition of their work. For more information: https://www.aimiaagophotographyprize.com/.
Detroit picture the human experience of post-industrialism and emphasize the strength of the human spirit over hardship and struggle. Jordano’s series represents an interest to develop the human story of what is going on in Detroit. He describes this project as his “reaction to all the negative press that Detroit has had to endure over the years.”

It was his goal to show a different side of Detroit, the “unbroken down” side.

Jordano was born and raised in Detroit. In 1974 he graduated from the College for Creative Studies where he developed his interest in documentary photography. He explains that he was particularly interested in the work of the Depression Era FSA photographers like Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn and that, “Detroit was the perfect mapping ground for extending that visual vocabulary for my own works.” With the encouragement of a professor, he developed a series of photographs documenting Detroit’s historical architecture. This series would eventually lead Jordano back to Detroit thirty years later. In the meantime he has been living and working as a commercial photographer in Chicago since 1977. He describes regretfully having to leave for work, explaining that Detroit was so automobile-focused that the only work he would get as a commercial photographer would be photographing cars and that was not something that interested him.

In 2000 Jordano began to revisit his explorations of documentary photography and fine art and in April 2010 returned to photograph Detroit. He cites the ruin photographs and subsequent book publications by Marchand and Meffre as well as Andrew Moore as his motivation to return to Detroit. He was appalled by the proliferation of ruin porn coming out of Detroit and wanted to do something different. Upon his return, Jordano began re-photographing the architectural sites from the 1974 series. This new series juxtaposed images like the interior of Detroit’s Michigan Central Station - arguably an over-photographed and over-used site, with contemporary photographs of the site in the original series. These striking photographs showed the progression of ruin and the degeneration of the city. In Great Hall, Michigan Central Station, Detroit, 2010 (original 1974) the wooden benches in the waiting area of the

89 Ibid., 15.
Central terminal are gone. The pristine floors and ceiling tiles are now torn up, the paint peeling from the remaining tiles. This contemporary image of the train station is the image that forms our current understanding of the state of Detroit’s ruins. The earlier image, oozing a certain haunting nostalgia for the city’s once splendid and glorious past, plays directly into the narrative of Detroit, the fallen city. Jordano stated that “[t]he concept was interesting not only because the two bodies of work would be exacted by the same person 37 years apart, but the passage of time would reveal the successes and failures of the decisions of those in power over the years.” Jordano was satisfied with the series, however, he felt he could do more. As interesting as the photographs are, they offer nothing critical to the discourse and only perpetuate the grand narrative of Detroit: the industrial powerhouse whose decline has been documented with morbid fascination.
Figure 1.4: Dave Jordano, *Great Hall, Michigan Central Station, Detroit*, 1974. Image appears with permission from the artist.
Upon completing this series, Jordano came to the realization that he had done exactly what all other ruins photographers had done, exploited the city. This work was completed in two weeks and left the artist with a deep desire to do more, to tell a different story of Detroit, to alter this negative narrative of ruin city. Not all of Jordano’s early work depicted empty architectural spaces, void of human presence. In fact much of his early work examined the people and culture of Detroit. His series *Detroit Portraits* (1971-1973) and *Detroit Barber Shops* (1972) are indications of both the influence of the FSA documentary photographers as well as his firmly rooted beliefs in photography’s ability to tell very personal stories about a place and the people that make up that place. In a statement regarding these early works, he acknowledges his privileged position as a white middle-class photographer and academic: “I was an aspiring young documentary photographer, eager to join the ranks of such notable heroes as Walker Evans, Eugene
Atget, and Robert Frank, all the while sitting in my ivory tower, oblivious to the responsibilities of my post."\(^9\) The *Detroit: Unbroken Down* series is Jordano’s maturity revealed. He is not only aware but very critical of his privileged role as photographer.

In an interview with photographer Dawoud Bey for the *Detroit: Unbroken Down* book, Jordano was asked about this privileged position.\(^3\) Bey, highly critical of the long-standing traditional privilege of photographer (and viewer) within documentary photography, points to the differing racial and socio-economic circumstances of the sitter versus the photographer and the imbalance or lack of agency possessed by the sitter.\(^4\) He explained that “a fundamental part of [the] practice” in the history of social documentary photography has been “the direct and often dramatic visualization of various forms of victimhood presented to privileged viewers who are then expected to act on behalf of the disenfranchised subjects in the photographs.”\(^5\) He went on to state that Jordano’s photographs resist this practice and depict a deeper engagement and level of respect between photographer and sitter.

Your photographs operate outside of that tradition of documentary photography that seems rooted in a depiction that frames the subjects solely as victims. There is a clear sense of exchange in your photographs between you and the subjects that negates the issue of victimhood, difference, and otherness and gets at something more fundamentally human.\(^6\)

From one documentary photographer to another, this statement seems to have some weight to it. He asked Jordano what he thinks of this and what he hopes the viewer will reflect on.\(^7\) Jordano explained that he does not see himself as better than his subjects even though there are obvious differences in class, race, and his position as photographer.


\(^3\) Dawoud Bey is an American photographer well known for his community-focused projects. His early work captured the everyday life and people of Harlem, NY and culminated in a five year project titled, *Harlem USA* (1975-1979). Like Jordano, Bey is interested in building relationships with the people he photographs and is acutely aware of his privileged position as photographer.


\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
Money and status are not prerequisites for compassion. I’ve never placed myself above anyone I’ve photographed and I’ve never felt that my skin color or background would in any way impact the relationships I would forge with the people I’ve met. We’re all humans and we should respect that of one another. If you give respect, you’ll get it back. [Furthermore,] I’ve always felt that if you are going to take part of someone’s personal life and expose it, there has to be a level of trust that is mutually agreed upon, but most of it has to be transferred by you to your subject because ultimately as the creator of the art, the work will rest on your shoulders, and that is a great responsibility to bear. 98

Jordano is acutely aware of his responsibility as the photographer and as a Detroiter to the people of the city. Although at times he acknowledges his privilege, in other instances he fails to recognize what that privilege affords in terms of his power. In this statement he fails to recognize how systemic racism inherently impacts and frames the relationship and the power structure between artist and sitter.

His answer can be read as being “colour-blind,” a form of not seeing or blindness that philosopher Kelly Oliver argues becomes a political act. 99 In her book, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (2001) Oliver argues for an ethics based on witnessing where there is an acknowledgement of difference in order to fully witness an other’s subjectivity and subjective lived experiences; especially those that are formed because of race, gender, and sexuality. Witnessing beyond recognition is where we begin to rethink the past in order to effectively and positively change the future. In Chapter 7 “Seeing Race,” she analyzes the rhetoric of a colour-blind society and explains how damaging this seemingly innocuous practice is specifically because it denies the history of racism “and ignores the affective effects of seeing race in a racist society.”100 In seeing and acknowledging racial difference in another we can see and acknowledge our racist histories and current power structures based on them. Furthermore, she explains that even if we believe we ought to live in a colour-blind society, the reality is that we don’t and this belief perpetuates social injustices. 101 “[T]o act like we do [have a colour blind society] when we don’t is to ignore or discount both the most violent and the most pedestrian types of racism and sexism that are still part of our everyday experience… The notion of a color-blind society levels

99 Kelly Oliver, Witnessing Beyond Recognition, 158.
100 Ibid., 159.
101 Ibid.
historically meaningful differences and denies the connection between past racism and sexism and the present.”

Jordano’s seemingly innocent response and genuine belief that his skin colour and background do not impact his relationships with the people he photographs are products of a society that perpetuates colour-blindness as a solution for racist histories. Despite the blind spot in his answer, I think what Jordano is getting at is the importance of building relationships and getting to know your subjects as more than just subjects – knowing them as people. And this takes time. Building trust. The kind of trust evident in these photographs takes time.

Jordano said that he could understand the interest and gravitational pull of Detroit for photographers but he states that he felt bad exploiting that visual language and wanted to depict the stories of the people residing in the city. Taking a different approach that was “more human,” he decided to do a long-term project that took five years to complete and involved over forty trips to Detroit. Jordano recognized that if he was going to build a people-centred project, he would need to establish a network and build close, trusting relationships. “I felt that was important. If I’m going to see these people and photograph them, I’ve got to get to know them. I wanted to do intimate portraits in their homes and stuff – get them to trust me. It was a wonderful experience and I just kind of thought, why isn’t anyone else doing this?”

One of these very trusting relationships involves a man named Tom.

In the photograph, Tom Sitting in Front of His New House, Southwest Side, Detroit (2011), Tom sits in the doorway of his home, a green wooden-framed cabin. He appears humble, shy but welcoming, at ease in his surroundings. The excellent craftsmanship and carefully painted wooden siding belies the fact that this is a one-room structure built on a patch of abandoned city property along the Detroit River. Tom, who was homeless for several years built this home out of found materials from

102 Kelly Oliver, Witnessing Beyond Recognition, 159.
104 Jordano, interview. In a way this series is ongoing with the development of new Detroit projects including the Detroit Nocturne series. A few photographs from this series were exhibited as part of the Detroit After Dark: Photographs From the DIA Collection (October 21, 2016 – April 23, 2017) exhibition at the DIA.
105 Jordano, interview.
106 Jordano, et al., Detroit Unbroken Down, 149.
construction sites and dumpsters and has lived in this location for over twelve years. Jordano met Tom early on in this project and has photographed him throughout the years. He refers to Tom as a good friend and it is evident in the way he speaks of him that he holds Tom in high regard. Jordano explained, “he’s just the most amazing craftsman, carpenter, survivor... He’s just the biggest inspiration I’ve ever met. He’s a rare individual. He’s got a lot of skills and he’s been able to provide for himself that way. Everything he’s built he’s built from stuff he found…” Jordano trails off, “Yeah, he’s amazing.” He photographed Tom in front of his home specifically to convey this amazing talent and resourcefulness that he describes.

The description accompanying the image, _Tom Sitting in Front of His New House, Southwest Side, Detroit_, in the book explains that Tom first lived “in a small, 4x6 foot hut that he built just a few feet above his new cabin and sat atop a concrete embankment. But climbing up and down a ladder several times a day was beginning to wear on him physically.” Descriptions like this provide a connection between the viewer and Tom. We can empathize with this simple act that wears on the physical body. We are provided with an understanding that Tom is aging and are caused to further reflect on what happens when Tom is no longer able to care for himself? What happens when people in Detroit, who live like this – who live without financial stability, access to health care and social services, etc. – are no longer able to care for themselves?

107 Jordano, et al., _Detroit Unbroken Down_, 159.
108 Jordano visits Tom every time he returns to Detroit. Jordano phone interview.
109 Jordano, et al., _Detroit Unbroken Down_, 149.
110 We can take this even further – what about all Americans living in abject poverty with no social welfare system to take care of them in their old age?
Figure 1.6: Dave Jordano, Tom Sitting in Front of His New House, Southwest Side, Detroit, 2011. Image appears with permission from the artist.
The images in this series provide a point of entry for the viewer to the human stories of Detroit, the narratives of resilience. The works’ aesthetic qualities and the intimate nature of the portraits, pull the viewer in, creating an initial interest and even attachment – to the sitter and to the subject of Detroit as something more than ruin city. The accompanying descriptions open up a space for connecting with the subjects’ personal stories. Although brief, these short narrations develop our understanding of the individuals pictured. Humans connect deeply with stories. Narratives shape our understanding of places, people and their unique circumstances. Richard Delgado explains that, “[m]ost who write about storytelling focus on its community-building functions: stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics.”111 Thus, counterstories function in the same way, however, they have the ability to depict an alternative to the status quo.112

Delgado also explains that “stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel.”113 For example, Kinney criticizes Vergara for the narrative he and his photographs of Detroit perpetuate. In the book *American Ruins* (1999), Vergara tells a story of calling a business to ask permission to photograph the exterior of their building, which Vergara deemed a ruin. The person answered stating that they “work on cars” and that they were “very busy right now.”114 Vergara, deciding that because this building was boarded up, no longer housing the original business for which the signage was created, a headstone showroom, and its front yard overgrown, photographed the building as a site of ruin anyway.115 Kinney explains that the story Vergara tells through his writing and his actions is that the people who inhabit these places are denying the ruin within which they live, “few people admit that the buildings in which they live or work are actually ruins.”116 Kinney counters Vergara’s story of ruin by questioning how it is possible for people to live and work if the places in which they do so are ruins. Furthermore, her

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., *Beautiful Wasteland*, 58.
115 Ibid., 58-59.
counterstory denounces him for not listening to the literal words of the people he interacts with.

[Vergara] engages the people who live in the neighborhoods and the places he photographs; yet he refuses to hear. Not only does he not listen, he continues to project an image of emptiness and abandonment when those who live and work in the places he photographs are clearly stating that Detroit is not empty, not abandoned, and life, commerce, and living are still happening – despite popular perceptions of ruin and abandonment.117

In her critique of his photographs, his words and actions, Kinney constructs a counterstory that demolishes the dominant narrative Vergara is perpetuating, where the people who live in the places he photographs are incapable of knowing ruin from life, of having a voice worthy of being heard by outsiders. Kinney’s counterstory then, gives a voice and lends an ear to these people, bearing witness to the lives they are living amongst the perceived ruin. That the ruin is indeed functioning, even if outsiders cannot see past their preconceived notions and dominant narratives.

Descriptions like Kinney’s and like the stories Jordano includes with his photographs, open up a space for critical inquiry into the system that has left its population to fend for itself. As one reads Tom’s story, sees the photographs of his expertly crafted shack, they might ask, “Why in the twenty-first century is an elderly man forced to build his own makeshift home from found objects on a deserted plot of land in one of the wealthiest nations in the world? How has the social welfare system failed so miserably that this is reality, and has been Tom’s reality for the past twelve years?” Delgado explains that “[c]ounterstories can quicken and engage conscience,”118 thus Jordano’s project functions to tell a counterstory that engages the conscience and invites viewers and readers to question America’s failing systems – social, political, and economic.

The combination of text with image presents the viewer with an understanding of the relationship between photographer and subject. In Jordano’s case, his process is inherently linked to relationship building. Beyond his explanations during the

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117 Kinney, Beautiful Wasteland, 59.
conversations we have had, this process is evident in the inclusion of the accompanying text. The text alludes to conversations involving trust and story sharing – an agreement or an exchange between two people. It also alludes to a bond between photographer and sitter, albeit some more superficial than others. Jordano explained that not everyone he spoke to wanted to have their picture taken; rather, they wanted to tell their story, to be heard and to move on. “Some people I would meet and I would have long conversations with them and I would ask them if I could photograph them and they would just say no. And that only happened once or twice.” He explains that people were interested in his project because of the story-telling element. “I think people that live there were just tired of the negative image that the media was portraying about Detroit – both nationally and internationally,” and enthusiastic to have an opportunity to be seen and to be heard. So much of the imagery coming out of Detroit has been void of people and thus void of the stories they have to tell. Jordano’s project intimately captures people in their daily lives, in pictures and in stories.

Embedded within the *Detroit - Unbroken Down* series is another, *Detroit – Darkness in the Light I* (2010-2013) and a second collection *Detroit – Darkness in the Light II* (2011-2014). This two-part series pictures approximately forty-eight white female sex workers, many who travelled downtown from the suburbs to work. Jordano explained that he began this series after photographing in Detroit for over nine months. “I saw all these women standing on street corners and I knew what they were doing. But it was so prevalent and they were so open – and didn’t care about the police stopping them or arresting them – like they didn’t have a care in the world. And I just found that striking and they were all white – and I found that kind of alarming as well.” This is striking because the population of Detroit at the time was 83% African American. Their race could be explained by the location they were photographed or the fact that they were coming into the city from the suburbs. Regardless of reason, this body of work (inadvertently) renders female sex workers of colour invisible. Black, Latina, and Indigenous women are all too often rendered invisible to the public eye and in a way, this

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119 Jordano, interview.
120 Ibid.
121 Perhaps it is this suburban context that Jordano is highlighting in this series – simply, the act of white women from the suburbs coming to the city to work and procure drugs.
work furthers their invisibility. Jordano began documenting these women who were prostituting themselves for drugs or money to buy drugs, for almost two years until,

…it became unbearable because their stories were so horrendous and sad – and I knew that I couldn’t do anything about them. We’d have long discussions about them getting clean and they were all afraid to go through withdrawal because staying on the drugs was better than going through withdrawal and getting dope sick and everything – it was such a vicious thing.122

Jordano felt the need to photograph these women, to document their complex stories as a way of witnessing their suffering in a dignified manner.

Melanie, in Melanie, Eastside, Detroit (2011) like all of the women in this series is pictured head-to-toe, standing posed for the picture.123 She wears a white eyelet lace dress, bright pink sandals, headband, and bra. The pink and the lace redolent of childhood innocence while the flimsy straps and see-through skirt deny this illusion. Her fingernails and feet are dirty, her body is marked and scarred. The difficult life experiences of the women in this series are worn in their physical appearances, their bodies transformed from years of drug use, physical violence, and malnourishment. Jordano’s photographs convey the embodied experience of these women’s lives – the embodied trauma. However, there is something dignified in Melanie’s awkward pose – in all of their awkward poses. We are forced to look at her, see all of her, and to look her in the eyes. The importance of these photographs lies in their role of making what and who is normally invisible, visible. These women and the work they do, their addictions and their struggles are often invisible. By taking their photographs in such a dignified way allows them to be seen, at least for a moment.

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122 Jordano, interview.
123 Each of the women were paid by Jordano.
Figure 1.7: Dave Jordano, *Melanie, Eastside, Detroit*, 2011. Image appears with permission from the artist.
In a statement on his website Jordano explains that his “approach to this project is not to [project a sense] of lightness [on] the situation, but to photograph these women in as casual a way as possible so that your perception [about] who they are is ambiguous. The meaning of the photograph challenges the viewer to consider alternate possibilities of identity and in doing so brings a closer sense of association with them.”

Jordano wanted the viewer to empathize with these women, to see a loved one in their place – namely, to see them as the people they are, undefined by the work they do or the addictions that dominate their lives. However, there is no mistaking the embodied trauma, the poverty and addiction borne in these women’s poses. Their poses do not belie their realities. It is not enough for Jordano to proclaim his intention of photographing these women as casually as possible so that they would appear as any other woman. This may have been his intention, however, it is not the end result. The end result is much more profound and beautiful than his intention. Profound because of their uncensored testimonies – to violence, abuse, and unimaginable hardships, and beautiful because in these photographs we witness the beauty of the human soul bared – vulnerable and dignified. The viewer is however, left to question, would the empathy generated by these images of white women differ if they were Black, Latina, or Indigenous?

This series is overtly fraught with the unequal power dynamic of a white male photographer and drug-addicted female sex workers as subjects. It can be argued that Jordano likens his female subjects to their ruinous surroundings, conflating the negative narratives of Detroit, addiction, and sex workers. However, I would argue that it would be easy and unproductive to reduce it to this obvious analysis and thus look to Kelly Wood’s article “In favour of Heroines: Lincoln Clarkes’s Vancouver photographs,” to help formulate an understanding of this series. In this article, Wood examines Clarkes’ photographic series Heroines (1998), and argues that it blurs the lines between several types of photography, creating an as-yet uncategorizable form that reveals “current models for writing about photography are insufficient.” Furthermore, Wood argues “that the importance of Heroines lies ultimately in how it suggests new strategies of

evaluating the political work of photography in the aftermath of identity politics.”126 This article is useful in its exploration of arguments made regarding this politically and ethically charged photographic series and how it can help to frame an understanding of Jordano’s project.

Lincoln Clarkes’ series of over four hundred photographs depicts the “heroin addicted women … (many of them sex workers)” of Vancouver’s notorious Downtown East Side (DTES).127 Many of the women dramatically pose for the camera in the style of fashion photography in the backdrop of the crumbling DTES neighbourhood.128 Signifiers like store signs that read “drugs,” barred windows that imply imprisonment, or the site of building demolition further enrich, or manipulate depending on which side of the argument you are on, the viewer’s understanding of the images. Wood’s article outlines the various criticisms the series received, each based on standard strategies for evaluation in the discourse of photography: concerned documentary, New Documentary, photojournalism, and fashion photography, all of which boils down to the issue of objectification and consent on behalf of the female subjects. An additional thread running through this article is the way in which the photographs were used in the media when the case of serial killer, Robert Picton broke and shed light on the long ignored issue of murdered and missing women from the DTES neighbourhood.129

Wood explains that the women in the photographs each gave written consent and that they were well-informed regarding the project and the implications of their participation in it.130 Furthermore she highlights that criticism waged against the series based on the argument that “the subjects’ drug use, purported addictions, and economic vulnerability precludes their ability to effectively grant consent,” only “negate[s] the women as subjects capable of giving their own legal consent.”131 Thus, the women in this

128 Wood cites intense criticism of Clarkes’ use of the fashion photographic style as a further commodification of these women’s bodies. She argues that the use of this trope actually “operates at a meta-level to suggest how much the image itself is the commodity,” and that “in the series… the fashion system inserts itself into documentary art and this confuses both registers’ of viewer expectation.” Wood, 231. The viewer doesn’t know how to read this image and is made to feel uncomfortable – hopefully uncomfortable about the politics and social issues faced by people living in the DTES.
130 Ibid., 236.
131 For the detailed arguments see Wood, 236 - notes 14 and 15.
series are further objectified by the critics who attempt to speak for them by assuming that these women firstly, need someone else to do this and secondly, that they had no voice and no agency when they agreed to take part in this project.

Wood draws on photographic theory, specifically Ariella Azoulay’s concept of the “photographic encounter” as an encounter “that spreads powers and responsibilities beyond the dualistic union of photographer and photographed such that neither ultimately control the event’s inscription, or, even, what happens to those eventual inscriptions, however wrought, when they enter society.”132 Wood explains, in terms of the *Heroines* series, “we should have no doubt that a wide range of needs defined both parties’ participation and that this clouds any sense of equitable collaboration.” Furthermore, she argues that “rethinking the image as an unpredictable photographic situation potentially gives back these women their stake as subjects with agency, allowing them to subvert their own invisibility.”133 The danger of this invisibility is the long neglected issue of missing and murdered women from the DTES.

Invisibility is at the heart of Wood’s comparison to Stan Douglas’ award-winning, sustained visual meditation of the DTES neighbourhood, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001).134 This work, in contrast to Clarkes’, depicts the architectural landscape of the area and is void of all human presence. *Every Building* is a digital panoramic image of every building on the south side of the 100 block of Hastings Street, taken at night with a long exposure time. The people of this neighbourhood are literally rendered invisible by Douglas’ artistic process. This social commentary on the threat of gentrification of this neighbourhood does what many images of Detroit’s ruins and empty streets do: it displaces the humans who occupy the space, neutralizing the issues of poverty, addiction, and crime, and providing the blank canvas necessary for gentrification.135

133 Ibid.
134 Both book publications for *Heroines* and *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* tied (for the first time in history) as winners of the 2003 City of Vancouver Book Award.
Wood explains that *Heroines*, with its combination of highly criticized photographic tropes represents “the political potential of photographic vision” not yet exhausted and that “there remains an ethical imperative to pursue it; since the potential invisibility of its subjects has a literally violent and not merely metaphorical dimension.”¹³⁶ Here, Wood’s direct reference to the issue of murdered and missing women speaks to the importance of the process of making the invisible visible and can be applied to Jordano’s *Darkness in the Light* series. Without a doubt there is an obvious gendered and economic power dynamic at work between photographer and subject. However, I would argue that in consenting to be photographed and in sharing their stories with Jordano, the women in these photographs have exercised their agency and will to be rendered visible – as difficult and fraught as that visibility is. Like the rest of the *Unbroken Down* series, the importance of these images lies in their ability to politicize and bear witness to the human experience in Detroit.

Jordano expressed the difficulty of this project. “It was too painful to [keep doing] knowing that there wasn't much I could do to help these women.”¹³⁷ He explained to me that not much happened with the work as a whole, other than publishing it on his website, because he felt in certain ways it was a negative approach to the city, that it was counter to the *Detroit - Unbroken Down* project, even though he understood the importance of documenting the women. However, several photographs from the series were included in the *Detroit: Unbroken Down* book as well as the AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize Exhibition (2015).¹³⁸ Jordano’s uncertainty with this project expresses his understanding of the delicacy, complexity, and unsettling nature of this work. In terms of this series, much remains for the artist to unpack. When I asked him if he is still in touch with any of the women, he told me, “some have recovered, they’ve sent emails, about three or four have gotten off the streets… but twice as many have died.”¹³⁹ He explained, “Melanie was a heroin addict… I lost track of her and don't know if she survived her addiction or

¹³⁸ Tammy, *Goldengate Street, Detroit* (2012) and Melanie, *Eastside, Detroit* (2011) are both published in the book. *Tammy* was included in the exhibition at the AGO.
¹³⁹ Jordano, interview.
not. Really a sad story.” This series of photographs conveys the fragility and precarity of life, and the brutal and raw beauty that constitutes this complex life.

One of the last photographs published in the *Detroit - Unbroken Down* book is an image titled, *Family Playing in an Empty Lot, Gratiot Avenue, Detroit* (2013). This photo taken mid-way through the series depicts two women and two children playing with a small inflatable swimming pool. The pool sits atop a wooden platform that provides a stage for this simple scene of summer play. One of the little girls stands with her head down, face scrunched in an intense expression of joy. Her outstretched arms seem to mirror three sets of handprints painted on the mural covering the building behind her. The mural reads: “DETROIT UNITED” subscript: “THE RISE OF OUR PEOPLE.” The font of “D’s” in the words Detroit and united are painted in the iconic gothic “D” of the Detroit Tigers that has come to represent Detroit, proudly dubbed, “the D” by natives of the city. The front of the wooden platform is covered by a sign that reads: “POP STAR” in bright blue block lettering. The literal shadow of the photographer is visible in the foreground, ironically over the word star. This could be read as the photographer’s insertion of himself into the narrative of Detroit. He has literally pictured himself within the complex story of Detroit as a story-teller or a facilitator of story-telling. The viewer is aware of his presence and his role – the power he wields as photographer and story-teller. This insertion of his shadow into the frame causes the viewer to reflect upon the use of text in this image.

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140 Jordano, email.
The text in this image draws our attention to Jordano’s goal for this project, to depict a version of Detroit that differs from the dominant narratives of abandonment and ruin. This scene depicts vibrant, resilient, playful life. It is a scene of women setting up an inflatable pool on a wooden stage in the middle of an empty space in an urban landscape - probably made empty by a demolished building – the ruin that Jordano’s project is working against. The point is not that there is no ruin; rather, it is that the people of Detroit are working with a state of ruin, making the best of what they have. This is resilience. These women, like others depicted by Jordano, are making the best of their surroundings, carrying on with the daily joys (hardships and toil – though not necessarily depicted here) of life. The words that frame this image, those that are painted on the mural in the background, exclaim the message Jordano, and his subjects, the people of Detroit, want to express: Detroit is united and through this unity, it will rise. The text in
this photograph draws our attention to our position of looking at and reading the image. It makes us as viewers accountable to perpetuate a positive narrative of Detroit. Through our role of witnessing Jordano (and Detroit’s) counter narrative to ruin city, we are implicated in the new narrative, hopefully as messengers of a positive narrative.

Jordano was by no means the only person to come to Detroit and create work with this philosophy of relationship-building. However, he is one of the first to do so on this scale, with this level of intimacy, and to receive such recognition for the work. Although Jordano’s work aims to tell a different, more positive story about Detroit, his images do not sugar-coat anything. They depict the ailing city, its abandonment and its decay in startling contrast to the resilient, vibrant human spirit that resides there.

…There were still over 700,000 people living within [the city’s] borders and I was conflicted as to why so many photographers had only concentrated on the abandonment and emptiness of the city. I felt that this was a great injustice to the human condition that existed there and the toll it was taking on the lives of those who must contend with the hardships of living in a post-industrial city. The title of the book alludes to the perseverance and strength of those who are fraught with the reality of trying to make the best of a bad situation. Their fate trapped within the confines of a city with minimal services and no money. I wanted to tell a story so that others wouldn’t forget the struggle that goes on here.\footnote{141}

The decay is indicative of municipal mismanagement and state abandonment. The viewer is left with the understanding that Detroit is still standing because the people are still standing. Detroit has survived because the people have survived. When industry, white people, and money left the city, these are the people who stayed.\footnote{142}

**Conclusion**

Coming home can be difficult, especially when the reason you left had nothing to do with your attachment to or love for your city. Both Lake and Jordano left Detroit for various reasons, economic and political, but often return to visit their families who had stayed. Neither one was ever fully out of touch with the city, but they are still somewhat regarded as outsiders returning to the city. True that neither of them had to stick it out in the

\footnote{141} Jordano, et al., *Detroit Unbroken Down*, 18.
\footnote{142} Many stayed because they did not have the resources to leave, others stayed for the love of their city.
crumbling city, surviving in the ways the people and places they photographed have. Both left and had successful artistic careers that led them home, to the city that formed them, as people and as artists. Straddling the line between “insider” and “outsider,” Jordano and Lake were able to produce works that are expressive of intimate relationships with the city as well as provide a critical outsider perspective. As outsiders or “returners,” these artists have been able to combine their knowledge and love for the city with the space necessary to examine the important, critical questions about art production in and about Detroit.

Through my analysis of the projects, *Performing an Archive* and *Detroit – Unbroken Down* I have come to an understanding that for Lake and Jordano, returning to their city of origin to engage in such work involves a determined commitment to the city and its people. These projects were deeply personal, important explorations for them both. This is evident in the careful production and detail of their work. Lake’s complex staging and layering of meaning and visual cues in her photographs communicate her deep respect for the places and people she documented. Jordano’s intimate portraits intensely communicate the trusting bond between sitter and photographer. Both artists are invested in the production of a positive, people-centred narrative of Detroit. Their work expertly rebukes the dominant narrative of ruin city and invites an exploration into a much more complicated story of Detroit.
"i want to see
brown and black folks
photographed
by
brown and black eyes."
- eyes by Niyirah Waheed

Chapter 2. At Home in Detroit: Constructing Agency and Narrative from Within

Introduction

During his keynote address at the IdeasCity Detroit conference, artist Theaster Gates emphasized that every city needs to find a unique solution to its problems and there is no one prescription for all cities. However, the conversation about our cities needs to involve many different voices and people from different backgrounds with different expertise. The Municipal government of Detroit wants to increase the flow of people and money coming into Detroit. All cities strive for this; however, Detroit must overcome its negative reputation in order to do so. On Saturday April 30th, 2016 IdeasCity hosted a public conference to conclude the six-day IdeasCity Detroit residency program. IdeasCity is a “collaborative, civic, and creative” international initiative of the New Museum in New York, organized around the premise that “art and culture are essential to the future vitality of cities.” Co-founded by Lisa Phillips and Karen Wong, IdeasCity provides a forum and the resources – money, space, and creative people (via an open call for participation) to produce ideas for solving the complex problems facing cities globally. Beginning in New York in 2011 the residency has taken place in Istanbul, Sao Paolo, Detroit, Athens, and Arles. The residencies include approximately forty participants with diverse backgrounds in art, design, technology, and community activism who take part in tours, lectures, and discussions with local experts in order to identify issues facing communities within the host city. Participants then work to brainstorm projects that address these concerns and the needs of the city and its people. Each residency culminates in a day-long conference that includes guest speakers and presentations of the group projects by the participants. The idea is that through the collaborative efforts of

144 Ibid.
diverse groups of people, creative solutions to our cities’ evolving problems can be proposed and enacted to create lasting, positive change.

Over the course of three months and prior to the launch of the IdeasCity Detroit residency, twenty-five artists and activists in Detroit collaborated to draft a community benefits agreement, “the Memorandum of Understanding for the IdeasCity Detroit Planning.”\(^{145}\) This short memo involved negotiations with the New Museum and articulated the value of including local artists in events and revitalizations projects to lend credibility to the conference. They advocated for: land acknowledgement, acknowledgement of the people, that the conference spend money on local businesses – which it did, all of the food and retail items were provided by local vendors –and they wanted to know, most importantly, that something was \textit{actually} going to come out of the conference. They wanted to know what the follow up would be.

Attempts to attract investors to cities often result in local voices being lost in the excitement, thus it was important that the voices of Detroiters were heard during the planning process and throughout IdeasCity. Detroit artist and community activist, Halima Cassells, explained that when outside projects are funded and supported in the city, it is perceived to be an intentional act of disconnecting from resident voices, especially because, as she explains, “the connection between artists (amongst themselves and the city leadership) is less than desired.”\(^{146}\) In an effort to form better relationships a city representative in charge of arts and culture has been meeting with groups of artists around the city. They have picked up on one of the projects developed during the IdeasCity residency and presented at the conference: simplifying the process for granting artists permits for special events. This will make it easier to organize block parties, festivals, and public installations. It is still unclear where this is in the process.\(^{147}\)

The community benefits agreement did allow for a local agenda at the IdeasCity Detroit conference and provided a framework for future projects in Detroit and beyond. It gave local artists an opportunity to present projects that, with the support of city officials, have the potential to shift the negative narrative of Detroit as ruin city and that attempt to

\(^{145}\) The full Memorandum of Understanding can be found here: [http://www.ideas-city.org/ideascity-detroit/public-conference/about/](http://www.ideas-city.org/ideascity-detroit/public-conference/about/).


\(^{147}\) Ibid.
revitalize communities and neighbourhoods in Detroit. Cassells explained that other “spin offs” and collaborations happened as a result; “the message for cultural CBA [community benefits agreement] has continued to evolve and folks are creating a toolkit for others to use.” Furthermore, “some very fruitful collabs happened between artists in different places as well as social justice folks and collectives sharing information as a result.” In the end, IdeasCity adopted the CBA framework for subsequent projects in other cities.

It was within the context of providing agency and a platform for people to tell their own stories, within this creative atmosphere that projects like the Detroit Narrative Agency or DNA (2016-ongoing) and Beware of the Dandelions (2015-2016) were conceptualized. This chapter will examine how projects by contemporary artists living in Detroit complicate and shift the narrative of ruin city. The focus will be on how complex political and social issues, as well as the everyday concerns of the people of Detroit, are addressed by these “insiders.” These case studies will be framed by discourses on narrative and story creation, gentrification and a critique of the “creative class.” The artist projects will be analyzed through the lens of Afrofuturism and will include further analysis of the multi-media project Beware of the Dandelions using the framework of “aesthetic action.” Aesthetic action is a term formulated by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin with specific regards to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. They use the term to describe “how a range of sensory stimuli – image, sound, and movement – have social and political effects through our affective engagements with them.” My analysis using the framework of aesthetic action will expand traditional understandings of narrative building and urban renewal projects to include the role of embodied experiences via community engaged art projects.

Afrofuturism was a concept explored by writer and African American Studies and Sociology professor Alondra Nelson in the early 1990s. The term was coined by writer, lecturer, and cultural critic, Mark Dery, in his 1994 publication, Flame Wars: The...
Discourse of Cyberculture. Described as a cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science and philosophy of history that explores the intersection of African Diaspora culture and science, Afrofuturism has been adopted by many cultural workers in Detroit. Nelson, explains that it is “(n)either a mantra nor a movement, AfroFuturism is a critical perspective that opens up inquiry into the many overlaps between technoculture and black diasporic histories.” Furthermore, Nelson quotes Dery in her description where “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as “African American voices” with “Other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.” This definition is useful in framing my analysis of the narrative-shifting projects by Detroit artists in their efforts to showcase local African American voices. The individual stories and collective narratives presented by the artists of the DNA Project and Beware of the Dandelions tell different stories about life, culture, technology, and things to come for the City of Detroit.

My analysis of the DNA project and Beware of the Dandelions is intended to showcase and elevate the types of story-telling and narrative-building from within Detroit, by the people of Detroit. It is important to bring these works into conversation with the type of work created by those returning to Detroit in order to understand their differences and what is at stake. Suzy Lake and Dave Jordano’s projects depict their complex love for the city while the work being done from within depicts the active struggle of those working within a system that is trying to erase and eliminate them. This chapter examines how Detroit-based artists have sought to counter externally funded urban renewal projects. I argue that urban renewal must involve people from within the city and acknowledge their complex histories in order to benefit the community in a lasting and meaningful way.

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152 In her 2006 article, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,” Lisa Yasek also attributes early Afrofuturist contributions to: Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Kodwo Eshun.
2.1 Finding a Voice: The Detroit Narrative Agency

DNA is a program of Allied Media Projects that aims to shift the narrative of Detroit by telling different stories through moving-image projects. The aim is to use narrative to shift the negative understanding of Detroit and its communities, in order to focus on the actual problems within the city that stem from systemic racism, mismanagement of government, and corporate strongholds. For many years narratives dominating the collective imagination of Detroit have focused on the city’s dangers and poverty, or that of post-bankruptcy corporate-sponsored resurgence via the development of Detroit’s downtown. Existing in parallel to this, but greatly ignored, have been the stories that DNA describes as “…the Detroit that was saving itself all along, the Detroit that is pushing back against marginalization and erasure.” It is these, differing stories of active but ignored communities that the DNA project wanted to give voice to. Founding director ill Weaver, a Detroit-based artist and organizer, along with adrienne maree brown, a Detroit-based writer and social justice facilitator, brought together an Advisory Team comprised of local artists, community members, and organizers to establish the philosophy and guiding principles of the DNA project. Organizers explain that, “the first step of this endeavor is expanding existing constellations of crucial storytellers… [and] building an ecosystem of skills, approaches, and mediums that emphasize

156 “About,” Allied Media Projects, accessed June 24, 2017, https://www.alliedmedia.org/about/story. “Allied Media Projects cultivates media strategies for a more just, creative and collaborative world. We serve a network of media makers, artists, educators, and technologists working for social justice. Our definition of media includes all forms of communication, from videos and websites to theater, dance, design, and interactive technology. Through the Allied Media Conference and the Sponsored Projects program, AMP shares and supports models for using media for transformative social change. Our work is grounded in Network Principles developed and evolved through dialogue with our uniquely diverse and collaborative community of participants. We are based in Detroit, MI. Our network includes people and organizations from more than 150 towns and cities across the U.S., Canada, and abroad.”
community accountability and more root-cause analysis of the issues impacting Detroit.” The team members hope that by telling a different story through the understanding and shifting of negative narratives, that the communities are empowered by their involvement and become capable of affecting the revitalization efforts of Detroit in a way that impacts communities in lasting, positive ways.

The Advisory Team studied the ways in which narratives were constructed and how they could be used to shift or counter dominant ideologies. Gathering input from Detroiters, the team created a "Detroit Narrative Map," a collection of the narratives their communities wanted to shift. Additionally, the team aided in making the process of applying for mini-grants to support moving image projects more accessible. On August 1, 2016, ten recipients of the Seed Grant Program for moving images were announced and the DNA project was launched. The projects range from documentary film, to web series, virtual reality, and interactive installation, and were chosen for their “strong narrative-shifting, moving image, and community engagement components.”

Participants took part in a series of “capacity building” activities that include technical support, community engagement, mentorships and consultations with DNA before and throughout the duration of the creation of their projects. This comprehensive program has aimed to support the creation of a new, representative and positive narrative of Detroit.

The Seed Grant phase culminated in private presentations to potential funders and a celebration of the work at the opening ceremony of the 2017 Allied Media Conference. The Second phase of the DNA program narrowed down the projects to five works and is focussed on “fortifying the city’s narrative-shifting ecosystem.” The final five films

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161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 There was a total of 148 applications.
had two screenings and there was a corresponding photography exhibition at the 20th Annual Allied Media Conference in June 2018, hosted at N’Nanamdi Center for Contemporary Art, Detroit. On August 1st, 2018 the final five were screened and followed by a panel discussion at the Blackstar Film Festival in Philadelphia.

The ongoing project aims to highlight marginalized narratives that “acknowledge and uplift the history of Detroit as Anishinaabe Indigenous people’s land; the largest majority Black city in the nation with a long legacy of African Diasporic global contributions; the many immigrant communities, working class white, and other peoples living in and around this border city, shaping the culture and uniqueness of Detroit.”

The chosen projects are expected to go beyond story telling. These projects are expected to form communities of like-minded individuals, “culture-shifters” and policy-makers, who are addressing similar narratives in order to effect real change in the city. The long-term goals of the project include continued growth and expansion beyond the film towards community action in order to foster the diverse narratives of the city and their various forms of expression.

The DNA Project incorporates aspects of Afrofuturist theory by way of creating a space, platform, and means for storytelling and imagining a future for people of colour in Detroit. Mark Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism includes the argument that it is not just a “subgenre of science fiction,” rather it is multifaceted and future-focussed; “it is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.” These Afrodiasporic experiences are the varied but shared histories of peoples descended from enslaved native Africans traded largely throughout the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries during the Atlantic slave trade. The term African Diaspora, like Afrofuturism, came into popular use in the 1990s.

Afrofuturist writing adopts tropes and narrative techniques of science fiction because science fiction is inherently future-centric. Afrofuturism operates in opposition to

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169 Ibid.
erasure – the erasure of African and African American histories, stories, culture, voices, bodies, etc. It in turn envisions and writes a future for people of colour and answers the questions: What is that future and what does it look like when erasure is resisted and people of colour can thrive? What does the future look like when we don’t erase and ignore long histories of oppression or frame rebellious uprisings as violent black riots? What does it look like when descendants of slaves can own property and businesses without the fear of foreclosure or eviction related to the gentrification of now desirable neighbourhoods? What does it look like to live in thriving, healthy, supportive, and growing communities? The DNA Project is one example of the creation of a platform and a means for people in Detroit to both resist erasure and tell their own stories, and envision a future for themselves and their communities in a city that is perpetually pushing them to the margins.

Director Orlando Ford presents stories that resist erasure and give a voice to the people of Detroit in his project for DNA. A trailer for his work, Where the Heart Is was previewed at the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 Allied Media Conference (AMC). This short film opens with a woman named Mayowa Reynolds recounting a story of taking a group of girls from the Detroit School of Arts to receive the Kennedy Center Honor at a conference in Atlanta and having an employee at their hotel recoil upon hearing they were from Detroit. Reynolds describes her reaction, one that echoes the pride and protective nature of Detroitters, and her refusal to allow these talented women to be judged based on the city they came from. The irony of that reaction from a young man from a city with its own highly charged history of racial turmoil and injustices is not lost on the viewer and sets the stage for this film whose aim is to deconstruct these inaccurate and misrepresented ideas of Detroit. The film features intimate interviews with people who live or who used to live in various neighbourhoods in Detroit. Each person recounts their experiences of life in Detroit, stories that rebuke preconceived notions of what it means to be from this city.

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172 Since then and at the request of DNA organizers, Ford’s project took on the specific focus of Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures. A second iteration of the original DNA project, Take Me Home (2016-2017) was screened at the 20th Annual Allied Media Conference (June 2018).
In the film, individuals are interviewed in their neighbourhoods, outside of their homes, or where their childhood homes once stood. They describe what it was like to grow up in this city, the good, the bad, and more recently – the gentrified. The stories recount growing up in a city where unemployment, drugs, violence, and poverty had become prevalent. The artist, Orland Ford sits outside of his family home and describes these conflicting narratives, “I had a childhood that everybody should have. I had a childhood where I was loved and nurtured, and really respected in a way that children should be… But when harder things came into the neighbourhood that’s when, as they say, stuff got real and people started dying.”

Another man, Yuseff Bunchy Shakur, describes the contradiction of this combined pride for the place he grew up and the often harsh realities faced by the community. Bunchy Shakur is a gang member turned freedom fighter who, through his community initiatives and events, currently inspires the youth of Detroit to “see themselves as defenders and creators of their communities.” His goal is to build strong, safe communities of people who take care of one another and their neighbourhoods as a reaction against the violence and deterioration he experienced in his

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childhood; “…growing up in the eighties, crack was king, joblessness was king. The deterioration of the city was accelerating during that period of me growing up in this city.”¹⁷⁵ The stories told in this film speak to the complex nature of people’s experiences in this city.

![Figure 2.2: Still of Yuseff Bunchy Shakur, Where the Heart Is, 2017. Image Courtesy of Orlando Ford.](image)

The intention of this film is to tell stories and give a voice to the people and neighbourhoods that are often overlooked in Detroit. The intention is not to sugar-coat the story of Detroit in an attempt to counter the dominant narratives of ruin. Ford explained that this is a project that aims not necessarily to be positive, just more truthful.¹⁷⁶ The intention is to present the lived experiences and the voices of those who call Detroit home. Some of the stories they tell are not all that positive, however, the point is two-fold. The first being that their stories are worth telling and listening to -- they speak of the complexities of staying in a city abandoned by many people. To put it

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¹⁷⁵ Orlando Ford, “Where the Heart Is.”
¹⁷⁶ Orlando Ford, Interview by author, in-person interview, Detroit, MI, November 25, 2017.
plainly, leaving was a luxury many could not afford. Secondly, these stories open up a dialogue about what and who the city has overlooked and is continuing to overlook in the excitement of development and gentrification. This is precisely why the narrative put forward in Ford’s film is so important. Detroit must not forget the people who have been there all along.

Another young man, Akil Alvin, sits out front of his grandmother’s home and explains his frustration with this notion that “great things are happening in Detroit, now.” The same signs of care and maintenance that were seen in the home pictured in Suzy Lake’s photograph, 723 Newport Avenue, 1913 (2014/2016) – the one she affectionately called “Patricia’s house,” can be seen in Alvin’s grandma’s house. He explains that she has lived in the city for over half a century, that “…she’s still here when everything she moved here for left her.” Her loyalty and pride in her home, both the structure standing behind her grandson and the city itself, are evident in the careful maintenance of the house. Many who were interviewed for this film talked about the concept of a “comeback” for Detroit, and how that is problematic precisely because of the people like Alvin’s grandmother who have been here all along – and for Alvin himself who believes that, “there have always been great things happening in Detroit.” These “great things” have obviously been accompanied by a lot of not great things; however, it is this sense of loyalty and deep love for a place that this film conveys. Shakur expresses this deep love when he exclaims, “[h]ell yeah I love my neighbourhood. I would fight for my neighbourhood. I would die for my neighbourhood. I would live for my neighbourhood. Because these are the people who love me.” This sentiment resonates through the neighbourhoods of Detroit.

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177 Orlando Ford, “Where the Heart Is.”
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
In another interview, Silver Danielle talks about the relationship between racism and public perceptions of the city. She sits before a vacant lot, the kind that has come to define images of Detroit, and speaks passionately about the issues faced by and continuing to face her city. She explains that the negative narratives that perpetuate a fear of Detroit have their roots in racist histories of America.

When people talk about Detroit and this fear of Detroit, it also has to do with this fear we have of blackness and this fear we have of black bodies. And Detroit just happens to be a place that has a whole lot of black bodies, and it’s had a whole lot of black bodies for a long time.181

In my interview with Ford regarding this project we spoke at length about the collective misconceptions of Detroit. Many of these misconceptions come from the inaccurate, violent, fear mongering representation of the Detroit Rebellion, commonly and incorrectly referred to as the “Detroit Riot.”182

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181 Orlando Ford, “Where the Heart Is."
182 July 23, 1967 – July 28, 1967. This is not a project on the Detroit Rebellion and so I will not go into further detail here, however, for more information on the Rebellion and the 50th Anniversary commemorations please see: https://hyperallergic.com/396619/calling-detroits-1967-civil-unrest-a-rebellion-a-museum-takes-a-strong-stand/.
As I sat interviewing Ford 50 years (and four months) after the Rebellion, I inquired about the discrepancies in the terminology. I was aware that this issue was not just a matter of semantics – when one is dealing with race and social justice, it rarely is. He exclaimed that, “we’ve always called it a rebellion – it was an act of rebellion.”\textsuperscript{183} He explained that people had enough of being controlled and oppressed by a racist police force and they snapped. “It just manifest itself in this huge collective anger and when anger comes out, anger is not smart, anger is not intelligent, anger is not well thought out; it’s just anger.”\textsuperscript{184} It was this anger that would come to define the city as violent and dangerous, and its black population as aggressive and unruly.

Ford talked about the Rebellion’s inherent connection to the legacy of slavery in America and the nation’s refusal to acknowledge its ongoing influence and thus its inability to come to terms with it. He describes the United States as a broken country then and now: “Oh, I don’t want to bring politics into my living room on Sunday afternoon when I’m watching the NFL game.”\textsuperscript{185} Here, he is referring to the #TakeAKnee phenomenon begun by NFL player Colin Kaepernick in protest of the oppression of people of colour and specifically the enormously high incidences of black deaths at the
hands of law enforcement. Because of this and movements like #BlackLivesMatter, now more than ever the country (and global observers) are becoming aware that racism is alive and well. Ford explains that it’s about time people’s living rooms start getting more political. For people of colour these racial politics of oppression and surveillance are ever present, “[w]e have to live with [this] every day. When I go to the store I get followed by policemen. I get followed when I drive around.”

The ongoing misunderstanding of the issues that led to the 1967 Rebellion and the “riot” misnomer, contribute to the inaccurate negative narrative of Detroit.

Halfway through Where the Heart Is, the film skips to a clip from a segment of the evening news titled, “Taking Action.” The tagline reads: “New census report finds more white people are moving to Detroit.” A population growth of 8,000 white residents in 2017 is deemed newsworthy, its gentrifying possibilities celebrated by the media. Gentrification is a complicated, hotly debated process, it typically involves the revitalization of a poor and run down urban area through an influx of people and investment.

The process of gentrification however, proceeds on the assumption of vacancy or misuse and capitalizes on cheap land and property values which lead to higher rents and displaced people. It is exactly these assumptions that Ford’s video, and much of the work being done by Detroiter, is working against. Danielle describes her personal experiences of gentrification in Detroit, “Gentrification is real and I’ve seen it even in my neighbourhood. We’ve fought developers on multiple occasions, trying to come in and buy up several different homes because they’re like, this is a diamond in the rough, look at these yards, we wanna buy everything.”

What is overlooked by gentrification and thus displaced and eradicated in its process are the existing communities and populations - always already marginalized peoples.

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186 Orlando Ford, interview.
188 Orlando Ford, “Where the Heart Is.”
2.2 White Noise: Gentrification and Urban Renewal

For people coming into Detroit, many of them young, white, and middle-class, some looking to open businesses or profit from the city, there is the assumption that the city is a blank canvas. A 2015 Associated Press article reported a growth in the population of white people moving to Detroit while the black population were continuing to leave the city.\(^{189}\) This trend depicts a shift in migration in comparison to a 2010 Census which reported an intensifying racial divide in Detroit with 83% of the city’s population represented by African Americans – a result of ongoing “white flight.”\(^ {190}\) “Whites are moving back to the American city that came to epitomize white flight, even as blacks continue to leave for the suburbs and the city’s overall population shrinks.”\(^ {191}\) The demographic shift is attributed to cheap housing and incentive programs not available in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Toronto.\(^ {192}\) “The cheap cost of living, opportunities for young entrepreneurs, and push by city-based companies to persuade workers to live nearby have made a big difference.”\(^ {193}\) Companies like Quicken Loans moved their headquarters of 1,700 employees to downtown Detroit from suburban Detroit.\(^ {194}\) The move was announced in 2007 and was completed by 2010.

Small business incentives and competitions have affected the shift in demographic and the influx of population. The Detroit Economic Growth Competition and Hatch Detroit are just two examples of organizations supporting economic and small business development in Detroit.\(^ {195}\) Hatch Detroit, for example was founded by Nick Gorga upon his return to Detroit from Chicago. His contribution to the revitalization of Detroit neighbourhoods was to create an organization that could support the growth of new small businesses in the city. Hatch is a “Crowd Entrepreneurship” contest, where members of

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\(^{190}\) The 2010 Census reporting this racial divide is in opposition to what was going on in suburban areas that were witnessing growing racial and ethnic diversity. Ecological Economics article: “Class/racial conflict, intolerance, and distortions in urban form: Lessons for sustainability from the Detroit region.”

\(^{191}\) Williams, “The Demographics.”

\(^{192}\) Ibid.

\(^{193}\) Ibid.


the community vote for the types of business they want to see in their neighbourhoods. The Hatch recipients and these types of small businesses are arguably what you would expect from urban revitalization efforts. Hip eateries and markets, boutique fashion and clothing stores, luxury and organic skincare bars and wellness centres make up the list of Hatch “Alumni.” These are all noteworthy companies with lovely origin stories and missions; however, they are all indications of gentrifying neighbourhoods. One might ask the question, if people are losing their homes over $1,000 in unpaid property taxes, how are they going to afford $7 organic cold-pressed carrot and beet juice? It is these types of efforts that are both bringing people into Detroit and alienating the existing population who have been struggling to get by. It is this both and conundrum that make up the revitalization of cities.

Detroit is understood, by outsiders and those returning, as a frontier of endless possibilities for developing and creating a kind of lifestyle not otherwise accessible in other cities. The terms blank canvas and blank slate are used interchangeably when discussing progress, revitalization, and development in Detroit. The terms are often intersected by the word “white” by many critics of these processes – an intentionally loaded term when talking about a city with a majority black population. Detroit, like Harlem and Brooklyn before it, sits at the well-documented and fraught intersection of race and gentrification.

In her essay, “Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit,” Nicole Dawkins introduces the term “white canvas” in her criticism of Detroit’s gentrification. In the subsection, “The Blank Canvas: Whiteness and the Utopic Potential of Ruined Spaces,” she begins by quoting an article from the Globe and Mail from February 2010 that situates artists moving into Detroit as the city’s saviours. She goes on to explain that these “saviours” are “uncritically celebrated as a force of almost evangelical transformation.” The term saviour is used to refer to images of a white, colonizing Jesus. Dawkins explains, “The popular discourse of Detroit’s ruination represents the city as a dystopic wasteland but also as a kind of utopic

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198 Ibid., 267.
“blank canvas”: an empty space waiting to be inscribed and transformed by artists and the arrival of a new creative class.”\(^{199}\) The canvas is blank for the white people moving into Detroit who choose to ignore the blackness of the city’s history. This goes back to my discussion regarding the unwillingness to acknowledge complicated, racist histories in America.

The creative class as defined by Richard Florida in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002, revised in 2012), is a new social class driven by creativity and includes “science and technology, arts, media, and culture, traditional knowledge workers, and the professions… [it makes] up nearly one-third of the workforce across the United States…”\(^{200}\) It is this creative class that Florida originally posited would reinvigorate the North American economy and in turn revitalize urban spaces. Dawkins presents Jamie Peck, one of many critics of Florida’s work, who argues that Florida’s concept of the transformative potential of the creative class and the corresponding narratives “work quietly with the grain of extant ‘neoliberal’ development agendas, framed around interurban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place-marketing.”\(^{201}\) Essentially, the creative class’ potential to revitalize a city, as posited by Florida, disregards pre-existing populations and communities.

Florida has since revisited his ideas regarding the creative class and urban renewal in his book, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle-Class – and What We Can Do About It* (2017) where he criticizes some of his own previous notions of urban development. He defines his concept of the “New Urban Crisis” and its economic and geographic structures as “the product of our new age of winner-take-all urbanism, in which the talented and the advantaged, [otherwise known as the creative class] cluster and colonize a small, select group of superstar cities, leaving everybody and everywhere else behind.”\(^{202}\) Furthermore, Florida argues that, “the New Urban Crisis is the central crisis of our time” and he proposes an outline to “bring about a new and more inclusive

\(^{199}\) Dawkins, “Precarious Work,” 266.
\(^{200}\) Florida, *Creative Class Revisted*, vii.
urbanism that encourages innovation and wealth creation while generating good jobs, rising living standards, and a better way of life for all.” Although Florida proposes greater inclusivity and recognizes alienating factors of urban revitalizations, he maintains a focus on “anchor institutions” like hospitals, housing developers, and large corporations. As an economist, his brand of revitalization is more realistic than ideal and indeed follows a capitalist model.

Dawkins adds to this discussion by invoking the notion of Detroit as a frontier, a term used by Rebecca J. Kinney, taken up in the previous chapter, “Beyond Ruin: Photographing Home in Detroit.” Dawkins quotes Dale Dougherty who stated in a 2010 New York Times article: “There’s a sense that it’s a frontier again, that it’s open, that you can do things without a lot of people telling you, ‘No, you can’t do that.’” Like Kinney, Dawkins explains that the idea of Detroit as “dangerous and lawless” is being replaced with the notion that it is also “ripe with freedom and potential for doing what you want to do, however you want to do it.” The colonizers in this case are artists and creative makers, and like colonizers throughout history, the pre-existing population is treated as an expendable resource.

In his book, How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighbourhood (2017), Peter Moskowitz defines gentrification not in terms of “hipsters” and trendy shops moving into run-down neighbourhoods, or real estate developers looking to buy low and sell high; rather, he defines it in terms of racist housing policies in the United States. He explains that gentrification is a result of:

…decades of racist housing policy in the United States that has denied people of color, especially black people, access to the same kinds of housing, and therefore the same levels of wealth, as white Americans. Gentrification cannot happen without this deeply rooted inequality; if we were all equal, there could be no gentrifier and no gentrified, no perpetrator or victim.

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205 Ibid.
206 Peter Moskowitz, How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood (New York: Bold Type Books, 2017), 5.
Furthermore, “gentrification is also the inevitable result of a political system focused more on the creation and expansion of business opportunity than on the well-being of its citizens (what I refer to as neoliberalism).” Neoliberal policies that led to cuts to federal funding for housing, transportation, and other public services have forced American cities to rely on their tax base to fund these services. Naturally, the wealthier the tax base, the better funded the public services. This process can be witnessed in Detroit’s bankruptcy and resurgence. A shrunk tax base as a result of the relocation of jobs and people – mostly white – to the suburbs, inevitably results in detrimental cuts to public services in the city. Limited transportation to suburban jobs led to higher rates of unemployment, an increase in poverty, criminal activity and violence, and further flight to the suburbs which decreased the already shrunk tax base, while heightening the need for greater spending on public services. The end result is underfunded communities with minimal access to public services and a cycle of poverty that cannot be broken until the neoliberal politics and economic systems are dismantled.

Revitalization for many North American cities means attracting more wealthy people to increase the tax base and the active expulsion of the poor, often black and Latino populations by increasing rents, land values, and taxes. In terms of Detroit, the active expulsion includes unconstitutional property tax foreclosures. Between 2009-2015 over three quarters of the city’s properties were assessed at more than 50% of their market value, which in the state of Michigan is unconstitutional. The rates were assessed based on pre-recession values of the homes dating back fifty years, rather than current values, which had declined substantially. Residents were not able to pay these inflated taxes which resulted in the foreclosure of 1 in 4 Detroit homes between 2011-2015. In 2016, there were foreclosures on 60,000 properties, of which 40,000 were occupied, forcing a staggering number of people out of their homes. Black

207 Moskowitz, How to Kill a City, 5.
208 Ibid, 6.
212 Ford, Take Me Home.
homeowners and residents were being kicked out of their homes at a rate not seen anywhere else in the country. Peter Hammer, a law professor at Wayne State University explains that in Detroit, “the scale [of foreclosures] is really unimaginable.” He explains, “You think of how outrageous it is that you’re losing your house because you can’t pay your taxes. It’s not your mortgage, it’s not your rent, it’s supposed to be something that is a small portion of the total value of the house and therefore sort of exceptional when someone can’t pay that or is an extreme situation.” He describes it as “…a tsunami coming through and the scale of foreclosures here is really astronomical and is having devastating effects on historic residents of Detroit.”

Neighbourhoods in Detroit are systematically being emptied by way of illegal tax foreclosures. In addition to this, many of these residents qualified for the Michigan Poverty Tax Exemption which would have exempted them from paying their property taxes. However, very few people knew of the exemption and those who did found it extremely difficult to navigate the application process. “As a result, over 100,000 working families have lost their homes, and many Detroit neighborhoods have been devastated. African-Americans have been hit hardest of all.” Sonja Bonnet, the subject of Orlando Ford’s second iteration for the Detroit Narrative Agency, explains how opaque things were when it came to her eligibility for the exemption, “… it was so hidden that I didn’t know about it and nobody I knew, knew about it.”

Ford highlights the issues of unconstitutional tax foreclosures and the fight for housing in his film, Take Me Home (2017–2018), an extension of his work to tell the story of Detroit by Detroiters. This film follows Sonja Bonnet’s family in their pursuit to reclaim their home.

Although Bonnet and her family were forced from their home, with the support of the United Community Housing Coalition, a non-profit organization providing housing assistance to Detroit’s low-income residents, as well as the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures, they were given a new home in reparation. The

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213 Ford, Take Me Home.
214 Peter Hammer, Professor of Law, Wayne State University, in Orlando Ford, Take Me Home.
215 Ibid.
216 If your income is under $21,000/year you are eligible for the Michigan Property Tax Exemption. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=102&v=bD3vZYDYZsM
218 Ford, Take Me Home.
“Dignity Restoration Housing Program” is an extension of these coalitions and is aiming to provide Detroit’s victims of unconstitutional foreclosures with replacement homes. “The program is designed to provide reparations that are owed to families who lost their homes because of illegal assessments and barriers to tax exemption, with the overarching goal of not only restoring property, but dignity too.” These coalitions and housing programs are a step to rebuild Detroit’s neighbourhoods by the communities and people who have been directly affected by the economic desperation and the poor public policies of the city and the county.

In the film Bonnet explains the importance of neighbourhoods occupied by people who are invested in the place they live. Crime rates are lower, there is a greater sense of community and well-being when you have neighbours looking out for you and your family. The struggle to get by is made easier when surrounded by people who care about the place they live. Bonnet and her family celebrated their move to the new house and the expansion of the coalition in a press conference on June 14, 2018. I attended as part of the Allied Media Conference and was struck with a sense of hope for those who had lost their homes. It seems that reparations are possible. However, I was simultaneously struck with the enormous breadth of this movement and the amount of damage that needs to be undone.

Gentrification presents itself as the saviour of run-down neighbourhoods. It seems to breathe life and culture back into empty, poverty-stricken areas. The influx of foreclosed homes with its lure of cheap property and the resulting notion of a blank canvas has attracted a number of people, namely members of the creative class, who as a result of their migration to the city, are pushing out long-time residents. The concept of the blank slate or blank canvas comes up often in the context of art projects in Detroit produced by outsiders or visitors. Many artists and arts organizations, including the Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, have been looking to Detroit as a place of opportunity. In his book, *Detroit City Is the Place to Be* (2012) Mark Binelli positions the influx of artists to Detroit as an indication of a “first wave of bohemian gentrification.”

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219 Unconstitutitional Tax Foreclosures, [https://www.illegalforeclosures.org/](https://www.illegalforeclosures.org/).
220 “As a result of illegally inflated assessments, in 2015 alone, Wayne County treasurer foreclosed on 28,158 Detroit homes.” [https://www.illegalforeclosures.org/](https://www.illegalforeclosures.org/).
221 Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 15.
outlines two phases of gentrification. In the first, lower income creatives migrate to a place based on affordability and possibility. This stage is followed up by corporations – real estate companies, chain retail stores, etc. supported by their political allies who provide tax breaks and favourable zoning, resulting in the evolution and consequent destruction of neighbourhoods. Binelli compares Detroit to the trendy Williamsburg neighbourhood in Brooklyn suggesting that the low cost of housing and land in addition to the 50 percent tax incentive offered by the state could mean big changes for Detroit.

New Yorkers especially, have converged on the city, lured by space and cheap property values. In 2014, the front page of the Galapagos website announced their move and the promise of a Detroit Biennial. The site boasted: “Galapagos Art Space Moving to Detroit: buys 600,000 sq ft for the price of a small apartment in New York City - - New venue to have 10,000 square foot lake - - Kunsthalle Galapagos to start Detroit Biennial in 2016.” With limited-to-no understanding of how offensive and dismissive of Detroiters this announcement was, Galapagos was intensely criticised. People in Detroit saw the announcement for what it was, a real estate story – another of the many excited stories that proclaimed cheap real estate values and vacant properties with wide open spaces up for grabs. “It's a shame, though, because we think the Galapagos people are doing what a lot of out-of-towners do: Bring Eastern preconceptions to bear in well-meaning but nonetheless offensive statements.” The art industry is not the only one committing these types of offenses.

Another, more veiled campaign appropriated iconic Detroit font with an image from Diego Rivera’s mural from the interior of the DIA and words that read: “Detroit,

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222 Moskowitz, 6.
223 Binelli, 15.
225 Jackman, “Galapagos.”
226 Ibid.
Just West of Bushwick.” In an article regarding the appearance of this banner, the author adds the subtext: “Detroit: the land of opportunity, Bushwick: nearing saturation.” The banner was created by a Manhattan-based advertising firm, Prince Media. Although it was non-descript and lacked any identifying information, it acted as a curious and clever advertisement for president and founder of the media company, Philip Kafka. Kafka co-owns the restaurant KATOI, which opened in Detroit’s trendy and quickly gentrifying neighbourhood of Corktown in 2016. He is another person operating under the impression that Detroit is a frontier town, rife with possibility, lying in wait for civilized New Yorkers, like himself, to settle it. The author of this article, Nicole Disser quotes Kafka stating he thought Detroit “wasn’t being appreciated or better yet taken advantage of.” Furthermore, in Detroit “there is plenty of space to live the way you want to live, work the way you want to work, it is the last frontier in America, and the creatives of Bushwick should consider it as a place to express their art.”

Kafka’s statements exemplify the complete disregard for existing communities (wherein there are artists with very active careers), who are at economic disadvantages to their New York counterparts and therefore for whom Detroit lacks the space – created by wealth - “to live the way you want to live and work the way you want to work.” That space, now ever encroached by creatives with an economic advantage.

Orlando Ford highlights this misconception, the one being wholeheartedly promoted by Kafka, that artists coming to Detroit have of it being a “blank slate.” They think they are doing something original, however, “in actuality, there are people [there] doing a lot more with a lot less.” Furthermore, he explains what he loves about the

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228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.
232 Emphasis by author. Ibid.
233 In my interview with him, Ford used this term.
234 Ford, Interview.
DNA project is that it provides support to artists who can’t afford to create the projects they want and are capable of. Of DNA he states, “…they took a chance on people with good ideas.” The only prerequisites were that the projects had to tell a story about Detroit and the creators had to be residents of Detroit. DNA and their funders uphold the values drafted in the IdeasCity community benefits agreement. They include that local artists should be promoted and supported both financially and professionally, and the story of Detroit should be told by those from Detroit.

Ford’s desire for an honest discussion about the formative dynamics of Detroit is conveyed in his film, *Where the Heart Is*. Outsiders come to the city with very little interest in its history and the inherent link to the country’s history of slavery and racism. They bring with them the misconception that in 1967 “black people just lost it!” And another, more recent misconception, that black people lost control of their city and caused it to go bankrupt. These misconceptions have exposed Detroit to a gentrifying force of white saviours coming to develop and settle it as they see fit - with little-to-no regard for who is already there. This “blank slate” or “blank white canvas” ignores all racist and colonial legacies and merely perpetuates the problems faced by cities country-wide. Ford explains,

> We’re a young, stupid country sometimes – we don’t think this [colonialism] is how we got here. This didn’t start yesterday. This may have started 200 years ago. Everybody hates hearing about slavery, but guess what folks, it had a big role in making us how we are the way we are. We wouldn’t be as rich if it wasn’t for that. We wouldn’t have had these racial problems if it wasn’t for that.

The film concludes with this resonating statement from a man standing outside of a modest townhouse. Khary Turner explains that “[t]he past plays a role in what the city is going to become. And history shows that when you don’t respect the past, at some point the past rebels. It finds a way to make its presence felt.” Sonja Bonnet speaks to this in her discussion of the Dignity Restoration Project when she calls for people to be on the “right side of history,” to fix the wrongs of the past.

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235 Ford, Interview.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.
238 Ford, *Where the Heart Is.*
2.3 Collective Voices: Complex Movements (Resilient Seeds)
The term Aesthetic action was formulated by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin with specific regards to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.\textsuperscript{239} Robinson and Martin describe “how a range of sensory stimuli – image, sound, and movement – have social and political effects through our affective engagements with them.”\textsuperscript{240} They use the term to frame the TRC proceedings, objects, performances, and spaces comprising it. Furthermore, the authors “are concerned with the ways in which the TRC proceedings and artworks related to the Indian residential school system have impacts that are felt – whether this is through emotion or sensory experience – and to what degree these impacts result in change.”\textsuperscript{241} The authors explain the importance of this “because of the potential for embodied experiences to go unrecognized or unconsidered, even as they have enormous influence on our understanding of the world.”\textsuperscript{242} Too often our sensory and emotional reactions to experiences are overridden and dismissed by rational thought. Since the Enlightenment we have systematically privileged rational thought and disadvantaged unconscious sensory perceptions and ways of knowing and learning.

The term “aesthetics” is inherently linked to Western thought, in broad terms, and specifically to philosopher Immanuel Kant’s notions of “distanced judgement of the sublime and beautiful aspects of the fine arts,” and often reserved for the Enlightened mind.\textsuperscript{243} The authors acknowledge this loaded history, its connection to colonial and oppressive histories and propose a use of the pre-Kantian idea of aesthetics linked to its understanding as “sensory engagement” and the concept of \textit{aesthesis} defined by Baumgarten.\textsuperscript{244} They explain that, “[a]esthesis, according to Baumgarten, is “primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensate

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 8-9.
body, and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings.” Furthermore, the authors were “interested in the actions of telling, making, talking, walking, sharing, giving, and receiving. Equally, (they) were interested in different kinds of reception – the ways in which such actions were read, witnessed, and understood by the multiple audiences that experienced them.” In their observations and analysis of the TRC, the contributors to *Arts of Engagement* have taken into account the various affective encounters and experiences resulting from the process of witnessing Canada’s violent history of indigenous oppression. The authors analyze aesthetic encounters in a number of ways: with art objects, through performative art projects, as well as through the real life performance of witnessing – the telling, the listening, the acknowledging, and in some instances, the healing.

I apply the term “aesthetic action” to the Detroit art project, *Beware of the Dandelions* (2015-2016) while still recognizing the term’s specific and direct connection to the TRC proceedings. It is useful to do so because the framework of aesthetic action expands upon traditional understandings of both narrative building and urban renewal projects to include the role of embodied experiences via community engaged art projects. *Beware of the Dandelions* is an immersive, tri-modal installation, performance, and community engagement project by Detroit artist collective, Complex Movements. I posit that this project is an aesthetic action. Participants of *Dandelions* are presented with a range of sensory stimuli that encourage affective engagement with the work and the ideas.

*Beware the Dandelions* is a mobile art installation that functions as a performance, workshop space, and a visual arts exhibition and was premiered in three cities across the United States from April 2015-October 2016. This project combined the various talents and specialties of the Detroit-based art collective Complex Movements. This four-member collective includes: Wesley Taylor (graphic designer, fine

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246 Ibid.

artist, animator), Waajeed (music producer, sound designer, filmmaker), Invincible – ill Weaver (lyricist, organizer, filmmaker), and L05 - Carlos Garcia (artist and designer), in “deep collaboration with” Sage Crump (producer, cultural strategist) and Aaron Jones (architect and fine artist). Members describe their practice as boundary pushing and movement building, “…with the spirit to uplift our people through our work and through our actions.” This artist collective “support[s] the transformation of communities by exploring the connections of complex science and social justice movements through multimedia interactive performance work.” Using their diverse talents, the group aims to strengthen and support communities in Detroit through their projects that combine art, design, film, and music with social movement organizing. Beware of the Dandelions brought all of these components together for an immersive, interactive, sensorial experience.

Group members wanted to create a project that both spoke to the specificities of community while not being restricted by site specificity. The project toured three cities, Seattle (April – May 2015), Dallas (November – December 2015), and Detroit (October 2016). The group constructed a “pod” they called a “semi-hemi dodecahedron” that could be assembled and disassembled in various locations in order to easily transform a space. The interior of the pod measures twenty-four feet in diameter, is ten feet tall and has a capacity for thirty-five participants who, upon entering, are surrounded by images, lights, and sounds that take them on a fantasy journey for social justice. Three projectors, a speaker at each of the eight vertices, and two eighteen-inch subwoofers provide an immersive experience for each participant regardless of their position inside the pod. The entire hour-long “show” is performed live in an adjacent control room.

Music is at the core of what Complex Movements does and the seeds of this project came from the song “Apple Orchard.” Wajeed explains that, “Music is the cornerstone of it. That’s what creates all the bi-products… It was the first thing we came up with, ill and I.” Invincible/ill Weaver is well known throughout the city for their

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248 Emergence Media, “Complex Movements.”
249 Ibid.
250 A dodecahedron is a polyhedron with twelve flat surfaces.
251 Emergence Media, “Complex Movements.”
use of hip-hop as a tool of resistance. Writer and critic Rosie Sharp explains: “Invincible spits stories of social discord, love and loss, rage and rebellion, and memory and healing, in staccato bursts of language that are lyrical and intensely heartfelt by both performer and audience.”253 This was the foundation and creative ground of Beware of the Dandelions; “ill developed that idea and pushed it to the point where it is now – where L05, Wes, and many other collaborators that we’ve had have built upon [it].”254 The title of the project comes from the resilient nature of dandelions, a reference to Detroit’s resiliency, and the medicinal, healing properties of the plant, likening it to the healing properties of art and community organizing.

*Beware of the Dandelions* takes part in three modes: performance, installation, and community organizing. ill Weaver describes performance mode as a thirty-five-person participatory performance where people are guided down a corridor and invited into the pod by the “guardians of the seeds:”

You are met by pulsing sounds and lights. You are transported to an other-worldly science-fiction parable. You are indoctrinated by the Captains of Industry who want to corporatize, militarize an urban apple orchard. The pod serves as their surveillance and control mechanism to exploit townspeople as their work force who are paid through water litres. You realize the townspeople have transformed the pod as an archive to pass on their stories of triumph, contradiction, and failure for future travellers such as yourself. But first, you and your fellow participants must work together to hack the pod, to unlock the stories trapped inside.255

Images are projected onto the walls of the semi-hemi dodecahedron pod. Barbed-wire fences, apple trees, industrial machinery and factory lines, 3D animated chanting figures, chains, police cars, insects, and instructional text surround participants creating a completely immersive experience. Music and lights narrate this sensorial experience. Weaver explains that the work addresses themes of movement-building including involving opposition to state violence and police oppression of resistance.256

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254 Emergence Media, “Wajeed on Complex Movements’.”

255 Creative Capital, “Complex Movements Present ”Beware of the Dandelions” at the 2015 Creative Capital Retreat,” October 19, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg7xtdS8Ax8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg7xtdS8Ax8).

256 Creative Capital, “Complex Movements Present.”
The theme of the apple orchard incorporates metaphors of growth and prosperity echoed in Detroit’s urban farming movement. However, the corporatization of the apple orchard is a warning against state supported corporate take-over of grassroots movements. In chapter three, regarding the resourcefulness of Detroiters, “DIY City, Or, Okra as Metaphor,” Mark Binelli outlines plans for the corporatization of urban farming by Hantz Group a Michigan-based financial services firm owned by millionaire John Hantz. Hantz Farms proposed the creation of the world’s largest urban farm with dreams to eventually develop five thousand acres of land. Critics of Hantz described this as a “land grab.” Malik Yakini of the DETROIT Black Community Food Security Network described it as “a “corporate takeover” of what has historically been a grassroots movement.”

This type of co-opting of smaller movements by large corporations is the narrative Beware of the Dandelions is playing out and warning against in their sci-fi installation. The work suggests that the way to fight these types of “take overs” is by community and network building and sharing stories of oppression, resilience, and resistance.

Installation mode takes place in the pod and presents “Movement Memory Maps,” stories told by people from the community. It is similar in its immersive quality to performance mode; however, it is based in reality rather than metaphorical fantasy. The fantasy or sci-fi aspect of performance mode speaks to Walidah Imarisha’s assertion in Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements (2015),

“Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction.”

The combination of “real life” stories in installation mode grounds the fantastic sensorial experience of performance mode. Interviewed community participants are filmed straight on and in profile. The video of these interviews is projected onto the interior of the pod so that the viewer is completely surrounded by the individual narratives. Carlos Garcia (L05) explains, “These, like the townspeople’s stories in performance mode, express the triumphs, failures, lessons, and contradictions of their

258 Binelli, 61.
journeys.” Furthermore, each story is viewed “as an heirloom seed of community movements, revealing the complexity of how revolutionary change occurs.” Each interview was collected by community partners in each touring city and included in the installation. The stories speak to a collective narrative of social movement building and resistance.

The third mode, Community Workshop mode was arguably the most important and impactful aspect of this project. It was curated and co-facilitated by Complex Movements in partnership with local artists, activists, and community members. Its collaborative nature encouraged community building and strengthening. Accompanying the installations were a number of workshops and public programs intended to build and strengthen relationships between local change-makers. These events were planned eighteen months to two years in advance and were intended to support movement-building in the various cities. Cultural strategist for Complex Movements, Sage Crump, explained, “in order to [engage with communities] with a level of reciprocity, authenticity, and integrity we realized we had to be partners with communities. The inspiration is about how people make change.” The Detroit community workshop mode included skill sharing sessions and an emergency preparedness workshop led by B Anthony, potlucks, book releases, and a mural project. Participants in the preparedness workshop learned how to make “go-bags,” to can and preserve foods, and were given information on the medicinal properties of wild plants and weeds. Viewed from an outsider perspective, this workshop may seem like a paranoid survivalist action, however, when you take into account that water and electricity shut-offs are a reality for many within Detroit, its usefulness becomes apparent.

Another program in Community Workshop mode was the “Sheddy Forever Mural” project, hosted in the Talking Dolls experimental studio space and led by

260 Creative Capital, “Complex Movements Present.”
261 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
Konstance Patton. Patton is a multimedia artist (painter, sculptor, illustrator, muralist, and collaborator) and arts educator from Detroit, currently living and working in Brooklyn. The relationship between this project and the pod is its extension of the Community Workshop Mode, which endeavoured to share the artistic talents of Patton with a community in search of art forms to publicly commemorate and tell local stories. Traditionally, mural painting has been used to both beautify urban spaces as well as commemorate or story tell. Over several days in October 2016 she gave an artist talk, designed a memorial mural, and led an instructive and participatory mural painting project. Open to the public, participants were encouraged to take part in all aspects of the mural project from drawing and drafting the design from Patton’s original sketch, to the actual painting of it. Of this project, she exclaims, “I love sharing with community members… I love sharing arts and letting people reconnect with their artistic side. I always find secret artists, people who were told too many times that they can’t.” This project brought the local community together to learn new skills and memorialize someone important to movement making. The community workshop mode takes months of thoughtful organizing to ensure the programming is “impactful and relevant.” The third mode of the Dandelions project emphasises that urban renewal must be a social movement that includes the voices, stories, and collaborative actions of the communities that make up a city.

Through the embodied experience of the Dandelions project, participants feel their way through the issues being presented. The idea is that the combination of this multi-media and multi-sensorial experience, its collaborative nature, and real-world application via the three modes, is directed towards strengthening and expanding movement building that will result in positive change. The framework of aesthetic action expands traditional understandings of narrative building and urban renewal projects to include the role of embodied experiences via community engaged art projects.

264 Cheri “Sheddy” Rollins Sanchez was a community activist and friend of Patton’s who passed away in 2014. Sanchez worked at Detroit Summer from 2005-2008. A video of the project can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKu47qQ49jg.
266 Brussel, “Brooklyn 100 Influencer.”
267 Creative Capital, “Complex Movements Present.”
Jeff Chang, cultural and political writer and reviewer, describes the *Dandelions* project as: “… a performance piece that becomes an engine for much more, including activities that build networks of solidarity with the community beyond the art space. It is a narrative, concert, visual installation, architectural piece, and convening space to distribute revolutionary ideas and activate creative ecosystems and economies of change.”\(^{268}\) Within their definition of “aesthetics,” Robinson and Martin utilize Jacques Rancière’s politicized notion of aesthetics to argue the political and change-making potential of aesthetics. Rancière’s argument is that, “aesthetic politics lives within the immediate sensory experience and impact of artistic forms. It is the non-representational and affective aspects of these works that enact politics through displacement of normative and hegemonic structures, or what Rancière calls the “(re-) distribution of the sensible.”\(^{269}\) The editors quote Tahltan Nation artist, curator, writer, and scholar Peter Morin for the title of their introduction: “The Body Is a Resonant Chamber.” In doing so they immediately emphasize the role of the body in knowledge production, our understanding of the world, and the potential for these embodied experiences to enact change. In this collection of essays Morin writes: “[t]he body is a resonant chamber.”\(^{270}\) Robinson and Martin explain that the body is “a place where experiences echo, sinking deep into the bones before reverberating back out into the world.”\(^{271}\) It is this shared belief that lays the foundation for the work of social movement builders like Complex Movements.

Wajeed explains that, “Complex Movements is Complex. It’s a group of Detroit-based artists with the spirit to uplift our people through our work and our actions.”\(^{272}\) The name comes from Grace Lee Boggs’ call to “move away from “Newtonian approaches to organizing: mass rallies and singular issues in linear strategies.””\(^{273}\) Rather, there is a need to introduce complexity and nuance to movement building and combine diverse

\(^{268}\) Chang, “Complex Movements’.”
\(^{269}\) Robinson and Martin, 9-10.
\(^{270}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{271}\) Ibid.
\(^{272}\) Emergence Media, “Complex Movements’.”
\(^{273}\) Grace Lee Boggs was an author, social activist, and philosopher who founded Detroit Summer, a Detroit collective working to transform communities and provide unique opportunities for youth. The Boggs Centre supports community activists and programs and was founded to honour and continue the legacy of Grace and her husband, James Boggs. Chang, “Complex Movements’.”
talents and practices, because social movement building is not singular, simple, or linear. The issues are complex and multi-layered and require an approach “that connects and activates networks of change-making activity.”

Group member Carlos Garcia (L05) describes the uniqueness and struggle of the cohort, “We are working in mediums that we don’t really have much to look to as far as examples, so we’re constantly experimenting and taking risks and failing and learning.” In his review of *Beware of the Dandelions*, Jeff Chang explains how Complex Movements have answered Boggs’ call:

In this way, building a project that embraces hip-hop, techno, video art, and architecture, and placing artists, community organizers, and local community members inside is not only a way of immersing large numbers of people in a worldview that is uniquely Detroit-originated, it is a way to catalyze productive work directed to the passions and needs of all those who come into it.

The multi-media aspect of this work and the combination of “modes” brings together multiple layers of movement building with the understanding that movements are as complex as the issues they address.

Detroit, like many gentrifying cities, is comprised of corporations and real estate developers looking to renew and invigorate the downtown while stimulating the economy. This type of renewal, population growth, and subsequent expansion of the tax base is supported by the city government. The result of this type of growth and renewal is a continued cycle of marginalization and thus erasure of specific low income, mainly black, communities. *Beware of the Dandelions* is a sci-fi, utopian vision invested in resisting this type of urban renewal. Through music, imagery, and participation Complex Movements was able to tell a story of urban renewal rooted in community building and resistance of dominant forces of oppression. At the end of the *Dandelions* performance, ill Weaver joined participants in the pod and had them call out what they “Wage Love” for. People responded with things like “liberation,” “courage,” and “resistance.” In her review of the project Taylor Renee Aldridge describes her experience: “[Upon] departing from the deeply immersive experience, I felt an urgency to commit to foraging idealized

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274 Chang, “Complex Movements’.”
275 Emergence Media, “Complex Movements’.”
276 Chang, “Complex Movements’.”
277 Aldridge, “Building Better Futures, 6.
futures for ourselves and our communities.” She further explains that “the type of futurity and science fiction narrative building that Complex Movements brings forth is indicative of a grander ethos that exists among Detroit creatives… [including] the use of science fiction to explore ideas of otherness, displacement, and survival despite the lack of resources.” The use of science fiction narrative to explore these ideas relates to Afrofuturism, which, as noted above, has become a popular tool in post-bankruptcy Detroit as a way of imagining a better future for black communities. One of the various definitions of Detroit Afrofuturism comes from author and women’s rights activist and DNA co-founder adrienne maree brown, “My shorthand is that it's creative work from black people that claims a future for black people. It includes fiction, and fashion, music, technology, architecture, art, textiles, poetry ... even political frameworks.” In order to resist the status quo of a gentrifying city, Complex Movements has created a tripartite exploration into the resistance movement. Aldridge explains that,

Complex Movements takes it a step further than those examples, presenting us with dystopian scenarios of what could become reality, while simultaneously asserting strategies for how humans can grapple with the impending threats of the privatization of water and other resources, climate change, and the extreme effects of gentrification. Complex Movements represents the intersection and use of speculative fiction as a catalyst for social change.

The first two modes of the project tell a story and create a bonding experience between participants, while the third mode teaches skills important for the creating and strengthening of agency, narrative, and community.

278 Aldridge, 6.
279 Ibid., 7.
282 Aldridge, 7.
Conclusion

The revitalization and healthy growth of the City of Detroit lies in the collaborative efforts of its people. Theaster Gates’ emphasis on collective, diverse voices and talents as the way to address urban renewal foretells the work being done by groups like the Detroit Narrative Agency, Complex Movements and the many others in Detroit. Revitalization of cities, specifically Detroit, requires an acknowledgement of existing populations and communities combined with an understanding of complex histories in order to move forward. Collaboration and partnership are key in order to benefit the entire community in a lasting and meaningful way. The community benefits agreement drafted in response to the IdeasCity Detroit fellowship and conference marks a beginning of local, large-scale collaboration dedicated to securing agency for the people and cultural workers serving the communities of Detroit.

Dandelions and Ants are the dominant images and themes reflected in the Beware of the Dandelions project. Both represent resiliency, resistance, and strength. Both are difficult to get rid of - eradicated only to return again and again. Dandelions are a fast growing weed with strong medicinal and healing properties; bright yellow reminders of their persistence. Ants represent the large, often dismissed population living in the margins. These include the poor, the proletariat, the worker, the pest underfoot. At the same time the ant represents power in numbers and is known for its collaborative nature. The use of this imagery represents the importance of growing relationships and bonds to create strong communities capable of determining the future of their city.

In the conclusion to this chapter, I would like to reflect upon what artist, curator, activist, Afrofuturist, and notably, 2017 Detroit Mayoral candidate Ingrid Lafleur wrote in her plan for Detroit:

In order to manifest true revitalization we must consider the histories and oppressions of the black American population. The foundation of every institution, government, police, education, the museum, was built to silence, disallow, displace, and render powerless, black Americans. These institutions

283 For more on the specific health benefits: https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/dandelion-benefits.
were never created for black Americans to truly prosper. It’s time for a new plan.\textsuperscript{284}

Neil Drumming, producer for This American Life and host of Episode 623, “We Are in the Future,” an exploration of Afrofuturism, responds to LaFleur’s plan, stating: “It makes sense here because Detroit is 80% black people. Fixing the city means fixing the city for black people. Ingrid sees black Americans as the protagonists in the story of Detroit, its future and its past.”\textsuperscript{285} Echoing Orlando Ford’s sentiments, and a vast array of other critical race theorists and black persons in America, fixing the city requires the acknowledgment and dismantling of the racist systems that govern and oppress marginalized populations. Projects like DNA and \textit{Dandelions} aim to foster agency through storytelling and collaboration to build strong communities capable of envisioning and enacting the change they need for and from their city. The “problem of Detroit” is not a problem of a city; rather it is a problem of a nation with a long history of the oppression of black people, minorities, and the poor. The “problem” will never cease to exist until the dominant forces of oppression are resisted by the masses of marginalized citizens. Artists and cultural workers must plant seeds of hope and knowledge while growing empowered and resilient communities, capable of revitalizing their city in a way that serves the marginalized majority.

\textsuperscript{285} Drumming, “We Are in the Future.”
Chapter 3. Art Institutional Revitalization: The Detroit Institute of Arts

“The Future of Museums has to be the combined product of our individual and collective dreams. Not just the dreams and visions of some, those in power, those in wealth. All. And not just “including” folks in the general vision but still undermined, oppressed, or marginalized. I believe that the dreamspace is a future where people center themselves and each other to create just and equitable public spaces for art and learning in community.”
- The Dreamspace Project by Alyssa Machida

Introduction

The 2013 economic crisis that nearly consumed Detroit provides a thought-provoking lens through which to discuss the role and place of the art institution in the city. The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) holds a privileged and sacred place in Detroit; one recently deemed worthy of 800 million dollars of protection.\footnote{286} On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 Bankruptcy protection, marking the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the United States.\footnote{287} The city’s debt burden as of the July 2013 bankruptcy filing was $18-20 billion, $8 billion of this owed to creditors and approximately $12 billion worth of unfunded pension and health care obligations.\footnote{288} With so much of the system failing and this incredible amount of debt, it is not surprising that the city turned to its art investments to solve the financial crisis.

The potential deaccessioning of the DIA’s collection to pay down the debt of the city and the subsequent effects this proposed and then rescinded prospect had on the museum’s role in the revitalization of the city will frame this chapter.\footnote{289} Securing the collection of the museum in the trust of the people of Detroit was significant in combatting the idea of Detroit as ruin city and instead, served to enable the art museum to take part in a growing narrative of Detroit as cultural city. By including exhibitions that reflect the city’s demographic, and proposing a collaborative redesign of the exterior museum space, the DIA is now more than ever, attempting to make itself more inclusive,

\footnote{286} The November 7, 2014 ruling that would transfer the ownership of the collection to the non-profit organization, the DIA Founders Society stipulates that the collection will be securely out of the hands of the city after a total of $800 million is raised.
\footnote{287} Chapter 9 of the United States Bankruptcy Code is available strictly to municipalities and assists them in the restructuring of debts. \url{http://www.uscourts.gov/FederalCourts/Bankruptcy/BankruptcyBasics/Chapter9.aspx}.
\footnote{289} Deaccession: officially remove (an item) from the listed holdings of a library, museum, or art gallery, typically in order to sell it to raise funds.
accessible, and user-friendly. This chapter examines the role of the DIA, its exhibitions, and future plans to build communal and welcoming spaces, from the vantage points of both community and positive narrative-building.

I will analyze the highly charged issue of deaccessioning that involves complex and intersecting forces within the politics of the city, and among its museum boards, donors, and the state of Michigan. I will look at how the Institute is working to create exhibitions and spaces that are more inclusive and user-friendly as well as at their contribution to the revitalization of the city. I will also look at several projects supported by the Institute that embody this ‘rethinking’ of the museum and engaging a generation of new spectatorship: the exhibitions Photographs from the Detroit Walk-In Portrait Studio by Corine Vermeulen (November 14, 2012 – May 31st, 2015), and 30 Americans (October 18, 2015 – January 18, 2016), as well as the DIA Plaza & Midtown Cultural Connections international design project (2018-ongoing). These efforts are not without issues and contentions. I would like to examine those tensions through the framework of Alyssa Machida’s Dreamspace Project which re-envisions the structure, display, and educational practices of the museum in a way that makes space for examination and critical dialogue around colonial histories of oppression and the museum’s role therein.

It is especially important to consider the DIA because of the direct effect the city’s bankruptcy had on the museum’s art collection and the threat of its deaccessioning. This chapter will look at what the institution is now doing and how it is contributing to counter narratives of Detroit, and a new story of a thriving Detroit. The museum has an important role in service to its public. The DIA’s vision is to “be the town square of our community, a gathering place for everybody,” striving to be inclusive of local communities and visitors from afar.290 Its key responsibility is as collector, caretaker, and protector of cultural history. Additionally, the museum is responsible for presenting and educating its public on accurate, representative, and inclusive histories. The Detroit Institute of Art is attempting to fulfill this role by fighting and campaigning to protect the collection, by exhibiting work and including public programming that attempts to be inclusive and representative of its population, and in its most recent collaborative revitalization effort, by stewarding the DIA Plaza Project in the Midtown area of Detroit.

The DIA is showing that it understands it has to be innovative and inclusive in order to survive, thrive, and become a meaningful player in the revitalization of Detroit.

### 3.1 Bankruptcy and the Art Institution

On October 4, 2013 protestors chanted, “the working class is here to fight, culture is a social right,” and carried signs reading, “Don’t show me the money, show me the Monet,” “Defend the DIA,” and “The art belongs to the people, not the rich.” This was all in the name of saving art and culture from officials looking to sell off the collection to pay the debt of the bankrupted city.\(^{291}\) By the end of October, LED lights spelling out, “NOT FOR SALE,” in block letters were installed in front of the museum by the Detroit Light Brigade, a group using illumination to amplify their voice in the community.\(^{292}\) These protests illustrate the attachment and pride people in Detroit have for the Art Institute.

Located in Midtown Detroit, a mixed-use commercial, cultural, and university area more recently known for expensive revitalization developments, the DIA is the sixth-largest art museum in the United States with a collection of over 65,000 works. The museum’s website claims that it holds, “one of the largest and most significant art collections in the United States.”\(^{293}\) This includes the first Vincent van Gogh painting acquired by an American institution, works by Rembrandt, Monet, Jan van Eyck, Mary Cassatt, Georgia O’Keeffe, and of course Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle. The museum is a reminder, celebrator of, and protector of Detroit’s modern industrial boom; a bastion that is emblematic of the city’s wealthier times.

It was no surprise then that the potential deaccessioning of the DIA’s collection of art to pay off the city’s debts became the leading headline to come out of Detroit’s bankruptcy crisis. The art collection is owned by the city of Detroit and operated by the non-profit organization, the DIA Founders Society. It was appraised by Christie’s auction house and they found that of the over 65,000 piece collection, 2,700 of the works are

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\(^{291}\) Organized by the youth wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, of the Socialist Equity Party - [http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2013/10/protest-at-the-detroit-institute-of-arts.html](http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2013/10/protest-at-the-detroit-institute-of-arts.html).

\(^{292}\) [https://www.facebook.com/pg/DetroitLightBrigade/about/?ref=page_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/DetroitLightBrigade/about/?ref=page_internal).

valued between $454 million and $867 million. Other estimates from Artvest put the entire collection’s value between $2.8 billion and $4.6 billion. These estimates did not take into account the fact that a fire sale of art would have been in bad taste and an enormous embarrassment in the industry, and therefore the auction would not be entirely successful in raising the necessary funds the city needed. Michael Plummer, founder of Artvest stated that, if it happened, “[i]t would be considered to be a tragic event. It would not be sold in a celebratory fashion. It would not be marketed in a glamorous way. It would have to be sold in a discrete way and it would have an aura that was negative not positive.” The potential deaccessioning of the DIA’s collection was a completely unprecedented crisis in the museum world, and it would have irrevocably devastated the institution and further devastated the city’s economy.

Deaccessioning would have been easier said than done. There is a complex system at work involving the institution, the city, and the state of Michigan. The main argument in court was the ‘charitable-trust argument’: whether the city owned the collection with no restrictions or whether the city is a “trustee required to hold the art collection in trust for the benefit of the city’s citizens.” It was argued that a tri-county tax millage further complicated the city’s claim over the art collection. A tax millage is money from property tax paid by residents, in this case, of the tri-county area of Detroit: Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne counties. The tri-county tax millage, which was enacted in 2011, afforded the museum approximately $22 million of its $32 million annual budget in 2013. Representatives from Macomb and Oakland Counties stated that the sale of the collection would end the millage, and consequently eliminate the majority (68.75%) of the museum’s budget.

On November 7, 2014, Judge Steven Rhodes agreed to a “Grand Bargain,” ending the city’s bankruptcy and allowing the museum to secure its collection by providing the city with $100 million up front of a total $800 million in funds for the city’s pensioners.

296 Devitt, “Testimony: Art Sale Would Destroy Detroit Institute of Arts.”
298 Devitt, “Testimony: Art Sale Would Destroy Detroit Institute of Arts.”
After months of securing funding commitments from the state, non-profit organizations, corporate, and private DIA supporters, the museum and the museum-going public could breathe a sigh of relief. Donors like Quicken Loans, DTE Energy, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, and Meijer pledged a total of $26.8 million, with another $10 million in pledges from Penske Corp. and $26 million from the US automakers.\textsuperscript{299} The $100 million from the DIA towards the city’s debt was the first in a move to transfer the ownership of the collection to the non-profit organization, the DIA Founders Society. The collection will be securely out of the hands of the city after a total of $800 million is raised.\textsuperscript{300} Mark Stryker of the Detroit Free Press put it rather dramatically when he stated in his article regarding the outcome, “the ruling means that the museum will never again be put at risk by the vagaries of city finances or politics, and it brings to a close one of the most harrowing chapters in the DIA's history.”\textsuperscript{301} Essentially, with this ruling comes clarification on ownership, and peace of mind—knowing the collection is securely entrusted for the people of Detroit.

Upon hearing the ruling in this matter and the dollar amount granted, perhaps one is left to question why art or art collections take priority over social welfare, and how major private corporations can pledge millions of dollars to a museum while simultaneously ignoring the residents of the city living in abject poverty. A simplistic answer would be that art is ‘prettier’ than poverty. However, it is more complex than that, and includes tax benefits for corporate donations. These are the same corporate donors who are partially responsible for stimulating a cultural and economic renaissance of the city. Many have argued that the sale of the DIA’s collection would have resulted in an even greater economic blow to the city. Museum attendance would have dropped significantly and Detroit would have been forever remembered as the city that sold off its valuables to creditors - not exactly a desirable reputation with which to attract tourists.

One could argue that the major corporations of Detroit and Michigan pledged enormous sums of money to the museum in order to secure the legacy for future

\textsuperscript{300} This is a twenty year agreement.
generations and to secure the museum’s place as a treasured part of Detroit’s past. An interesting quote from William Valentiner, director of the DIA from 1924-1945, comes to mind in this context; he said of his commission of Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* Murals (1932-1933): “[i]t seemed indeed a coincidence, though, that I should meet Rivera, for I had always hoped to have on my museum walls a series of frescos by a painter of our time – since where could one find a building nowadays that would last as long as a museum?” These words seem ironic now given the deaccessioning scare, but they also highlight the role of the museum as collector, caretaker and protector of cultural history. Thus, one could also assert that when Valentiner commissioned Rivera to paint the mural that would become a monument to Detroit, he was securing the public’s interest and investment in the museum, by providing for it, an image of local pride.303

3.2 Dreaming Inclusive Spaces: The Future of Museums
I met Alyssa Machida in 2017 during a field trip she hosted at the DIA as part of the 19th Annual Allied Media Conference. The field trip workshopped and introduced participants to Machida’s ongoing research and toolkit, The Dreamspace Project: A Workbook and Toolkit for Critical Praxis in the American Art Museum. The tour was subtitled: Anti-Racist Pedagogy for Museum Education, and through it participants were introduced to the project’s ideology and goals. We were given a workbook with thematic questions to contemplate while touring the museum as a group. Each section of the workbook was punctuated by an individual breakout session and then group sharing and reflection. The themes of the exercise included space, people, voice, and engagement, and included five questions per theme. There were questions like: “What words would you use to describe the space and architecture of this art museum?” Examples included: expensive and expansive, ornate and beautiful, hollow and cathedral-like. Followed up with, “Spend some time analyzing these words. What kinds of meanings and associations do they

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suggest?’”

People associated these words with exclusivity and membership, human achievement combined with religious-like feelings that involved faith in something greater.

Another section on “people” asked questions that encourage participants to think about which artists are represented in the DIA’s collection and who the people or figures represented in the artworks are. Furthermore, who is visiting the museum and who do you see working at the museum? Each theme and subsequent set of questions was framed by carefully selected theoretical touchpoints. The “people” section was framed by a quote from Pablo Helguera’s article, “Alternative Time and Instant Audience” (2010) which states, “Audiences are never ‘others’-they are always very concrete selves. In other words, it is impossible to plan a participatory experience and take steps to make it public without also making some assumptions about those who will eventually partake in it.”

Through these strategies, Machida set up her participants to reflect on their role as audience/museum visitor and how they are represented by and invited to take part in the museum.

The Dreamspace Project and subsequent workbooks are an extension of Machida’s Ed.M. in Arts in Education research undertaken at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, and offer insight on the work yet to be done inside the museum. Her ongoing research and toolkits were designed on evenings and weekends while Machida worked at the DIA as an Interpretive Specialist in the Department of Interpretation, in the Division of Learning and Audience Engagement, hired for the reinstallation of the DIA’s permanent collection of Asian art.

In a three-part series published on The Incluseum Blog, Machida has provided detailed explanations of the Dreamspace Project, access to a PDF version of the Workbook, and a Live Google Presentation of the Workbook. Machida explains that the workbook “translates theoretical concepts into practical language and frameworks.”

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305 Ibid.
307 In the fall of 2018 Machida took a position as "Asian Art Learning Resources Fellow" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.
adaptable for art museum professionals with key vocabulary, diagrams and graphical organizers, ideas for building tours, and questions for critical reflection.” She stipulates throughout that this is a living document, an ever evolving, growing, work in progress.

The workbook used during Machida’s DIA Fieldtrip was focused on the way museum space and practices of collecting and display exclude non-white visitors. The second part of the tour and workbook exercise was to: “Design an activity that challenges museums, and ourselves, to reimagine how learning experiences can dismantle racism.” Part One had participants choose an artwork that relates to a given theme: power, whiteness, race/racism, capital, history/narratives, or a theme of the participants choosing. The next step was to examine the work closely and to think about both what you see and feel. Following this was Part Two of the exercise where participants indicated the chosen theme, the purpose of the activity, the audience or learners, and then what the actual activity would be. Suggestions and listed options were included to help participants in the design process. We were encouraged to reflect on the question: “What does critical, anti-racist pedagogy look/feel/sound like in an art museum?” and consider including “written text, music, spoken word, drawing/sketching, improve, discussion, quiet reflection, small group work, and so much more!” This was important both because our tour allowed for less than two hours from start to finish, and to encourage participants to think beyond pre-existing museum engagement activities.

Setting up the activity design section were questions that required participants to reflect on how they have previously been engaged as well as what kind of “voice” and whose voice museums present, in this case, regarding the DIA specifically. The workbook asks, “Does the museum ask enough questions? Are these questions sincere and open to critique? Do they invite genuine inquiry and dialogue from the public?” The questions prompt participants to think about how they might design an activity to reflect what they feel might be missing from museum programming and engagement.

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309 Ibid.

310 Ibid.

311 Ibid.
Throughout the tour and activity, participants were encouraged not only to think their way through the museum but also to feel their way through the museum. The toolkit is meant to promote and enable an embodied visitor experience and to encourage reflection on how we feel when we encounter art and objects, and how we feel in certain spaces. Participants reflect on how the museum affects them mentally as well as physically and thus emotionally. Are museums making us feel welcome, safe, represented, seen, heard?

The workbook introduces and defines difficult concepts like racism, whiteness, and white supremacy in ways that are both straightforward and easy to understand, while encouraging users to reflect on their understanding of the terms, how they operate in society, and their personal experiences related to them. A key component of the workbook and the ideology behind it is the work that needs to be done on the self. Machida emphasises that,

> At the core of the Dreamspace approach is the acknowledgement that we can only truly extend ourselves in this work as far as we have dared to examine and interrogate inward; to cast an eye not only upon the world and others, but to spend time critically studying ourselves and the many layers and identities we hold. 312

She provides diagrams that envision the self-discovery she deems necessary to do this work: self-study, self-awareness, self-growth, self-management, and self-care precede the intricate mapping of personal identity in relation to global systems of oppression. 313

Part of what frames Machida’s proposal for self-exploration is Herb Kohl’s notion of “learning, not-learning, and unlearning.” 314 She explains that when learning is intentional and self-aware it is meaningful, however, most learning is not done consciously and is often a passive action. 315 Not-learning and unlearning are related to resisting dominant ideologies passed on through the learning process. In other words not-

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312 Alyssa Machida, “The Dreamscape Project Workbook,” online workbook, ongoing: 38. https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1lrExramQQp2TvWp0pTf4-FSSQ2v08tsHHDDSS-JJrQ1Q/mobilepresent?slide=id.g5517599b5b_1_41.

313 Machida, “The Dreamscape Project Workbook,” online workbook, 40.


315 Ibid.
learning and unlearning are practices of critical thinking. Machida describes the critical learner as “one who then employs a combination of learning, not-learning, and unlearning to resist the oppressive structures we live in, in order to gain the knowledges, languages, and tools needed to dismantle and rebuild the fabric of society.” The museum educator must do this type of self-work and critical learning before they can bring the type of teaching and programming proposed by the Dreamspace Project into the museum.

In a seminal work of museum criticism, “The Art Museum as Ritual” (1995), Carol Duncan analyzes art museums, their collections, and display practices in relation to the ritual practices enacted by visitors. She outlines how the museum ritual begins at street level with the museum grounds and architecture forming a procession that leads to a ritualistic experience of works on display in the interior. Working within this ritualistic experience is the performance and reinforcement of one’s identity in the museum space. Duncan explains how museums are sites where an individual’s place in the world is determined, and dominant ideologies are on display. Those who are best able to perform the museum’s ritual, often times those most comfortable in the museum space, are those whose identities are represented and celebrated in the museum. Alyssa Machida’s *Dreamspace Project* offers a method of reorganizing and rethinking the entrenched rituals of the museum in order to change display practices, framing devices, education, and conversations and thus our relationship and understanding of the objects within the museum, all with the clear objective of making museums safe, representative spaces for all.

I have already argued here that it is important to shift negative narratives of Detroit. It has become apparent that for a city to truly “revitalize,” an overall ideological shift is necessary. Museums play important roles both because of the story-telling power they wield and their reliance on the publics they serve. Museums survive as long as they have visitors; a more diverse visitor base that is reflected in exhibitions and programming will help museums to grow. They can become spaces that present diverse, difficult histories; spaces that allow for reflection and conversation about these histories; and spaces for inclusivity, accessibility, and difference; spaces for both, and. Machida asserts

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316 Morgan-Hubbard, “Building the Dreamspace in Museum Education.”
that, “Rather than presupposing that it is the art museum that contains the wealth of knowledge and experience, we must remember that the participation of diverse museum goers enrich the experiences that happen within museum walls.”

As a keeper, preserver, and protector of the past, the DIA needs to reflect both on the ways in which they are perpetuating dominant narratives of oppression, and are, at the same time striving to break down these narratives and instead celebrate diversity and create inclusive spaces, and how this relates to the growth and success of the city.

3.3 Rethinking the Museum: Programs and Exhibitions
Described by former Director Graham Beal, as “the jewel in the cultural crown,” the DIA had undergone several revitalizations long before the bankruptcy of the city and its subsequent renewal projects. The latest renovation and expansion of the museum began in 1999, was completed in 2007, and cost $158 million dollars. The renovation included major upgrades to the infrastructure, updating of the North and South wings, and a 31,282 square foot addition, resulting in much needed exhibition space. The renovation and creation of new exhibition spaces led to a comprehensive overhaul of the museum’s display, programming, and education practices. Beal described the reinstallion process in an interview: “We are doing with our great permanent collections, stuff that we’ve been doing with special exhibitions. When we do a special exhibition it has a story, it has a specific theme. We’ve never done that with the permanent collection.” Over an eighteen month period, staff members worked in teams of curators, educators, and conservators to draw out stories and themes to make the work more accessible, engaging, and educational to visitors.

In March 2015, four months after the “Grand Bargain” agreement was finalized, the DIA opened the blockbuster exhibition, *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit*.

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321 Modeldmedia, “Detroit Institute of Arts Renovation,”
322 Ibid.
(March 15 – July 12, 2015). This exhibition and its timing are an interesting example of recontextualizing and reframing the museum’s most famous work of art.\(^{323}\) It combined a re-presentation of drawings from the permanent collection, the murals, and borrowed works to develop a rich story of Rivera and Kahlo in Detroit. In her book, *Radical Museology or, What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (2013), Claire Bishop posits a curatorial method of approaching history and its objects with a present-mindedness that harkens to Beal’s approach of the reinstallation of the permanent collection in 2007 and the ideology behind the Rivera and Kahlo blockbuster.

I include Bishop here because her discussion incorporates aspects of museum revitalization that focus on architectural improvements instead of the art objects housed within and she argues for a re-framing and recontextualizing of pre-existing collections that echoes some of the things Beal was doing in 2007, and what was done with this blockbuster. *Radical Museology* is Bishop’s critical analysis of the art world, in which she focuses her discussion on three European museums with very small budgets in order to analyze how contemporary museums can use their existing collections to create interesting and engaging exhibitions.\(^{324}\) She terms this type of re-contextualization, “dialectical contemporaneity.” It is a curatorial method of making history relevant and politicized in our contemporary context, and it acknowledges the important role that history plays in our current understanding of the world both locally and globally.

Dialectical contemporaneity is a method of bringing history into conversation with the present, to shed new light on historical problems. The Rivera murals are a literal representation of Detroit’s prosperous history and thus all that was lost, which resulted in the city’s bankruptcy. Importantly, though, the Depression era murals were painted during a time of economic crisis and were coming to symbolize a movement out of the 2013 economic crisis; a move towards stability and revitalization. Dialectical contemporaneity is a means of acknowledging past events, traumas, movements etc. in a new light, with a new perspective. These murals act as a pilgrimage destination for

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\(^{323}\) Although the exhibition was conceived almost ten years before it opened, the timing which coincided with the “Grand Bargain” is serendipitous given that the context of economic insecurity (the Great Depression) during which the murals were commissioned mirrored the bankruptcy of the city.

\(^{324}\) The three museums include: the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain, and the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (MSUM) in Ljubljana, Slovenia.
tourists interested in Detroit’s modernist era, and were organized into a blockbuster exhibition at a time when the DIA needed to off-set the bad press surrounding Detroit’s bankruptcy and the attempted deaccessioning of the museum’s collection. Predating the opening of this exhibition were ten Kahlo and or Kahlo-Rivera exhibitions throughout the US and Europe, and this exhibition spoke to the importance of Detroit in the development of those artists’ careers. This exhibition both highlighted the DIA’s international prominence in the art world and the regional specificity of some of their work. An exhibition about Rivera and Kahlo in Detroit could only be presented in Detroit, thus securing high numbers of visitors as well as providing an opportunity for the celebration of the city by the world.\textsuperscript{325}

In 1931, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, William Valentiner invited the acclaimed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to paint the walls of the Garden Court at the Institute. This project, funded by Henry Ford’s son and successor to the Ford Motors empire, Edsel B. Ford, would prove to be among both the most controversial and popular commissions of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{326} These frescos reflect the now lost golden age of industry. The Detroit Industry murals celebrate the accomplishments of Detroit and operate as a monument to an industrious city built on manufacturing, which promised for its workers the fulfillment of the American Dream. The re-presenting of the murals after the bankruptcy and deaccessioning scare repositioned them as an important part of Detroit’s past and its hopeful future.

\textsuperscript{325} An interesting trend to consider in future research would be that of the contemporary Street Art and muralist trends in Detroit. A compelling discussion of the influence of the Detroit Industry murals on contemporary street murals could include the parallel economic crises of the two different time periods – the Great Depression of the thirties versus the recession of 2007 and the 2013 bankruptcy of the city of Detroit.

\textsuperscript{326} This commission was controversial because a Mexican Communist artist was paid $20,000 to paint the interior of the beloved Garden Court during the greatest economic depression of the twentieth century.
The exhibition included eight massive drawings by Rivera used in preparation of the murals, and twenty-three works by Kahlo made during her time in Detroit.\(^{327}\) It was the first time this work by Kahlo had been exhibited at the DIA. The time spent in Detroit and the work she created there would be crucial to her development as an artist. It was in Detroit that Kahlo miscarried and spent time at the Henry Ford Hospital. She named one of her most famous paintings from 1932 after this hospital. The work Kahlo made in Detroit reflected her unhappiness and the pain of losing her unborn child. However, it also reflected her growth as an artist because it was here that she had time to practice and experiment. In her review of the exhibition for the New York Times, Roberta Smith asserts, “the miscarriage she suffered while in Detroit spurred the searing form of self-representation that is her contribution to art history.”\(^{328}\) The exhibition, *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit* provided an inside look into Rivera’s process combined with


historical context through which visitors could understand the murals in greater depth, however, the underlying and more interesting theme was of Kahlo’s maturation and development as an artist. Smith articulated this sentiment in her review, “Rivera takes up most of the room — as, tall and bulky, he did in real life — but Kahlo emerges in the final galleries as the stronger, more personal and more original artist.”329 This exhibition certainly speaks to the effect of the city on her career but also to her artistic contribution to the city.

It is interesting to compare the current economic state of Detroit and this particular crisis at the DIA, with the context of the Depression during which Diego Rivera’s murals were painted. The amount of money that can be raised to save a museum collection or pay an artist to paint a mural is both inspiring and shocking given the desperate situation of the people of Detroit then and now. The overcrowded slums and breadlines of the 1930s contrast with the 2000s, foreclosed and abandoned homes on streets with no electricity. Exhibition organizers certainly did not have this type of critical comparison in mind, rather their hope was to provide an inside perspective and tell the story behind these beloved murals while appealing to museum visitors. The recontextualization and use of existing art works, drawings, and archival photographs reframed the Rivera murals and invited visitors to see the murals anew. Whether intentional or not, this exhibition reinvigorated public interest in the DIA’s art collection at a critical time.

Jennifer Wild Czajkowski, director of learning and interpretation at the DIA, outlines the developments, successes, and lessons learned during the process of the DIA’s overhaul in her article, “Changing the Rules: Making Space for Interactive Learning in the Galleries of the Detroit Institute of Arts.”330 During the 2007 renovations, the DIA spent a significant amount of time and energy researching what visitors wanted out of their museum experience and what was missing. The objective of this initiative was to bring visitors into the centre of the museum with the objects (as many visitors describe a

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329 Smith, “Review: ‘Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit.’”
330 The department title, “learning and interpretation” was a result of these changes and a desire for transparency in terms of the work the education department was doing. Jennifer Wild Czajkowski, “Changing the Rules: Making Space for Interactive Learning in the Galleries of the Detroit Institute of Arts,” Journal of Museum Education 36, no. 2 (2011): 178.
feeling of being on the outside looking in – a disconnect between themselves and the objects on display). The outcome of the visitor research was organized into three categories that included: “enabling” visitors to feel welcome, comfortable, and intellectually and physically oriented in the museum space; “satisfaction,” exciting, inspiring, and personally meaningful experiences that would encourage visitors to return; and “learning,” helping visitors to understand the objects and their relationship to one another. The end result is that visitors feel both at home in the museum space as well as awe-inspired at the human capacity for imagination and creativity; and deeper relationships with the objects are formed by the development of independent looking and interpretive skills.331 The work of Czajkowski’s interpretive team reflects Bishop’s concept of dialectical contemporaneity through the way it re-framed and recontextualized objects compelling visitors into an engaging relationship with them.

Some of the educational tools and programs that were developed in response to these outcomes include: experiential models like “conversation starter(s),” “immersion,” “making art,” “multiple perspectives,” “object exploration,” “take a quiz,” etc. The use of flip labels and graphic panels throughout the museum helps to facilitate these learning and exploration objectives. The “immersion” model is used to transport visitors to a different time and place. A unique example of this is the re-installation of 18th-century decorative arts. The space is organized not in chronological order by style, but rather according to the time of day the objects were used. This method of display allows the viewer to become immersed in their surroundings and envision what daily life and the objects used in that life, would be like in the 18th-century. By disrupting the normative display practice, these historical objects are brought into a closer relationship with the contemporary viewer, providing an affective engagement with the objects.

During the renovations, collaborative teams were created, and included new interpretive specialist roles and a renaming of the education department to “learning and interpretation,” as a reflection of the evolution. What happened at the DIA in 2007 was part of a wave, a growing understanding of positive visitor experience. Focus in the museum world had turned to how to engage visitors in meaningful ways – get them in the doors, make them feel welcome, and get them coming back regularly.

In the article, “Transformation and Interpretation: What Is the Museums Educator’s Role?” Wild Czajkowski and Shiralee Hudson Hill of the Art Gallery of Ontario discuss this refocus towards meaningful visitor engagement and efforts to create loyal and repeat visitors in the context of their institutions’ major renovations and reinstallation projects.\textsuperscript{332} Using bell hooks to frame their discussion, the paper examines the experience of museum educators “working from the margins of their museums’ hierarchical organizations” and how this is “fundamental to their work in leading transformative change.”\textsuperscript{333} In their study, the authors link museum educators with museum visitors who they perceive have a history of being marginalized by the institution. This marginalization can be seen in the often inaccessible way art objects are presented; at a distance, behind glass cases or velvet ropes, and the “look but don’t touch” disengagement of the display practices.

Along with the major renovations and reinstallations came a need to engage visitors in ways that would make them feel welcome, activate their imaginations and emotions, and “encourage self-reflection and social engagement” in order to secure repeat patronage of the institutions.\textsuperscript{334} Similar to what was happening at the DIA, during the 2002-2008 Transformation AGO redevelopment project, the AGO formed interdisciplinary teams to address this visitor-centred vision and collaboratively re-imagine the museum experience. Museum interpretation moved from the margins to become the central focus of these teams. Wild Czajkowski and Hudson Hill define interpretation as “the ways that art, objects and ideas are presented to visitors in order to facilitate the visitor experience – noting that visitor experiences are far from being singular in nature.”\textsuperscript{335} The collaborative, interdisciplinary teams were important to reflect the heterogeneous nature of visitor experience and interpretation.

In a lecture given in March 2019, at Western University as part of the Arts & Humanities inaugural Duncanson Lecture Series, Matthew Teitelbaum, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, expressed his view that a guiding principal is that

\textsuperscript{332} The Transformation AGO was the Art Gallery of Ontario’s $276 million dollar redevelopment plan by architect Frank Gehry and directed by the gallery’s CEO, Matthew Teitelbaum.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 256.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
museums need to be accessible and welcoming spaces. He believes that museums can live through the audience they serve and lead to new truth. Since moving to the MFA Boston, Teitelbaum has continued to pursue his audience-centred, community-building vision for the museum. In his talk, he admitted that he wanted to re-open the AGO’s doors to an exciting collection, new and engaging display practices, housed in a beautiful, welcoming space where visitors felt more like friends and could engage in different interpretations of artworks and objects.

Wild’s article highlights shifting perspectives within museums and provides insight into how an institution like the DIA operates and evolves to maintain relevance in the community it serves. The evolution she speaks of in her article contributes to the support of exhibitions like *Photographs from the Detroit Walk-In Portrait Studio by Corine Vermeulen* and *30 Americans*. Vermeulen’s project is representative of the local communities within Detroit. Her photographs, like Dave Jordano’s, tell individual and community stories. The display and support of her work in and by the DIA validates and emphasizes the importance of community projects. The exhibition *30 Americans* celebrates important contemporary African American artists and is representative of the African American communities in and around Detroit. The museum’s goal was to have exhibitions that were representative of the city’s population and that engaged with various communities who often feel unwelcome and under-represented in the museum space.

### 3.4 The Exhibitions

The *Walk-In Portrait Studio* was set up in a formerly foreclosed house in North Detroit in 2009 and was initially designed as a community-based photography project. Vermeulen photographed residents of the neighbourhood and her collaborator, art historian and curator, Femke Lutgerink collected the individual stories of the sitters. The sitters received copies of their portraits in exchange for their stories. The purpose of the project was to get to know the neighbourhood and represent it through the portraits and stories of

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336 Matthew Teitelbaum, Duncanson Lecture Series, Western University, London, ON, March 4, 2019. In 2007, Teitelbaum led the 2002-2008 Transformation AGO project as the gallery’s director and CEO. He has since moved to the MFA in Boston and has taken his audience-centred and community building vision with him.
each participant. As outsiders to the community (both Vermeulen and Lutgerink are from the Netherlands), they understood the importance of the individual stories in shifting the negative narrative of Detroit. Vermeulen who was part of a wave of artists who came to Detroit before the declaration of bankruptcy, explained, “I didn’t come to Detroit to witness the end of an era. I just wanted to find out if there was a future and what would it look like. My conclusion is that it’s about people; it’s about people empowered.” Her conclusion, like Dave Jordano’s and Suzy Lake’s, resonates with many projects that have come out of Detroit. The marginalized people of Detroit are the ones who have kept the city alive and vibrant in unique ways, even when no one was looking.

An extension of this project was later commissioned by the DIA culminating in an exhibition of the work in 2015. In this version, Vermeulen photographed while writer Minehaha Forman interviewed members of community and independent neighbourhood organizations and social groups like: D-Town Farms, the East Side Riders, Detroit Focus: HOPE, Recycle Here! Detroit, The James and Grace Lee Boggs School, etc. The exhibition also showcased the original Walk-In Portrait Studio’s photographs from Klinger Street, 2009 and was accompanied by both text and audio of Forman’s interviews.

In the photograph, Ron, East Side Riders (2013), Ron stands behind his vibrant orange bicycle equipped with whitewall tires, speakers at the front and back of the bike, a shock-absorbing seat, and a second, smaller passenger seat at the rear. He wears a white and black Detroit Tiger’s baseball jersey, emblazoned with the iconic gothic D that symbolizes Detroit pride. Like the other portraits in the series of the East Side Riders, Ron is framed by a background of trees, shrubs, and slightly overgrown grass. The choice of background speaks both to the overgrown neighbourhoods and paths these cyclists traverse as well as what it means to put them in spaces normally photographed as abandoned. It means that there are people residing in these places previously thought to be empty.

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339 This image of Ron appears on the Detroit Walk-In Portrait Studio’s Facebook page as the cover photo.
This series of photos highlights cycling as a dominant form of transportation in Detroit at this time. The increase in cyclists resulted from the need for convenient and affordable transportation. Public transportation in the city is notoriously unreliable and inaccessible. Detroit is a city built on and for the automobile, however, owning a car is a luxury many cannot afford. For example, in 2014 only forty percent of Detroiter had access to automobiles and of those, two-thirds only had access marginally – shared automobile. Therefore, many Detroiter have turned to cycling as their reliable form of transportation. Detroit’s East Side Riders bike club was instrumental in popularizing cycling in Detroit and is known equally for their flashy custom bikes as they are for their service to the community. Begun in 2008 by brothers Mike and Dywayne Neeley as a healthy lifestyle choice, the group evolved to include mandatory community service for all members. Service includes: feeding the homeless, patrolling their neighborhood on Angel's Night and helping tend to local community gardens. The East Side Riders are part of a collection of Detroit-area bicycle clubs that include over 3,000 riders. The inclusion of the Riders in Vermeulen’s Portrait Studio series illustrates the resilient and community-focused nature of the people of Detroit. Additionally, her motivation to include these people, their culture, and their stories in her narrative of the city help to shift the dominant negative narratives.

Nancy Barr, Co-Chief Curator, Dept. Head - Prints, Drawings and Photographs, and Curator of Photography at the DIA chose to collaborate with Vermeulen and exhibit this series because, she said, “I saw something unique in this work in that it showed the efforts of an artist who was interested in not only the faces but in the stories of real people during a time of transition and change in the city.” With many artists coming to photograph Detroit’s ruins, abandonment, and bankruptcy, Barr saw in this project an effort to tell a different story of Detroit. She further explained:

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342 Ibid.
343 Ibid. Angel’s Night occurs between October 29th-31st and is a neighbourhood patrol in response to the escalation of vandalism and arson on Devil’s Night.
344 Dutch Culture USA, “Corine Vermeulen solo show.”
Largely [this] exhibition, and I have organized numerous exhibitions inspired by Detroit and photographic practice here, came about because I’m from Detroit, born and raised here, and I studied photography here. It just seemed like a relevant course of action for me and the institution to take on this subject and bring about more research and exposure for the public.\footnote{Nancy Barr. Interview by author. Email interview. February 20, 2019.} The display of this work at the DIA is evidence of the institution’s ongoing goal of both supporting community initiatives and redirecting the narrative of the city, to tell a story of hope, survival and thriving communities.

\textit{30 Americans} (2015-2016) was featured as the DIA’s winter blockbuster exhibition and included the works of thirty contemporary African American artists from the Rubell Family Collection. Works from the past thirty years by artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, David Hammons, Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kehinde Wiley were shown in the first comprehensive exhibition of its size.\footnote{Thirty years from the first exhibition in 2008.} Through the inclusion of discussions and interpretations of the artwork by Detroit school children on the audio tour, the programming of this exhibition emphasized public engagement and the museum’s initiative to engage a new generation of spectators. In his essay, “Art Chronicle” for the \textit{30 Americans} exhibition catalogue, Franklin Sirmans, Department Head and Curator of Contemporary Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art asks, can such a show be useful? He goes on to answer exactly how this type of show is indeed useful and provides an institutional critique with regards to a lack of visibility or institutional collecting of artworks by African American artists. He concludes by stating that, “Ultimately the importance of this collection is that it was purchased. In this case, the RFC (Rubell Family Collection) has recognized, more than any other public institution – except the Studio Museum in Harlem – the importance of this work. That’s useful.”\footnote{Franklin Sirmans, “Art Chronicle,” \textit{30 Americans}, 45.} This travelling blockbuster exhibition was initiated by The Rubell Family Collection and has been on tour since its opening in 2008 at the RFC Museum in Miami and has made its way through 15 American cities with presentations planned for Kansas City (June 2019) and Philadelphia (Fall-Winter 2019-2020). It was important that this
exhibition stop in Detroit when it did because it emphasized the museum’s commitment to showcasing work that is reflective of its public.

Figure 3.2: 30 Americans installation view, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015. Image courtesy of author.

Detroit Free Press Staff Writer, Mark Stryker begins his review of the exhibition by stating that, “it’s about time.”348 In a city with a majority African American population, there has been an underwhelming number of large-scale exhibitions by African American artists at the DIA. Stryker briefly outlines a short list of such exhibitions, going back fifteen years, including the work of Jacob Lawrence and Julie Mehretu.349 He is critical of the museum, pointing out, that since the creation of the General Motors Center for African American Art in 2000, the museum has not originated a single major special exhibition of African-American art.350 However, he does highlight


350 Stryker, “DIA’s Provocative ’30 Americans.’
curator of the GM Center, Valerie Mercer’s 2003 survey of the DIA’s African American collection that evolved into a section of galleries devoted to African American art, making it the only encyclopedic museum in America with a curatorial department and galleries devoted to black artists. The development of the GM Center relates to the museum’s “Reflecting Our Community” initiative that includes exhibitions like the “Walk-In Portrait Studio,” and the DIA Plaza Project, with the goal of diversifying the DIA’s attendance and reflecting the city’s racial and ethnic demographics by 2020. Stryker was accurate in his expression, “it is about time.” I would like to add, “what took so long?”

Figure 3.3: 30 Americans floor plan, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015. Image courtesy of author.

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351 Stryker, “DIA’s Provocative ‘30 Americans.’
In her review of the exhibition, Taylor Renee Aldridge explains how the DIA made the broadly and loosely-themed exhibition its own. She claims that aside from the obvious thing connecting the works – that they were created by black artists, there was “a missing connection,” a “lack [of] a real curatorial thread.” The DIA’s Valerie Mercer, curator of the GM Center for African American Art and her curatorial team provided the missing thematic framework for the DIA’s iteration of this exhibition that would bring the works together. The exhibition was divided into thematic galleries that included: representing, transforming, confronting, freestyling, sampling, and defying, which Aldridge asserts, “reconciles the opaque initial curatorial concept, compartmentalizing works in a way that is digestible for viewers.” The curators created the type of space Machida calls for in her Dreamspace Project, a space where visitors are confronted with the work of marginalized black artists presenting and representing different and often difficult subject matter.

354 Ibid.
355 Ibid.
356 The Dreamspace workbook was not available (or even related to this exhibition) at the time of this exhibition, however, if it had been it would have afforded visitors a tool to analyze and interpret the work in greater detail.
The public programming that complemented the exhibition included educational lectures and the direct involvement of Detroit school children. The multi-media accompaniment incorporated discussions by the children regarding their interpretation and understanding of the works on display. In one example, children were asked to interpret the Gary Simmons, *Duck, Duck, Noose* (1992). The installation includes small stools with child-sized white KKK hoods perched atop them and a long rope tied into a noose hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the circle of stools. This installation with its playful title riffing on the popular children’s game “Duck, Duck, Goose,” is made all the more disturbing by this juxtaposition of childhood fun and objects that recall America’s violent history of lynching. Additionally, the reference to child’s play illustrates the inheritance of racism from a young age.
Other methods of audience engagement included photo booths located at the exit encouraging visitors to take a selfie after answering leading questions regarding self-identification with prompting adjectives to help describe personality traits. The images were then displayed, making the visitor a part of the exhibition. In addition to this the hashtag “#30plusus,” provided visitors a way to share and reflect on their experience via social media.  

Visitors were also encouraged to fill out cue cards answering the question: What thoughts or feelings did this exhibition provoke? One card read: “The circle of KKK hoods around the noose was the most thought-provoking. That is the history of my people. That is how my family continues to think. My white, racist family may not have white hoods, but they have those attitudes. I’m glad to be different from

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357 Aldridge, “DIA offers a potent exhibit.”
them.” Aldridge reflects on the exhibition stating that an exhibition like this, of thirty African American artists tackling issues of race, identity, and sexuality, indicates the need to sincerely and frankly address racial identities. She hopes that this exploration into identity politics will encourage more exhibitions like it, both at the DIA and at other American institutions. The programming of the exhibition with its inclusion of young, black voices and interpretations, both demonstrated the DIA’s commitment to inclusivity and the importance of developing a healthy narrative about difficult histories of oppression, art, and visual culture.

Wild Czajkowski and Hudson Hill describe “new institutional priorities” that have situated interpretation at the centre of facilitating “dynamic, dialogic experiences that will ignite visitors’ imaginations, ideas, and emotions and encourage self-reflection and social engagement.” This article, although from 2008, remains reflective of how the DIA is presenting relevant and timely exhibitions that promote invested engagement from visitors. Presenting exhibitions that reframe and celebrate important pieces of DIA history like *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit*; and exhibitions like *Photographs from the Detroit Walk-In Portrait Studio by Corine Vermeulen*, that present different narratives of the city emphasizing the lived-experience of Detroiter; and the *30 Americans* exhibition, which celebrated African American artists while encouraging visitors to reflect on identity and racial tensions in America, the DIA has begun to demonstrate its commitment to the public it serves. Only future exhibitions and museum programming will truly indicate the museum’s commitment to genuine inclusivity.

### 3.5 Dreaming New Spaces: Museum Revitalization

The 2007 construction project expanded the interior of the Detroit Institute of Arts both physically and ideologically. The deaccessioning scare was averted and the collection is now securely held in trust for the people of Detroit. The focus for the DIA has now turned to creating a more accessible, user friendly, and communal exterior space. The hiring of museum director, Salvador Salort-Pons, in 2015, brought a European vision of piazzas and town squares to Detroit in an effort to make the DIA a central part in

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358 Aldridge, “DIA offers a potent exhibit.”
359 Wild Czajkowski, and Hudson Hill, “Transformation and Interpretation,” 256.
socializing and community building. He saw this plan as a way to get people to the DIA and to keep them coming back on a regular basis.

The DIA’s focus on becoming user-friendly came on the heels of the deaccessioning scare, and thus exposed the need to prove their service to the citizens for whom their collection is held in trust. This includes the tri-county millage and the tax-payers from Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties who contribute to it. Detroit is the seat of Wayne County and according to the 2018 US census, thirty-nine percent of the population was African American. This is compared to the largely suburban, white populations of the Metro Detroit counties of Oakland, and Macomb, with African American populations estimated at 14.2% and 12% respectively. The census reflects the disparity of race and class between the counties and illuminates the unique position of the DIA, one that includes answering to wealthier, white tax payers and donors. In 2012 taxpayers in the three counties approved a ten year, $23 million property tax millage. In exchange for this, the museum provides free admission to these residents. Felicia Molnar, Executive Director, Strategic Initiatives explains, “We really want everyone who supports us to feel welcome.” In short, the DIA is being held accountable by the people providing funding and is responding to on-going criticism that the museum is not welcoming or user-friendly. Molnar described visitor feedback, explaining that people find the edifice imposing and are unsure of where the front door is, thus they have difficulty finding their way into the museum. Molnar explains that the 2007 marble-faced, window-less addition only exacerbated this issue and the fort-like impression of the museum.

There is extensive literature on the history of the museum architecture of which Molnar speaks, and the purpose of these imposing qualities. As discussed previously, in

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364 Ibid.
365 Ibid.
“The Art Museum as Ritual,” Carol Duncan states that museums resemble ritual sites because they are constructed to “accommodate and prompt ritual activity.” Furthermore, museum space is carefully marked off ideologically as institutionalized to uphold the values of Western civilization and is thus often physically set back from the street. The museum is reserved for contemplation and learning. Facades are often marked by grand staircases and adorned with sculptures – in the case of the DIA, visitors are greeted by replica Donatello and Michelangelo bronze sculptures. The ritual experience begins at street level and continues as a procession directed by the museum’s architecture and design and enacted by the visitor.

Duncan is useful in the context of the DIA’s revitalization and visitor-outreach efforts because her work provides context for the issues facing the museum. She explains that museums are sites with social implications that determine an individual’s place in the world. Museums control the representation of Western society’s highest values and thus determine where an individual stands in this order. The ability of a visitor to perform the museum’s rituals confirms their identity within Western society. For example, “those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, or ethnic) the museum ritual most fully confirms.” In other words, museums have been constructed to position the dominant as ideal – the dominant being, upper-to-middle class, white, usually Christian and male. Many institutions are currently struggling with and negotiating these long histories of patriarchy. The Plaza Project looks to change the rituals enacted outside of the museum and thus how visitors approach space-making within the museum. Although not driven by the exact ideals or effort of Machida’s Dreamspace, by creating accessible, social spaces, the hope is that the people of Detroit will see themselves as part of the museum and see the museum as a space for themselves – a space that tells their stories and represents their place in the world, a step towards a dreamier space.

367 Ibid.
368 Ibid.
369 Ibid.
In the grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) the DIA proposed to hire a landscape architect to study a means of activating the Woodward plaza, the space just outside the front entrance to the museum. The NEA’s Our Town grant provides support to projects that provide the foundation for long-term, sustainable integration of arts, culture, and design in service of strong community building.¹ This aligned with the DIA’s commitment to make the arts accessible to its diverse public. The William Davidson Foundation matched the NEA grant and proposed broader community engagement and partnership with the surrounding cultural district.² There are twelve different educational and cultural institutions in this particular area of Midtown Detroit, including: Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, the College for Creative Studies, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American Culture, the Michigan Science Centre, and the Detroit Public Library.³ Molnar describes the partnership as a logical extension of the Plaza Project because “all of these institutions [are essentially] living on an island – sitting adjacent to each other,” with similar goals of increasing visitorship, creating ease of access, and a space people want to be in.⁴ The twelve institutions were grouped together and titled, the DIA Plaza and Midtown Cultural Connections Project.

The project then partnered with the Fred A. and Barbara Erb Family Foundation, pre-existing supporters of Midtown Detroit Inc., a non-profit led by Executive Director, Sue Mosey. Midtown Detroit Inc., has been providing leadership and funding opportunities for the revitalization of the Midtown area for over thirty years. It began by provided funding for small business incubators and predates Dan Gilbert’s revitalization efforts.⁵ The organization works on projects that include: district planning, beautification and maintenance, community and real estate development, district marketing, planning and economic development, and special events. For example, Mosey has been instrumental in organizing cultural events like Noel Night and Delectricity, a bi-

² The grant stipulates there needs to be a minimum $25,000 match.
³ For a comprehensive list of the participating institutions: https://www.midtownculturalconnections.com/project-site.
⁴ Molnar interview.
⁵ Ibid. Dan Gilbert, billionaire and founder of Quicken Loans and Rock Ventures. Revitalization efforts in Detroit are often attributed to him and his corporations. Although he has contributed greatly to Detroit’s revitalization efforts, he has also further marginalized the local population in these gentrifying efforts.
annual technology-focussed Nuit Blanche-type contemporary art exhibition that stretches along Woodward Ave. from the DIA south toward downtown for one night in early fall. Molnar explained that “when she organizes large events and we see what activity looks like in the district, it’s pretty awesome. You have people on the streets – throngs of people going in and out of buildings.”\textsuperscript{375} It was an obvious decision to include Mosey and Midtown Detroit Inc. in the development of the Plaza Project.

A steering committee of invested partners, CEOs and Directors of the partner institutions, was assembled and a vision for the area began to form. Using information on the physical, structural and neighbourhood challenges faced by each institution, the group formed a roadmap to draft a design brief.\textsuperscript{376} As part of the initial community engagement efforts it was decided to form a juried competition that would include leaders in the field of landscape architecture and design, academia, culture, urban planning, etc.\textsuperscript{377}

On April 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2018 a Request for Quotation (RFQ), essentially a call for proposals, went out with a goal of twenty responses. The committee received forty-four proposals from ten countries and twenty-two cities. Applications arrived from a multitude of US and European cities including Boston, New York, Oakland, Minneapolis, Paris, and Amsterdam. It’s no secret that there is a lot of interest in Detroit from outsiders, many looking to bring their talent and or money to make a lasting mark on the city through revitalization projects like this.\textsuperscript{378} Molnar speculates that the Foundations are very interested in transformational projects, attending committee meetings and participating on the steering committee. She states that, “their interest lies in the fact that this is a project bringing together disparate institutions that many of them support individually.”\textsuperscript{379} The hope is that collaboration between these institutions via the Plaza Project will create a more cohesive, welcoming space where people want to spend their time.

\textsuperscript{375} Molnar interview.
\textsuperscript{376} The publicized design challenge incorporated components from the brief and can be read in full on the website: https://competitions.org/2018/04/detroit-dia-plaza-landscape-competition/.
\textsuperscript{377} For a full list of jury members see: https://www.midtownculturalconnections.com/jury.
\textsuperscript{378} For example, the Detroit RiverFront Conservancy project has benefitted greatly from outsider interest and input. The latest extension of this project, the Detroit West Riverfront Park received $50 million of a $100 million grant from the Ralph Wilson Foundation. ($200 million was awarded to Buffalo and Detroit for revitalization projects.) Molnar Interview.
\textsuperscript{379} Ibid. I would also assert that interest lies in attaching their names to the revitalization of the once-forgot city – the re-glorification of the industrial giant - much of the money they’re donating comes from a long history of making enormous sums of it through industrialization.
The forty-four submissions were reviewed by the jury and narrowed down to eight. The eight finalists were invited to Detroit in June 2018 for two days of public presentations and further narrowed down to three finalists: Agence Ter, Paris, France; Mikyoung Kim Design, Boston; and TEN x TEN, Minneapolis. Each urban landscape design team is made up of individuals from 4-9 different firms and academic institutions including a partnership with at least one Detroit area firm. The teams came back to Detroit in January 2019 to take part in a day of public presentations followed by an exhibition of their proposals at the DIA: *The DIA Plaza/Midtown Cultural Connections International Design Competition* on view until April 1, 2019. The winner of the competition was Agence Ter. Made up of a team that combines the talent and specializations of local Detroit and Michigan architectural designers and educators with members of the French design firm was chosen for bringing together an international sensibility steeped in local knowledge. Detroit city planner Maurice Cox asserted that it was this local knowledge that stood out against the competition. The winning design combines technology and social justice in a way that meets the needs and desires of people using the space. Free Wi-Fi, an outdoor living room-like space outside the Detroit Public Library, a “Respect café” at the Charles Wright Museum of African American History, and a performance and technology hub are just a few of the proposed plans.

As a way of gathering support for the project and engaging the surrounding student population, the Cultural Connections partners co-ordinated a student summit. Organized by the DIA, University of Michigan, and the College for Creative Studies, the Student Design Summit allowed students from across the state to propose design projects of any size ranging from illuminated way-finding sculptures to a unified logo design for the district and an app creating a digital connection between the institutions. As frequent and future users of the space, student design teams were invited to imagine the

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380 For a list of the eight finalists see this press release from the museum: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ab01e379d5abb3869926931/t/5b06bc9503ce640b29b589e2/1527168149864/5-22-2018CompPressReleaseD4FMAM-FINAL.pdf.
382 Ibid.
383 A list of projects and video submissions can be found here: https://www.midtownculturalconnections.com/student-designs.
future of the district, with the DIA as their central focus, through the lens of connectivity.\textsuperscript{384} “The aim of this competition [was] to address the opportunity the DIA and surrounding cultural district have to connect with each other and with outside communities.”\textsuperscript{385} Students submitted three minute video proposals of their projects followed by an evening of “speed dating” project pitching to stakeholders.\textsuperscript{386} The three minute video format allowed students to propose projects with few limitations, allowing them to be as creative and innovative as they wanted. The student design contest relates to the juried competition by tapping into the creativity and innovative spirit of the student teams while creating excitement and publicity through public engagement. The idea is that the final design for the Plaza Project could incorporate aspects of the winning student design.

The top prize and People’s Choice Award winning project was designed by 51Eighty, a group of eleven students from Wayne State University who proposed a design that repurposed open spaces and rebranded the district.\textsuperscript{387} Their submission states that their proposal “honours the history of the district and transforms it into a model of collective and inclusive urban sustainability.”\textsuperscript{388} 51Eighty proposed the “Wonder Plaza,” an open air amphitheatre and green space in a repurposed parking lot. Each institution would be represented through their individual and collaborative programming of the space. Included in this design are distinct pedestrian zones, encouraging visitors to socialize and spend more time in the district. Furthermore, they imagine a branded smart phone app orienting and connecting visitors to the space. The students conducted interviews with visitors in the district, including them in their submission and further purposed collecting design feedback via surveys and informal conversations. Jury members were impressed with the diligence of the team stating, “They actually went out and interviewed stakeholders and they showed us one way at least on how to engage the

\textsuperscript{385} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{386} Molnar Interview.
\textsuperscript{387} The group received a $5,000 award; $2,500 for the top prize and another $2,500 for the People’s Choice Award.
\textsuperscript{388} Winning video: https://www.midtownculturalconnections.com/winning-student-teams.
Molnar, one of seven jury members, explains that she is proud of the students and their level of engagement with the contest and the future development of the district. This project is providing students and the involved cultural institutions with “some semblance of a future. Some of the institutions are really struggling financially but this is providing hope - kind of an anchor for the future.” Hope for a culturally rich and vibrant district is becoming manifest through stakeholder collaboration and student and community engagement.

Molnar referred to the public presentations of the juried competitions as “engagement sessions” and “engagement activities.” However, when I posed the question regarding “community” or “local” response to the project Molnar was hesitant, no doubt aware of the precarious and contentious position of the project. It comes with a heavy burden of transforming public space to become more accessible and user-friendly while resulting in the gentrification of another neighbourhood in Detroit. Molnar explains that the approach to engagement has been gentle and broad. A press release regarding the engagement stations and over a thousand invitations to the public presentations was distributed garnering approximately three hundred responses. She explains that the Plaza Project is not on “everyone’s radar right now which is okay because once the design team is chosen, those architects and landscape architects are experienced in doing engagement and it’s important that they do it.” She affirms, “at that point, it will be a more vigorous, rigorous process. Right now it’s a lighter touch.” The subtext of her response is that the museum doesn’t have the resources to do extensive public engagement nor do they want to stir up any conflict or criticism this early on in the planning process. Molnar is aware of the precarity of this project; the newly formed institutional relationships, the funding and donor relationships, and what it will take to please all invested parties, and all in the name of the public trust.

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390 Molnar interview.
391 Ibid.
392 Ibid.
393 Ibid.
394 Ibid.
Now that a winner has been announced and a project chosen, the team will begin an eighteen month conceptual planning project, surveying the area, meeting with stakeholders and the public. It is anticipated that the project will take seven to ten years to complete. The NEA grant and subsequent foundation support was awarded to support the research and planning process of the Plaza Project. It was not however, meant to cover the cost of executing the project. And so the future of this project will involve much more fund raising. There is hope that the combined efforts of the institutions will create a greater likelihood that in this time frame, the proposed project will come to fruition.

**Conclusion**

The Detroit Institute of Arts is in a unique position. Never before in American history has an institution as prominent as the DIA been faced with having to sell off its collection to save a bankrupted city. Throughout the years the Institute renovated, re-installed, and wrestled with public engagement and attempts to increase visitorship. However, now more than ever, the museum is having to prove itself to the public for whom it holds its collection in trust. With engaging and provocative exhibitions that reflect these publics, and plans to activate the outdoor space in a welcoming and inclusive way, the DIA is demonstrating its commitment to these promises. In 2008, Wild Czajkowski explained that the museum is constantly “wrestling with what it means to be a place of independent, interactive learning where rare, valuable, and aesthetically-significant objects are held in public trust. In such a place, changing the rules of access is no small thing.” These remain concerns for the museum.

Alyssa Machida’s workbook proposes new ways of engaging museum publics, providing access and inclusivity. The work she tasks museum staff and administrators with is not simple. It is ongoing and requires the difficult work of unpacking histories. Claire Bishop explains that dialectical contemporaneity is a method of bringing history into conversation with the contemporary, to shed new light on history (historical

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395 Parlette, “University of Michigan faculty.”
396 Wild Czajkowski, 178.
problems). It is a means of acknowledging past events, traumas, movements etc. in a new light, from new perspectives. Bishop states that, “[o]ne of the consequences of approaching institutions through this category is a rethinking of the museum, the category of art that it enshrines, and the modalities of spectatorship it produces.” The bankruptcy of Detroit and deaccessioning scare have created a space for rethinking this museum, its display and collection practices, and how it represents and serves its public. Through its engaging and timely exhibitions and the DIA Plaza and Midtown Cultural Connections Project, the DIA is becoming a centralized force in a growing, positive narrative of Detroit as cultural city.

397 Bishop, Radical Museology, 9.
Conclusion

"Yet just as ruin imagery challenges the idea of the capitalist state as effective protector of its citizens and source of progress and rationality, it also challenges us to consider how our declining cities may be reclaimed and reimagined as part of an egalitarian society where cities meet the needs of their collective populations, provide the basis for individual fulfillment, and help sustain the earth’s environment."

- Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline*

My research has positioned artists, art projects, and the Detroit Institute of Arts at the centre of a shifting narrative of Detroit; from ruin city to a people centred, cultural city. I have examined the role artists, their projects, and the DIA have played in the revitalization of Detroit. I have determined that although artists, art, and art institutions alone cannot bring a city back from the brink, nor can they eliminate hundreds of years of inequality, violence, poverty, and racism; they can activate change and progress through visually and physically representing stories, personal and collective truths that have the power to shift negative narratives of a place.

I am aware of how narrative is utilized. I myself, in this very dissertation, have carefully chosen images, artists, projects, and examples that work to create my own narrative. A narrative of an outsider writing about a city who has been so generous as to show me its beautiful, kind, and vibrant side. I believe that the creation of narrative has an energetic force with the capacity to move. To affect change. To bring with it whatever the creator (of that narrative) intends. By weaving positive narratives, it is my firm belief that collectively, change may be activated.

The projects I discuss in chapter one, “Beyond Ruin: Photographing Home in Detroit,” examine what it means to return to and photograph Detroit. Suzy Lake places herself in the picture, by way of voyeuristic-looking self-portraits, as she delves into her family history in Detroit. Her project, *Performing an Archive*, explores aspects of Detroit’s revitalization through the neighbourhoods of her past. Her work also criticizes the practice of objectifying and gawking at the city through the photography of ruins and abandoned spaces. Dave Jordano’s project, *Detroit - Unbroken Down* returns to his college practice of photographing the people and culture of Detroit in response to the proliferation of ruin photography. His work came to include the individual stories of his sitters as a way for them to share their perspective of survival and thriving in a city many had written off. The work of Lake and Jordano puts people back into the narrative of
Detroit in a way that forces viewers to confront inaccurate notions of the city as empty, derelict, and in ruin.

By incorporating images and stories of existing populations, artists help resist the erasure of the marginalized populations of Detroit. Chapter two, “At Home in Detroit: Constructing Agency and Narrative from Within,” is a continuation of this story-telling work. The artists of the DNA Project, *Beware of the Dandelions*, and those like Halima Cassells, who were involved in the co-creation of a community benefits agreement, now an open access toolkit and implemented by IdeasCity, are working to ensure the people of Detroit are represented and have a seat at the table in terms of revitalization projects and future visions of Detroit. Working from an Afrofuturist perspective, many of these artists pose the questions: what is the future of Detroit and what does it look like when erasure via gentrification is resisted and people of colour can thrive? What does it look like to live in thriving, healthy, supportive, and growing communities? Through their work they represent exactly what it looks like. It looks like a Detroit that supports its local populations. It looks like access: access to a platform and media through which to tell their stories and represent themselves; access to a means of being seen and heard; access to resources to create their own art projects; access to housing and legal home ownership; access to jobs and wealth, public services, and basic human rights.

The revitalization and healthy growth of the City of Detroit lies in the collaborative efforts of its people. Outsiders can contribute to telling the story of Detroit and can utilize their talents in collaborative ways, however, true change must come from within – from those whose lives are directly affected by the revitalization of the city and whose lives have been directly affected by the mismanagement and racist history of that city.

In chapter three, “Art Institutional Revitalization: The Detroit Institute of Arts,” I examine the affect the 2013 bankruptcy of the city had on Detroit’s largest art institution, the DIA, and the almost forced deaccessioning of the museum’s collection to pay down the debt of the city. Upon securing the collection in the trust of the people of Detroit and surrounding areas of contributing tax payers, the DIA accelerated its efforts to make itself appealing and welcoming to its visitors. The DIA’s role in revitalizing the city evolved from these efforts and came to include a design project that would involve the
surrounding cultural and academic institutions in an attempt to make these spaces accessible, user-friendly, and promote community-building in the Midtown area.

The inclusion of exhibitions like 30 Americans, that represent art by and of people of colour, and Corine Vermeulen’s Walk-In Portrait Studio, that literally put the people of Detroit on the walls of the DIA, help to engage audiences previously alienated by the institution. In their article, “Identifying and Transforming Racism in Museum Education,” Marit Dewhurst and Keonna Hendrick explain that: “To live up to their roles as spaces for civic engagement and public accessibility, museums must transform how they address institutionalized racism.”398 They must “bring the conditions of the world into the museum” and, “[t]o do so requires both an understanding of the ways in which museums can perpetuate inequality as well as how we can work to dismantle systems of injustice in our everyday practices.”399 They, like Alyssa Machida’s Dreamscape Project, call for museums to create engaging, safe spaces for ideas, conversations, critical thinking, and a sense of belonging that helps to educate the public. By programming the aforementioned exhibitions and more like them, the DIA invites the current conditions of the world inside and creates a space for thinking through and dismantling injustice and inequality. Additionally and simply, when visitors see themselves represented in the works of art exhibited in museums, they feel welcome, included, and seen. Returning to Afrofuturist and mayoral candidate, Ingrid Lafleur’s assertion that American institutions, including the museum, were not created for black Americans to prosper; rather they were built to, “silence, disallow, displace, and render powerless,” the job of the museum to give voice, space, place, and to empower the largely black population of Detroit becomes clear.400

The combination of activities that made up my research for this project have always brought me back to the reason I was doing it: both to show how art and arts and cultural workers can shift narratives through their work, but also how necessary it is to shift negative narratives of people and places. Detroit is not the empty, derelict place portrayed by the media, neither is it a blank canvas for gentrification, rather, it is a city

399 Dewhurst and Hendrick, 106.
400 Drumming, “We Are in the Future.”
with vibrant culture and communities rooted in survival. It is a city that includes communities of Afrodisporic culture who refuse to be erased from history, from the present, and who are making their future aspirations known. There will be a future for the people of Detroit. They will fight hard against the current political climate. They are resilient. They are story-tellers. And they will go on to weave their stories of oppression into futures of social justice and equality.
Minor Project Reflection - Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities

*Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities* (April 20, 2017) brought together a panel of guest speakers, including practicing artists and cultural workers from London, Windsor, and Detroit. Located in downtown London, Ontario at 121 Studios, the panel focussed on engaging and revitalizing communities through the arts. This panel pulled from a variety of disciplines and approaches to address the fundamental and practical questions about the impact, role and responsibility of the arts in our communities. The ultimate aim of this event was to foster a lively and inclusive arts dialogue between different departments at Western University and the London, Windsor, and Detroit communities.

![Art and the City, April 20, 2017. Image courtesy of Ruth Skinner.](image)

I invited three speakers who focused on public engagement, outreach programs, and community development strategies in the arts. Some questions considered by the

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401 121 Studios is a co-working, digital media, and community event space in London, ON.
Panel participants included: what specifically are the arts doing for your communities, and how can art and its institutions instigate concrete positive changes in communities, or potentially even foster the rebuilding of communities? To further complicate these questions panelists were asked to consider, what responsibility the arts have, if any, to the community, and what are the socio-economic complications and challenges involved when we use the arts as a tool for community (re)building? What is the responsibility of art institutions (if any) to affect social change? And what are the ethics involved in the engagement between art institutions and the local community? The goal of this event was to explore multiple perspectives on community building in the arts.

It was important for this project to bring together cultural workers with diverse backgrounds who engage their respective communities of London, Windsor, and Detroit in creative ways. I chose three women inclusive of different perspectives. In a conversation about diverse communities, it was imperative that I include female, Indigenous, and African American voices. The London, Windsor, Detroit trifecta was essential for me both because of their proximity to one another and for what each city could teach the others about community building. The shared characteristics or themes of declining (or downright failed or disappeared) industry, attempts at revitalization of the struggling downtown cores (albeit some smaller than others), and the communities that have formed to develop the culture of each city, framed the formation, and ultimately the conversations, of this panel. The selection of the three panelists grew organically out of conversations with respected colleagues and advisors and significant time spent reflecting on the perspective I wanted to give this panel. Whose voice matters and whose contributions would be new, insightful, and ultimately meaningful? I chose three women who are doing incredibly important work in their communities, each in very different ways.

Nicole (Nicki) Borland is the Program Director at LondonFuse, a not-for-profit online and print (ShortFuse) publication that promotes local art and culture. She

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402 Five hundred jobs were lost when the 75 year old Kellogg’s plant in London shutdown in December 2014. The declining auto industry has affected Windsor, Detroit, and surrounding areas, including St. Thomas, 20 minutes outside of London, which boasted 3,600 union members at the Ford assembly plant in 2000. Deindustrialization and plant shut downs have negatively affected communities across North America.
completed her MA in art history at Western University where she wrote her graduate thesis on art and urban regeneration in London, Ontario. It was this shared interest in urban revitalization and community building that drew me to Borland. After meeting with her and discussing this project I knew that her wealth of knowledge, dedication to the London community, and her passion would make her a perfect fit for this panel.

Borland was the first to speak and she shared with us the story of launching the new LondonFuse website and the interim period that was filled with an incredible project called, ShortFuse. ShortFuse is a short, print publication that covers local events and stories, and was an experiment that took off in a most unexpected way. This twelve by eighteen inch double-sided “zine-like print publication”\(^{403}\) has been embraced with open arms. People love that it is a local, intimate reflection of their community. Borland explained that it is an “accessible and enjoyable reason to engage with [the] city…”\(^{404}\) It is found in locally-owned shops throughout the city, it covers local news, promotes local events, features people within the community, and is written and printed right here in London.\(^{405}\)

\(403\) Nicole Borland, “Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities,” guest panel, London, ON, April 2017.
\(404\) Ibid.
ShortFuse began as a weekly publication and has gone down to a monthly publication both in order to allow for richer, better-developed content and for the staff and volunteers to prepare for the relaunch of the LondonFuse website. The publication became organized around themes, for example, the surge of craft breweries (in a city dominated by the large scale brewing of the Labatt company) was covered in an issue dedicated to beer in London. It is exactly this type of local coverage and promotion that make ShortFuse and the newly launched LondonFuse\(^{406}\) so popular and such an integral part of the London community. Borland’s presentation emphasized the important role of print and digital media in the support of local art and culture.

Jessica Cook is the Education and Public Programs Coordinator at the Art Gallery of Windsor. She is completing her Master of Education at the University of Windsor where she is building a model of education that incorporates Indigenous practices of education through engaging with and understanding nature. Jessica brings her Indigenous heritage, her background in education as well as her visual arts and design practice to her work.

\(^{406}\) The new website relaunched on April 4, 2017.
outreach initiatives with the local Windsor and surrounding communities. The breadth of her background, her collaborative experiences, and (again) her passion, brought Jessica into the Art and the City conversation.  

Jessica provided us with an overview of her practice and the many projects she is currently working on. Notably, this includes the Four Winds STEAM Project at the University of Windsor’s Aboriginal Education Centre – Turtle Island House, where Cook was an instructor with other professors at the university. The STEAM Project is for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students in grade five and six and combines lessons in Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) “while making strong connections to the Original People’s culture and teachings.” Cook’s work with STEAM connects to her Master’s research that combines Western pedagogy with Indigenous teaching and cultural traditions that include oral history and our relationship to and with the natural world. Through her presentation, Cook demonstrated that it is

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Thank you to Patrick Mahon for the introduction.

http://www.steambtt.ca/
important to engage communities through art, education, and sharing cultural histories and traditions.

Halima Cassells is a Detroit-based artist and a community advocate. Her involvement in organizations like the Oakland Avenue Artists Coalition, O.N.E. Mile project, Incite Focus Fab Lab, Center for Community Based Enterprise, and the Free Market of Detroit, have helped to build community and give a voice to marginalized people living in Detroit. Cassells came to my attention when I heard her speak at the IdeasCity Detroit (2016) conference and again at the Allied Media Conference (2016). I am especially interested in her organization of the Detroit Narrative Agency (DNA) Project that called on people in Detroit to use ‘new media’ platforms to tell their own stories of Detroit in an attempt to change the way people understand the city and the people residing there. Cassells’ unique approach to community building and her experience with urban revitalization projects made her a valuable inclusion in the Art and the City panel.

Cassells began her talk by rephrasing one of my original questions to the panel: What is the artists’ role in rebuilding a city? She asked, rather, what is the artists’ role in
building a city? For Cassells it begins with people having the agency to tell and represent their own stories. When organizers from the New Museum in New York began planning the IdeasCity Detroit fellowship and conference (2016), a group of artists and activists banded together to draft the Memorandum of Understanding for the IdeasCity Detroit Planning, a community benefits agreement. The city (the governing body) wants to promote “out of towners” coming into Detroit for events like this, thus, it was important that the voices of Detroiter be heard – by outsiders and by their own city. The community benefits agreement allowed for a local agenda at the IdeasCity Detroit conference. It gave local artists an opportunity to present projects that, with the support of city officials, have the potential to revitalize communities and neighbourhoods in Detroit.

Another series of projects Cassells presented are swap events. These interactive installations are multi-genre and include DJs, workshops (yarn making, loom making, shea butter making etc.), upcycling, art, story-telling, etc. Admission is one item and you are entered into the cycle of giving. Cassells emphasized that the ideology behind these swaps is that they are meeting needs, whether that be through sharing physical objects, stories, knowledge, or company. Value is placed on meeting actual needs. Cassells began by exclaiming her belief “that I think [swaps] will save the world, actually.” By the end of her presentation, I believed her.

The story of organizing the Art and the City project quickly became about generosity. From raising funds, working out logistics, promoting the event, and problem solving, I was blessed with the generosity of colleagues, advisors, university administration, and friends. I spent approximately three weeks (in total, not consecutive days) preparing a list of department contacts and letters requesting financial support. I was overwhelmed by the generosity that many of them demonstrated. Meghan Edmiston, Administrative Coordinator in the Department of Visual Arts and her detailed spreadsheets kept all of my finances organized and within budget. We met on a regular

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409 This short memo which was drafted by twenty-five artists over three months and involved back and forth negotiations with the New Museum is now available as a downloadable Cultural Community Benefits Toolkit, created by ArtChangeUS: https://artsinachangingamerica.org/cultural-community-benefits-principles/.

410 In particular, I am very grateful to Helen Fielding, Chair of Women’s Studies and Feminist Research who donated her ArtNow honorarium to this project.
basis (almost weekly nearing the end of this project) to discuss the budget and allocate funds accordingly.

During the process of organizing this panel I was surprised to discover that the thing that intimidated me most was promotion. I did not have the first clue about how to design the graphics for a poster or invitation, how to book an Akimbo ad or what exactly an Akimbit was, or if anyone was going to show up. Again, I was shown an enormous amount of generosity and really learned first-hand the meaning of community. I was introduced to graphic designer, Emanuel Ilagan, who provided me with the graphics for the Art and the City poster and invitations, by a colleague and mutual friend. I was provided with email lists of contacts in the London community who would be interested in the panel. The event was shared throughout the Western University community and beyond by colleagues, many of whom I have only corresponded with via email. 411 My Western University Visual Arts community came together in support of Art and the City to ensure that the event was well promoted and thus well attended.

411 Tweeted by Michelle Hamilton in Public Histories.
The “day of” logistics involved a pick up from the train station and a check-in at the hotel, food preparation, set up of chairs, tables, projector and screen, tripods and audio recorders, coffee and cups, and all of the things that make events like this worth attending. None of this work would have been possible without the help of Meghan Edmiston who booked the train tickets and hotel for Cassells, or Troy Oulette, Technical Specialist Manager in Visual Arts, who taught me how to use my borrowed AV equipment, Nicki Borland and Charles Blakevic for their help setting up the space at 121 Studios, or my supportive Ph. D. colleagues, Ruth Skinner, Margherita Papadatos, and Katie Oates for picking up coffee, cutting fruit, putting out sweets and running to the store for some last minute ice and non-dairy milk for the coffee. At this point, the hard
work was done and I was ready to see this thing unfold. And unfold it did, in every way I had hoped it would.

I have never been so proud to be a part of something as I was with this project. As I sat back listening to the speakers I had brought together, having a conversation that is so important to me, I was overwhelmed with excitement and pride that with the help of so many people, I had organized this event. This event that introduced strangers to one another, that taught us about the important projects people are doing in different cities and in our own city, and this event that sparked ideas (between panelists and audience members) for new projects and collaborations.412

Although this project seemed to come together seamlessly in the end, there were of course some hiccoughs and a few lessons learned along the way; namely, begin everything sooner. I learned a bit about department budgets and allocations of funds, and thus, when during the academic year is best to approach departments for support. In hindsight, I would begin any fundraising projects as soon as possible in order to secure the maximum amount of support. I also learned the hard way that the SOGS Joint Fund is not an unlimited stockpile of money, it does indeed run out, and without notice. Although I was disappointed and a little frustrated at what seemed like wasted time spent putting together the joint fund application, I am grateful for the practical component of this experience. I learned that it takes time and patience to compile the detailed information necessary for this type of application – and now I have a template for future projects.

Something else I should have begun sooner was the advertising of the event. I am pleased with how many people attended and how diverse the audience was, however, I would have loved to have reached even more people.413 For my Major Project, I made sure I began this process earlier, including to communities and audiences outside of London. The Akimbit post reached people in Toronto, which I was very pleased with, but with more time and notice I could have reached out to surrounding communities like

412 Jessica Cook and Patrick Mahon who have worked on a project together (The Living River Project: Art, Water and Possible Worlds a symposium on water at the Art Gallery of Windsor, March 4, 2017), discussed the potential for a new project involving Halima Cassels.
413 Approximately twenty people attended and included: students, faculty, artists, and community members from London and the GTA.
Sarnia, Woodstock, Windsor, and even Detroit. Timing and an expansion of my contact list is something I worked on for my Major Project.

My final lesson or bump along this road involved navigating certain power structures delicately and with grace. I learned that even if you don’t mean to, people can become offended, and all you can do is explain and educate, apologize humbly, and never lose the vision for your project, no matter how hard it is trying to be co-opted. Also, no amount of financial “support” is worth losing your creative agency or having others second-guess your decisions. Having conviction in what you are doing, a strong support network, and the ability to be diplomatic, makes navigating power structures easier. Not easy, but easier.

In the end, I am happy to have had what I perceive as my list of “fails,” so that I may learn from them, because without a solid understanding of your shortcomings, it is difficult to improve for future endeavours. The ultimate goal of the Minor and Major Projects was to get outside of my comfort zone, meet people and make connections, and gain as much practical experience as I could while at Western, blessed with ample resources and support. I learned that in organizing an event like this, it really does take a village, and I am truly grateful to be surrounded by such a strong, supportive community.
What I learned from each of the panelists and through the organization of this event is that community building involves understanding the local needs of each community, and this happens by building relationships and networks. There is no one prescription for community building, and thus creative solutions develop out of conversations and sharing ideas. Borland’s work at LondonFuse shows how a publication that reaches different local communities and promotes local events and business can create networks of people that support community growth. Cook’s work as an artist, designer and educator proves that community is built through sharing information and teaching publics about different cultures, beliefs, and ways of knowing. Cassells’ advocacy for the marginalized and for new, positive narratives teach us the importance of becoming active about what matters to us within our communities. If I’ve learned anything from this process, it is that building strong relationships and being generous with our resources, whether that be our time, energy, knowledge, expertise, and yes, even money (if you have it), is what builds strong communities.
Major Project Reflection - Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford

The exhibition *Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford* (June 8-30, 2018) at McIntosh Gallery on the Western University campus, brought the artwork of Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford into conversation. It included six works by Lake from her *Performing an Archive* series (2014/2016) and Ford’s short film *Where the Heart Is* (2017). The exhibition responded to images of Detroit as a ruin city, which aestheticize and make a spectacle of decay and poverty in Detroit. It brought together two artists who, through their work, propose a counternarrative to prevailing ideas about the post-industrial city.

![Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford installation view, McIntosh Gallery, 2018. Image courtesy of Mark Kasumovic.](image)

Suzy Lake’s *Performing an Archive* includes over thirty images, of which only five were chosen. The sixth work by Lake was a large map that was part of her archival research for the photographs. By tracing and photographing her roots in Detroit, Lake calls into question the culture of gawking at and objectifying Detroit as a ruin city. Orlando Ford’s film, *Where the Heart Is* was produced as part of the Detroit Narrative Agency’s Seed Grant Program. Through interviews with Detroiters in the neighbourhoods and outside of the homes where they grew up, Ford’s film tells a story of Detroit that differs from the popular narrative of Detroit as an empty, ruin city. This film
tells the human story of Detroit, a vibrant city that has experienced hardship; a story of a
city that’s been here all along.

This exhibition considered explored the main issue of my dissertation research but
in a different form. For both artists, the work is deeply personal. Lake’s complex staging
and the layers of meaning and visual cues in her photographs communicate a profound
respect for her subjects. Ford’s intimate and candid profiles communicate the complex
relationship the people of Detroit have with their city. Ford’s film complements Lake’s
work by giving a literal voice to the people and neighbourhoods she photographed. This
exhibition brings these artworks into conversation because they expertly rebuke the
dominant narrative of a city in ruins and invite an exploration of a much more
complicated and nuanced story.

I began planning this exhibition during the writing of my prospectus. I knew I
wanted to exhibit several works from Suzy Lake’s Performing an Archive series in
conversation with another Detroit project. Initially I had Dave Jordano’s Detroit
Unbroken Down photography series in mind, however that changed after I saw the trailer
for Where the Heart Is, screened at the opening ceremonies of the Allied Media
Conference in June 2017. In my prospectus I proposed the use of the smaller gallery
space at the McIntosh Gallery in order to curate an exhibition that would afford visitors a
space for engaging more intimately with the work in hopes that they would spend more
time analyzing and thinking through some of the visual cues and elements of Lake’s
multi-layered artworks. In early July 2017, Patrick Mahon contacted me to confirm my
intended use of the space and I began the planning process. After meeting with Prof.
Bassnett and expressing my plan to exhibit Lake’s work in tandem with Ford’s, I drafted
a formal exhibition proposal and budget. As I was in contact with both artists at this time
for research purposes, I asked if they would be interested in taking part in this exhibition
and both happily accepted the invitation.

In November, 2017 I formally met with James Patten, Director and Chief Curator
at McIntosh Gallery and Helen Gregory, Curator in Residence who would act as my

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414 I had a good idea of which works I wanted to exhibit, knowing for sure I would include 1093 Seyburn
Avenue, Gustav Schneider, 1913 (2014/2016) and 723 Newport Avenue, 1913 (2014/2016), as these works
represented a breakthrough in my understanding of Lake’s process and intention.
Curatorial Assistant and go-to for all things exhibition and McIntosh related. Over the course of the development of this project, I worked closely with Helen and was fortunate to have her guide me through this process. After my meeting at the gallery, I confirmed my budget and began fundraising. As with my Minor Project, Art and the City, I received generous support from the departments within as well as the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. I was also granted money from the Joint Fund for the Support of Graduate Student Research and Scholarship, an award funded by Research Western, the Society of Graduate Students, and the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Including support from the Department of Visual Arts I raised a total of $3,111.91. Together with support from McIntosh, I was able to cover the costs of the exhibition and upon review of this process Gregory communicated to me that the gallery was impressed with my successful fundraising.

Upon securing funds and setting up deadlines, I wrote the accompanying text for the exhibition. I wanted to communicate what this exhibition was about, why it was important, and why I had chosen these two artists to create a dialogue about the city of Detroit while also leaving enough space for the viewer to make their own meaning of the works. Prof. Bassnett helped me clarify my thoughts and formulate a succinct piece of writing that reflected all I wanted to convey. Both the wall text and the catalogue essay were edited and approved by McIntosh Gallery. The essay was printed in a fold-out pamphlet-style catalogue designed by graphic artist and Western University graduate, Liza Eurich.

Gregory has since been promoted to Curator at the McIntosh Gallery.
McIntosh Gallery took care of many of the administrative tasks, for example, writing and delivering the artist contracts, shipping and insurance for the artworks, advertising and promotions including: creating and booking the Akimbo, press releases, invitations, social media, as well as the installation of the artwork and the organization of the opening reception. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside the incredible staff and volunteers at the gallery including, Abby Vincent, Communications and Outreach Coordinator, who managed promotions with grace and ease, Brian Lambert, Collections Manager, and Brian Wellman Preparator, who made my curatorial vision come to life on the gallery walls, and work study students Maria Napigkit and Steven Roesch who were available to answer visitor questions and facilitate the opening reception. As with the organization and execution of my Minor Project, I learned that it takes a strong network of people and support to successfully accomplish a project of this magnitude.

During the process of curating this exhibition, I learned the importance of clear communication and transparency. If I could improve on any part of my process, it would be more in-person meetings early on to avoid miscommunication and greater clarity about finances. At times it was difficult to determine which expenses I was responsible for and which ones the gallery would cover. I have learned that I need to be assertive and straightforward in order to create an accurate and balanced budget.

Welcome to Detroit was a great success and I can say with pride, that I am the first, but hopefully not the last, graduate student to curate an exhibition of a living artist of such caliber (Suzy Lake) at the McIntosh Gallery. Traditionally the gallery would schedule an exhibition of such a prominent artist at a busier time of year. However, it
ended up being very successful with over 150 visitors attending the combined opening reception for *Welcome to Detroit* and Mark Kasumovic’s *A Human Laboratory*. Both Ford and Lake expressed how pleased they were with the exhibition. Ford, who was in attendance for the opening reception was extremely happy with the way his film worked in conversation with Lake’s work. He was grateful for Lake’s project that reflected his home in such depth and with such positivity. Throughout the evening he engaged with visitors, telling stories of the various locations mapped and photographed in Lake’s work. His presence enriched the exhibition in ways I could not have anticipated.

![Figure 5.3: Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford installation view, McIntosh Gallery, 2018. Image courtesy of Mark Kasumovic.](image)

During the initial planning phases of this exhibition I had very candid correspondence with Lake regarding the importance of the maps to this project. She was concerned about the possible use of her photographs in the context of ruins photography of Detroit and explained the issue she had with her publisher wanting her book to go in this direction. I assured her that my project was intended to be the exact opposite of this and that the inclusion of the mapping works was crucial to the exhibition. *Mapping Research* (2014/2016) is a large work measuring 150cm x 242.6cm comprised of digitally printed sections of a map of the City of Detroit from the early 1900s collaged over brown
kraft paper. Each location photographed by Lake is marked by a number and corresponding post-it note with the year, address, name(s), and familial relation. Accompanying the map is a legend, also organized numerically, in a chart form that includes more genealogical information as well as occupations of the family members. This map, which was so important to Lake’s research, became a focal point and touchstone for visitors. It provided context and depth, both geographically and personally, for the photographic works. When I described the visitor reaction to Lake, she told me, “it is heartening that your comments seemed to reinforce the exciting investment I had in the project.”

Knowing how important the mapping work was to Lake, it was great to see it being received so enthusiastically by visitors. Reflecting upon the process of organizing this exhibition, I feel I accomplished my goal, which was to present a counter narrative of Detroit through the work of Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford.

Figure 5.4: Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford installation view, McIntosh Gallery, 2018. Image courtesy of Mark Kasumovic.

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**MEDIA – NEWSPAPER & MAGAZINES**


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VIDEO & PODCASTS


WEB


http://josephhartman.ca/hamilton.html.


Appendix A: Minor Project Materials

a. Invitation

Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities

Date: April 20, 2017
Time: 3pm -5pm
Location: 121 Studios - 211 King Street, London, ON, Canada
* this event is free and open to the public

Art and the City will focus on public engagement, outreach programs, and community
development strategies in the arts. Some questions to be considered by the panel
participants include: what specifically are the arts doing for your communities, and how
can art and its institutions instigate concrete positive changes in communities, or
potentially even foster the rebuilding of communities? To further complicate these
questions we might also ask, what responsibility the arts have, if any, to the community?
And what are the socio-economic complications and challenges involved when we use
the arts as a tool for community (re)building? What is the responsibility of art institutions
(if any) to affect social change? And what are the ethics involved in the engagement
between art institutions and the local community? The goal of this event is to explore
multiple perspectives on community building in the arts.

This professional panel of guest speakers includes practicing artists and cultural workers
from here in London, Windsor, and Detroit. Focusing on engaging and revitalizing
communities through the arts, this panel will pull from a variety of disciplines and
approaches to address the fundamental and practical questions about the impact, role
and responsibility of the arts our communities. The ultimate aim of this event is to foster
a lively and inclusive arts dialogue between different Departments at Western University
and the London community.

Speakers:

Halima Cassells - What is the artist’s role in the rebuilding of a city?

Bio:
Detroit-based artist/ community advocate Halima Cassells occupies a myriad of roles
that are unified by a devotion to fostering community inter-connectivity. In practice she
designs spaces for authentic engagement, and collaborative artistic expression, as well
as projects that engender new economy practices. She works as an independent artist
and assumes roles at Oakland Avenue Artists Coalition, O.N.E. Mile project, Incite Focus
Fab Lab, Center for Community Based Enterprise, and the Free Market of Detroit.

Nicki Borland - “Over the past year working at LondonFuse (and four years prior
volunteering), we’ve always tried to connect the local community through the arts. Aside
from visual art itself, additional media like photography, video, and writing have been the pillars of progress when bringing Londoners closer to the city they live in.

Further to that, focus will be placed on our print publication, Short Fuse. I would like to discuss how this new venture allowed us to reach an even broader audience through traditional, offline media, in an increasingly online world.

Such an endeavour has opened our eyes to an entirely new method of connecting our community with writers, illustrators, photographers, artists, and leaders in the local art world. It has been very interesting to see the overwhelmingly positive engagement and response this method has received. It's one we will continue to explore in order to promote arts, culture, and community in London, Ontario."

**Bio:**
Nicki Borland is a born and raised Londoner, a Western grad, and a lifelong supporter of the arts. She has been heavily involved in the community for many years, something that largely lead to a graduate thesis on art and urban regeneration in London, Ontario. Currently, Nicki is the Program Director at LondonFuse and works every day to make the Forest City the best it can be through creativity, innovation, and engagement.

**Jessica Cook** – “As a First Nations artist living in Windsor, I will be talking about the projects I have worked on, and am presently working on. Additionally, I will discuss my role as an educator at the Art Gallery of Windsor and how I have been invited to participate in past events and presently how I engage with the Art Gallery, our local community members, elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools, educators and parents.

**Bio:**
Education and Public Programs Coordinator at the Art Gallery of Windsor.

OCT, graduated from the University of Windsor with an Honours Bachelor of Fine Art and a Bachelor of Education and is presently working towards her Master of Education at the University of Windsor, where she is a Graduate Assistant for Dr. Anthony Ezeife. Jessica has been working in multi-media/computer graphic design for over twenty years and works in combination with traditional fine arts, photography and contemporary mediums to create custom works of art or promotional and marketing materials for online, print, film & television for companies such as, the Can-Am Indian Friendship Centre, the Greater Essex County District Public School, the University of Windsor, Kickstand Entertainment, Mach2Films, and NAFTC Studio. Jessica is also a Production Designer who has worked on films with Peerless Productions, The Dot Film Company, Magic Door Films, the Peabody Bridge Company and as an Associate Producer with Black Coal Films. Jessica is also the Education and Public Programs Coordinator at the Art Gallery of Windsor, where she enjoys outreach initiatives with local communities and group art projects.

**Organizer:**

**Jessica Cappuccitti**
Art and the City has been organized by Jessica Cappuccitti as part of the adapted project-based stream of her Ph.D. in Art and Visual Culture at Western University. Her current research considers the City of Detroit as a case study for analyzing the complex role that artists and art institutions are playing in the potential re-growth and revitalization of the city.

Special thanks to:

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

The Departments of:

Visual Arts
English and Writing Studies
French Studies
Philosophy
Women's Studies

Western University’s Centre for Theory & Criticism
The School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities

121 Studios
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Western University Graduate Guest Panel: *Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities*

121 Studios, 211 King Street, London, ON, Canada
Thursday, April 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2017
3pm - 5pm

Western University Arts & Humanities and the Department of Visual Arts invite you to attend the guest panel, *Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities* (3pm - 5pm).

*Art and the City* will focus on public engagement, outreach programs, and community development strategies in the arts. Some questions to be considered by the panel participants include: what specifically are the arts doing for your communities, and how can art and its institutions instigate concrete positive changes in communities, or potentially even foster the rebuilding of communities? To further complicate these questions we might also ask, what responsibility the arts have, if any, to the community? And what are the socio-economic complications and challenges involved when we use the arts as a tool for community (re)building? What is the responsibility of art institutions (if any) to affect social change? And what are the ethics involved in the engagement between art institutions and the local community? The goal of this event is to explore multiple perspectives on community building in the arts.

This professional panel of guest speakers includes practicing artists and cultural workers from here in London, Windsor, Toronto, and Detroit. Focusing on engaging and revitalizing communities through the arts, this panel will pull from a variety of disciplines and approaches to address the fundamental and practical questions about the impact, role and responsibility of the arts our communities.

*Guest Panel:* Halima Cassells (Detroit), Jessica Cook (Windsor), Lisa Cristinzo (Toronto), and Nicki Borland (London)

Schedule is as follows:
3pm - Opening Remarks
3:05 – Speaker 1 (Detroit)
3:25 - Speaker 2 (Windsor)
3:45 - Speaker 3 (Toronto)
4:05 - Speaker 4 (London)
4:25 – Discussion, Q & A
5pm – Closing Remarks
Appendix B: Major Project Materials

a. Exhibition Proposal

Exhibition Proposal: Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake’s *Performing an Archive* and Orlando Ford’s *Where the Heart Is*

I plan to curate an exhibition as one of the degree requirements for the PhD in Art and Visual Culture, curatorial stream. The exhibition would include five works by Suzy Lake from her *Performing an Archive* series (2014/2016) and Orlando Ford’s short film *Where the Heart Is* (2017).

Suzy Lake’s *Performing an Archive* combines archival research, mapping and her signature style of self-portraiture to explore her identity as it relates to the city of Detroit. This body of work that includes over thirty images, is a “coming home” for Lake who was born in Detroit but who has been living and working in Canada since 1968. It is an attempt to situate her present self and insert her physical body into the places of her past. This project is a search for identity in a decaying urban landscape that, through its exploration of the working class neighbourhoods of Lake’s childhood, bears witness to the cycle of ruin and revitalization of Detroit. By tracing and photographing her roots in Detroit, Lake calls into question the culture of gawking at and objectifying Detroit as a ruin city.

Orlando Ford’s film, *Where the Heart Is* was produced as part of the Detroit Narrative Agency’s Seed Grant Program. This Program funds moving image projects that work to communicate positive narratives of Detroit. Through interviews with Detroiter in the neighbourhoods and outside of the homes where they grew up, Ford’s film tells a story of Detroit that differs from the popular narrative of Detroit as an empty, ruin city. This film tells the human story of Detroit, a vibrant city that has experienced hardship. It is a story of a city that’s been here all along.

This exhibition will consider what it means for a city to be observed, photographed and often gawked at by outsiders, as well as how this has perpetuated a negative narrative of Detroit as a city of ruin. At first, Lake’s photos, in contrast to Ford’s film, seem to play directly into this narrative of looking at Detroit from the outside, the gawker narrative. But what Lake has achieved with this series is a feeling of the artist being looked at by the city. They seem voyeuristic in a way and while observing them, one can almost hear a whisper of a city begging the question, “what are you looking at?” Ford’s film complements Lake’s work by answering this question through the individuals sharing their stories. This exhibition brings these works into conversation in order to question the dominant narrative of Detroit. They emphasize that Detroit is still a vibrant city, inhabited by people who are committed to shaping a new narrative of Detroit.

Attached you will find a list of the works I would like to include by Lake with thumbnails of each, a link to Ford’s video, and the budget for this event. The cost of shipping the art works is yet to be confirmed. I am hoping to supplement this budget with
support from McIntosh Gallery. As per the July 4th email correspondence with the former Graduate Chair Patrick Mahon, this exhibition would take place in the small gallery in summer 2018. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like to meet with me in person to discuss the details of this exhibition.

Sincerely,
Jessica Cappuccitti, Ph.D. candidate in Art and Visual Culture

List of Artworks

507 Drexel Avenue, Frederick Schneider, 1890
2014/2016
archival ink jet print
50.8 x 76.2 cm

1093 Seyburn Avenue, 1915
2014/2016
archival ink jet print
50.8 x 101.6 cm
723 Newport Avenue, 1913
2014/2016
archival ink jet print
50.8 x 101.6 cm

17 Chipman Street, 1893
2014/2016
archival inkjet print
50.8 x 1’01.6 cm

Mapping Research
2014/2016
Orlando Ford, *Where the Heart Is*

[https://vimeo.com/221515036](https://vimeo.com/221515036)
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Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford

Images of Detroit’s ruin have been steadily pouring out of the city for over a decade and have arguably played an important role in initiating interest in the revitalization of the city. However, these images aestheticize and make a spectacle of decay and poverty in Detroit. Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford brings together two artists who propose a counternarrative to prevailing ideas about this post-industrial city.

Suzy Lake’s Performing an Archive combines archival research, mapping, and her signature style of self-portraiture to explore her identity as it relates to the city of Detroit. This body of work, which includes over thirty images, is a “coming home” for Lake who was born in Detroit but who has been living and working in Canada since 1968. It is an attempt to situate her present self and to insert her physical body into the places of her past. This project is a search for identity in a decaying urban landscape that, through its exploration of the working class neighbourhoods of Lake’s childhood, bears witness to the cycle of ruin and revitalization. By tracing and photographing her roots, Lake calls into question the culture of gawking at and objectifying Detroit as a ruin city.

Orlando Ford’s film, Where the Heart Is was produced with the support of the Detroit Narrative Agency’s Seed Grant Program, which funds moving image projects that work to communicate positive narratives of Detroit. Through interviews with Detroiteres outside the homes in the neighbourhoods where they grew up, Ford’s film tells a story that differs from the popular narrative of Detroit as an empty, ruin city. This film tells human stories about a vibrant city that has experienced hardship.

Welcome to Detroit considers what it means for a city to be observed, photographed, and fetishized by outsiders. While Lake may initially seem to look at Detroit as an outsider, what she achieves is a reversal in which the artist is observed by the city. Ford’s film complements Lake’s work by sharing stories that convey the complex relationship the people of Detroit have with their city. Lake and Ford’s projects provide a counternarrative to popular images of ruin and explore the power of such imagery to determine our understanding of a place. The work emphasizes that Detroit is still a vibrant city by showing that the people who live there are passionate about its future.
Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford

What do you picture when you think of Detroit? An abandoned city with burned out homes and derelict factories? Headlines that declare bankruptcy and the decline of a once great city? Such images of ruin, decay, and abandonment have come to define Detroit. Industrial disinvestment over the past forty years has ushered in a decline that has left many North American cities, including Detroit, in post-industrial ruin. Empty industrial spaces have come to define these cities and have become sites of visual interest. The ethics of picturing Detroit’s ruins has been examined by artists, journalists, bloggers, and scholars alike. An important voice in these discussions is cultural critic and art historian Dora Apel who analyses our fascination, and oftentimes fixation, on images of disaster and decay in her book, Beautiful Terrible Ruins.\footnote{Dora Apel, \textit{Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).} Apel’s premise is that we are drawn to images of ruin because they mediate our anxiety about our current cultural decline, the death of modernism, and its promise of progress. Images of ruin put us at a
safe distance from these realities. Additionally, she suggests that we need to understand ruination not as historically inevitable or as the fault of its victims, but rather as a product of our neoliberal capitalist system. In the case of Detroit, many of the images of ruin suggest that the people of Detroit are to blame for the city’s decline. They fail to show post-industrialization as an effect of globalization. For many years now, industrial production has been done more cheaply by non-unionized labour in countries where employment standards are lower, while large corporations profit from these cost-cutting practices, tax exemptions, and government bailouts. The proliferation of ruin imagery distracts us from the difficult reality that neoliberalism has created economic disparity and the decline pictured in these photographs. Artists Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford have addressed these issues in projects that counter popular images of ruin and the narrative of Detroit’s decline.

Suzy Lake’s series *Performing an Archive* (2014-2015) combines archival research and mapping with her signature style of self-portraiture to explore her identity as it relates to the city of Detroit. This body of work, which includes thirty contemporary photographs and maps dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has been called a “coming home” for Lake, who was born in Detroit but who has been residing and

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creating art in Canada since 1968. Each photograph represents a location where Lake’s family lived or worked, which she mapped using archival documents and family records. This intimate project about Lake’s ancestral roots calls into question the culture of gawking at Detroit, the ruin city. The artist pictures the city she loves, maps the evolution of the neighbourhoods of her childhood, and documents the “discrete rejuvenation” of residential areas outside of the downtown core.\(^{419}\)

Suzy Lake, 723 Newport Avenue, 1913, 2014/2016

Lake explains that the people of Detroit are very important to her work and through this project she wanted to convey that Detroit is a “poor city, not a derelict city.”\(^{420}\) Lake resisted perpetuating an aesthetic of emptiness and a narrative of abandonment in her work. Instead, she focused on personal gestures of urban renewal that are not often seen or talked about, such as the aging but maintained properties that reflect the presence of people, and of lives lived in these homes. Lake described the process of photographing the various neighbourhoods as both a relationship building and a story sharing process.

The minute I would pull out my camera and tripod, residents would come out to see what I was up to. They would tell me just about everything they could remember about the neighbourhood during the time they lived there. It was a


\(^{420}\) Ibid.
remarkable connection that made the project very real to me... So, for example, I often refer to my Aunt Theresa's property as 'Patricia's house'.

Patricia smiles at Lake from her porch swing in the photograph 723 Newport Avenue, 1913 (2014/2016). This image tells the story of an exchange between two women who have more than a modest green house in common. In a city like Detroit where history and place are so important to the identity of its inhabitants, it is this culture and these roots that create a fleeting connection between the women in this image. Patricia demonstrates the vibrant human presence that Lake wants us to see. This vibrancy tells a story of hope and survival within Detroit’s working-class neighbourhoods.

Many of the sites that Lake photographed are also where cinematographer Orlando Ford locates Detroit’s heart. His film, Where the Heart Is (2017-2018) features intimate interviews with people who have lived in neighbourhoods throughout Detroit. Each narrator recounts their experiences of Detroit, and each story rebukes preconceived notions of the post-industrial city. Individuals are interviewed outside their homes, or where their childhood homes once stood. They describe what it was like to grow up in this city, both the good and the bad. They speak of a tight-knit community and fond childhood memories, as well as unemployment and the spread of drugs and violence.

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Lake, interview.
Akil Alvin sits out front of his grandmother’s home and explains his frustration with the misconception that it is only now, with the latest efforts at revitalization that “great things are happening in Detroit.” The same signs of care and maintenance that were seen in the home pictured in Suzy Lake’s photograph, 723 Newport Avenue, 1913 (2014/2016) can be seen at Alvin’s grandmother’s house. He explains that his grandmother has lived in the city for over half a century: “…she’s still here when everything she moved here for left her.” Her loyalty and pride in her home, both the physical structure standing behind her grandson and the city itself, are evident in the careful maintenance of the house. Many who were interviewed for this film talk about how the concept of a “comeback” for Detroit is problematic. People like Alvin’s grandmother have been there all along, and Alvin himself believes that “there have always been great things happening in Detroit.” His comments convey a deep sense of loyalty and love for the city Ford’s film portrays.

422 https://vimeo.com/221515036
423 Ibid.
424 Ibid.
Orlando Ford

*Where the Heart Is* gives voice to the overlooked people and neighbourhoods of Detroit. Ford explains that this project aims to be truthful and that these stories open up a dialogue about what and who the city has overlooked in the push for development and gentrification.\(^{425}\) The film shows viewers that the people of Detroit are the heart of the city and they have been there all along.

Lake and Ford’s projects provide a counternarrative to popular images of ruin in Detroit and explore the power of such imagery in determining our understanding of a place. Images of Detroit’s ruin have been steadily pouring out of the city for over a decade now and have arguably played an important role in initiating interest in the revitalization of the city. However, these images aestheticize and make a spectacle of decay and poverty in Detroit. This spectacularization is challenged by images and stories that include the people residing and thriving amongst the perceived decay. For both artists, the work is deeply personal. Lake’s complex staging and the layers of meaning and visual cues in her photographs communicate a profound respect for her subjects. Ford’s intimate and candid profiles communicate the complex relationship the people of

Detroit have with their city. Ford’s film complements Lake’s work by giving a literal voice to the people and neighbourhoods she photographed. This exhibition brings these artworks into conversation because they expertly rebuke the dominant narrative of a city in ruins and invite an exploration of a much more complicated and nuanced story.
**Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford**

Mark Kasumovic: A Human Laboratory

Suzy Lake, 1093 Seyburn Avenue, 1915, 2014/2016, photograph, courtesy of Georgia Scherman Projects.

**Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford** includes photographs by Lake and a film by Ford that ask what it means for a city to be observed, documented and perceived by outsiders. Lake’s series, *Performing an Archive*, examines the cycle of ruin and revitalization in the Detroit working-class neighbourhoods where she grew up.

Ford’s film, *Where the Heart Is*, tells a vibrant, human tale of a growing city through candid interviews with Detroit residents.

**About the curator:**

From Newmarket, Ontario, Cappuccitti holds a BA Hons. from Western University, and MFA from OCAD University. Currently a Western University Department of Visual Arts’ doctoral candidate, *Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford* is her thesis exhibition.
f. Exhibition Photographic Documentation
Images courtesy of Mark Kasumovic
Appendix C: Research Ethics Approval

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Prof. Sarah Bassnett
Department & Institution: Arts and Humanities/Visual Arts, Western University

NMREB File Number: 10986
Study Title: Rui(N)ation: Narratives of Art and Urban Revitalization in Detroit

NMREB Initial Approval Date: May 11, 2017
NMREB Expiry Date: May 11, 2018

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

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The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer: on behalf of Dr. Ashley Polson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

Signed: Erika Beale  Grace Kelly  Karen McKeown  Nicola Meath  Karen Gopal

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5210
London, ON, Canada N6G 3I3 t 519.661.3036 f 519.850.2466  www.uwo.ca/research/ethics
Jessica Cappuccitti, M.A.

EDUCATION

2019 (expected) Western University, London, Ontario
Ph. D. Art and Visual Culture

2013 Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto, Ontario
MA Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art

2008 The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario
BA (Hons) Art History and Criticism
BA (Minor) History

HONOURS AND AWARDS

2016-2017 USC Teaching Honour Roll Award for Excellence in Teaching in Visual Arts

GRANTS

2018 Western University, Mary Routledge Fellowship
2018 Research Western, the Society of Graduate Students, and the School of Graduate Studies, Western University, Joint Fund for Support of Graduate Student Research and Scholarship
2015-2018 Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2014-2018 Western University, Western Graduate Research Scholarship
2014 Western University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities Dean’s Entrance Scholarship
2011-2013 OCAD University, Graduate Scholarships
2007 The University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Arts and Humanities Alumni Award
2003 The University of Western Ontario, The Western Scholar Award

PUBLICATIONS

7, no. 1 (Spring 2018).


EMPLOYMENT

September 2018- April 2019 Experiential Learning Intern, Undergraduate Programs, Student Experience, Western University, London, Ontario

Summer 2017 Research Assistant, Western University, London, Ontario

Winter 2017 Course Instructor, Western University, London, Ontario
- Course: VAH 3386G Histories of Collecting, Museums and Heritage Studies
- Awarded the 2016-2017 USC Teaching Honour Roll Award for Excellence in Teaching in Visual Arts for this course

2014 - 2018 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Western University, London, Ontario
- Courses: VAH 1041A Art, Visual Culture, and Power, VAH 1045B Collecting Art and Culture, VAH 2252F Early Medieval Art, VAH 2272G 20th Century Canadian Art, VAH 2281F Modern Art After 1945, VAH 2241G Theories and Practices of Art History and Visual Culture

2011-2014 Teaching Assistant, Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU), Toronto, Ontario
- Courses: LBST 1B03 Introduction to Visual Studies II, LBST 1B04 Global Visual and Material Culture: Prehistory-1800, LBST 1B05 Global Visual and Material Culture 1800-present

Summer 2012 Blog Coordinator, XPACE Cultural Centre

Summer 2011 Volunteer Coordinator, Museum of Inuit Art, Toronto

SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCE

Curatorial Work

June 2018 Curator, Welcome to Detroit: Suzy Lake and Orlando Ford, McIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario

January 2018 Assistant, Looking Back: 50th Anniversary Exhibition, ArtLab, Western University, London, Ontario

2011-2012 Exhibition Assistant, Art & Struggle, OCAD U, Toronto, Ontario
March 2010 Curatorial Consultant, Svetlana Boym, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

University and Community Service

May 2018 Programming Juror, General Call Submissions, Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario

September 2017 – December 2017 Graduate Teaching Mentor – The Teaching Mentor Program, Teaching Support Centre, Western University, London, Ontario

2017-2018 Visual Arts Councillor, Society of Graduate Students Council (SOGS), Western University, London, Ontario

2017-2018 Ph.D. Representative, ArtLab Steering Committee, Western University, London, Ontario

November 2017 Juror, Annual Juried Exhibition (AJE 15), Western University, London, Ontario

2014-2015 Practicum Mentor, Western University, London, Ontario

2012-2013 Graduate Gallery Committee Representative, OCAD U, Toronto, Ontario

2010-2011 Museum Volunteer, Museum of Inuit Art, Toronto, Ontario

Conferences

Presenting


March 2016 Conference Presenter, “Dire is the New Strait: Picturing the Ruins of Detroit,” *Consumption and Detritus: Stories of Destruction and Reconstruction*, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec


Organizing

April 2017 Panel Organizer, *Art and the City: the Role and Responsibility of Art in Our Communities*, 121 Studios, London, Ontario

March 2016 Conference Organizer, *Upset & Disarray: Re-Presenting the Museum*, Western University, London, Ontario

March 2015 Conference Organizer, *BOREDOM*, Western University, London, Ontario


Discussant

February 2018 Panel Discussant, *Inward Outward*, Western University, London, Ontario