

BEYOND TWELFTH STREET:
VISUAL NARRATIVES AND REALITIES IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN

by
KATHERINE MARIE MORRISON

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written by Katherine Marie Morrison
has been approved for the Department of Art History

Professor Kira van Lil

Professor Claire Farago

Professor Robert Nauman

Date_____

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
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Morrison, Katherine Marie (M.A., Art History)

Beyond Twelfth Street: Visual Narratives and Realities in Detroit, Michigan

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This project considers the ambivalent uses of contemporary ruin photography (pejoratively known as “ruin porn”) in Detroit, Michigan. Although ruin photographers emphatically deny historical context in favor of sensationalism, they participate in a cycle of victim blaming that can be traced to the 1960s. News media coverage of the 1967 Twelfth Street riot in Detroit used photographs that documented the melee in order to thrust blame upon inner-city blacks for their participation in the riot. At the same time, these sources acknowledged the structural inequalities in Detroit that preceded the riot, including segregated housing practices, unequal access to education and employment, and police brutality. In a similar fashion, popular media sources that use ruin photographs create a narrative that posits Detroit as the victim of deindustrialized late capitalism. At the same time, these narratives erase Detroiters’ agency, implying that they are incapable—and unwilling—to change their environment. The visual negotiations of blame in ruin photography and documentation of the Twelfth Street riot articulate historical and ongoing anxieties surrounding race, class, and urbanism in the United States.

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This work is dedicated to my parents and my brother, with love.

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Introduction

Can't Forget the Motor City

The “before and after” effect is one of the most ubiquitous tropes in contemporary photographic representations of Detroit. The popular website *Detroit Urbex*, an online community dedicated to urban exploration and historical documentation in the city, has published a widely popular photograph series titled “Now & Then.” The series consists of contemporary images of Detroit’s more infamous abandoned buildings, such as the old Cass Technical High School and the Mark Twain Library. Historical photographs of these spaces’ previous lives are layered over the contemporary photographs (Figure 1). The exactitude with which these historical photographs are inserted into the contemporary images creates a nearly seamless visual palimpsest. Although *Detroit Urbex* characterizes this series simply as a study of the evolution of buildings in the city, other online media sources have taken them as tragic memorialization.¹ The mournful tone that characterizes much of the discourse surrounding Detroit posits the past as a total loss. In these narratives, a city that once bore popular monikers such as “The Model City,” “The Motor City,” and “Motown” has been reduced to a metonym for late capitalist doom. This project, however, reasserts the active role of Detroit’s history in its present situation.

¹ EDW Lynch, “Then and Now Photos of Detroit’s Abandoned Buildings Show Their RapidDisintegration,” *Laughing Squid*, July 24, 2013; Liz Klimas, “The Breathtaking Then-and-Now Photos of an Abandoned Detroit High School,” *The Blaze*, December 10, 2012; “Detroit Series Reveals Past Life of city’s ruins,” CBS News, accessed February 2014. <http://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/detroit-series-reveals-past-life-of-citys-ruins/>.

Comparing photographs of the 1967 Twelfth Street riot in Detroit with contemporary representations of the city's ruins knits together two disparate, yet connected photographic projects. One body of work speaks specifically to the context of civil rights, urbanism, and civil conflict in the 1960s; the other body of work emphatically denies immediate social context. In part, this delineation is a matter of representation: photographs of the riot largely show active human participation and agency, whereas ruin photographs purposefully evince declension in the absence of humanity. These disparate photographic projects, however, form a specific dialogue in and for the city of Detroit. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these discourses demonstrates the complex, interconnected networks of meaning and context in photography at large. This project aims to show the different contexts used to frame images of the 1967 riot and images of contemporary ruins in Detroit. The diverse usages of these images prove how conflicted and complicated this discussion is. As a project of interdisciplinary visual culture, this work strives to prove that the meaning of an historical event or image is never grounded.

Both 1967 riot images and ruin porn have been used to victimize Detroit; moreover, the popular media outlets publishing these photographs have promoted victim blaming. In this narrative, Detroit brought its suffering on itself. Mainstream press outlets such as *LIFE* magazine and *The New York Times* acknowledged the structural inequalities in Detroit that preceded the 1967 riot, including segregated housing practices, unequal access to education and employment, and police brutality towards inner-city blacks. These same sources, however, also used photographs that documented the melee in order to thrust blame upon inner-city blacks for their participation in the riot. In this

way, popular publications emphasize individual acts of criminality rather than the systemic criminality of a deeply racist northern city. This trend is not unique to national publications; the *Detroit Free Press* constructed a similar narrative. The *Free Press*, however, showed a more nuanced, introspective negotiation of blame. Local Black newspapers, such as the *Michigan Chronicle*, directly confronted the confusing network of victimization and blame that national publications elided by way of generalization. Since 1967, Detroit's dominant narrative centers on the imbalance between local contextualization and national (and international) generalization.

Contemporary ruin photographers offer a more vapid generalization of Detroit's historical peculiarities. Artists such as Yves Marchand and Andrew Moore exploit the lack of evident historical memorialization in Detroit in order to insert their own fantastical, aestheticized historical narratives. In these narratives, they frame Detroit and her citizens as inevitable victims of late twentieth-century capitalism. By only showing the city's most impressive and, without contradiction, depressing decay, these artists make the visual argument for Detroit's hopelessness. Rather than showing the hundreds of thousands of active human beings living and working in Detroit, the photographers suggest that these citizens are incapable of changing their crumbling environment. In this view, while Detroiters may be the victims of capitalist decline, they are also to blame for lacking the agency and effort to change their environment and that destiny.

Other Americans have exploited ruin porn in order to racialize Marchand and Moore's cycle of blame. For white observers in Detroit's suburbs and across the nation, the city's black residents are responsible for its decline and their own impoverished condition. Racist tropes of black laziness and violence permeate discussions surrounding

Detroit's problems. Even though Marchand and Moore deracialize the city's decline in their photographs and explanatory texts by depopulating them, the extensive reproduction of these images across the Internet and printed news media allows for many new, insidious uses. In this way, both the 1967 riot photographs and contemporary ruin imagery project a racialized (and racist) network of victimization and blame onto Detroit and Detroiters.

Although Detroit has become the most visible riot-torn American city in contemporary journalistic and academic scholarship, authors do not articulate this connection between 1967 and today. Significantly, there is no evidence of the 1967 riot photographs in visual culture discourse on race relations. Visual culture historians have emphasized imagery in the southern civil rights movement, but this discussion rarely connects with the movement's struggles in northern cities. Visual culture historian Martin A. Berger provides a compelling and engaging argument in his important 2011 publication *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. In this book, Berger argues that northern publications decontextualized documentary images of black civil rights struggles in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, in order to garner white sympathy for the movement. This decontextualization, however, posits black activists as passive victims of white violence and rage.² Although Berger briefly touches on the vicious responses to the movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the North, he

² Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 19.

only uses this as an argument to limit his discussion to the South.³ Visual documentation of the riots in Detroit (and other northern cities such as Newark, New Jersey), however, creates an interesting counterpoint to Berger's argument. The urban race riots of the 1960s are striking examples of Black agency. Furthermore, the visual portrayal of these riots in news publications frames inner-city blacks specifically as violent agents. This narrative conflicts with the passive framing of southern Blacks that Berger describes. This divergence illustrates the tension between the South and northern cities in the narrative of the civil rights movement.

Urban race riots were perceived as outbursts of Black Power, a radical dimension of the politics of the civil rights movement. Black power and radicalism have remained controversial subjects of debate in the context of the civil rights movement. As Tufts historian and activist Peniel E. Joseph explains, the "conventional narrative" of the civil rights movement has perpetuated the belief that black power and nationalism marked the movement's decline.⁴ Although civil rights scholars have recently opened up the field to a discussion of the Black Power movement, this discussion has not yet become a dominant theme of the visual civil rights narrative.⁵ By analyzing undercurrents of black agency and self-determination in Detroit's 1967 riot, this project extends the field of scholarship for civil rights visual culture.⁶

³ Ibid., 47-49. Berger explains that although northern newspapers condemned white supremacy in the violence of civil rights demonstrations in the South, they condemned black people for inciting violence in demonstrations in northern cities.

⁴ Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* 96 (December 2009), 751.

⁵ Ibid., 776.

⁶ For further information about visual culture in the Black Power movement, see: Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Howard Bingham and Steve Crist, *Howard L. Bingham's Black Panthers 1968* (Los Angeles: Ammo Books, 2010); Charles E. Jones and Stephen Shames, *The Black Panthers—Photographs by Stephen Shames* (London: Aperture Books, 2006).

All of this does not negate the expansive body of scholarship on Detroit and the 1967 riot. Sidney Fine's path-breaking and award-winning narrative of the riot, *Violence in the Model City*, is one of the most significant and cogent analyses of urban race relations in the twentieth century. Although Fine uses riot photographs as illustration, he does not directly address them as powerful agents in Detroit's visual narrative. Other historians, such as Thomas Sugrue, Kevin Boyle, and Heather Ann Thompson, provide detailed explanations of racial tensions in twentieth-century Detroit, although they too only use images as illustrations. The methodology of this project knits together the historical approaches of these scholars and the visual culture methodology of Martin A. Berger, as well as civil rights visual scholars Erina Duganne and Maurice Berger.⁷ In this way, the image gains a primary role in the construction of Detroit's identity during and after the 1967 riot.

This project, however, does not strictly address the complexities of the 1960s. It also seeks to fill gaps in, as well as contribute to, existing scholarship on contemporary ruin porn in Detroit. The term "ruin porn" has a derogatory connotation; by and large, contemporary cultural writers have extensively criticized the genre. Many of these critics are Detroiters themselves. Jim Griffioen, photographer and author of the Detroit-based blog *Sweet Juniper!*, is often credited with coining the term in a 2009 interview with *Vice*. Along with Griffioen, Detroit scholars such as John Patrick Leary and *Detroit City is the Place to Be* author Mark Binelli have provided lucid and convincing arguments for the unfortunate effect of the work of naïve ruin photographers who drop into the city

⁷ John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism," *Guernica*, January 5, 2011; Mark Binelli, *Detroit City Is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis* (New York: Picador, 2013); Thomas Morton, "Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff," *VICE*, July 31, 2009.

without any connections to its history or citizens.⁸ Although these unintended consequences clearly include the exploitative aestheticization of poverty, these scholars circle around the issue of race rather than making it their primary object of study.

Although many use the 1967 riot as the singular defining moment in Detroit's racial history, few contemporary authors look past the "white flight" that followed in order to gauge the effect of the riot on the city today. Mark Binelli, to his credit, demonstrates this by including a conversation he had with Jim Griffioen and Detroit resident Marsha Cusic. Cusic pointed out the still vacant lots along what is now named Rosa Parks Boulevard, the epicenter of the riot. These lots have remained empty since their torched frames were demolished after the riot. Cusic remarks: "All burned. It's missing an entire layer of history."⁹ Binelli follows this quote with a brief analysis of the riot. Cusic's observation is important because it articulates why contemporary ruin photographers are so easily able to create their own Detroit narrative. Binelli uses the riot several times throughout his argument, mostly to contextualize the ongoing alienation of Detroit from its (largely white) suburbs. The city suffers from an erasure of its own history through the lack of memorialization. The fact that the intersection where the riot started is completely unmarked demonstrates this historical amnesia. This project expands upon this idea and strives to introduce the riot and the city's larger racial history as a *central* theme in contemporary ruin porn discussions.

In order to provide the historical context of race-based victim blaming, Chapter One explores media coverage of the 1967 Twelfth Street riot. The *Detroit Free Press*,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 283.

which earned a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the riots, articulated a complicated assessment of blame. In photographs, articles, and special editions of the newspaper, the *Free Press* took major efforts to delineate black Detroiters who participated in the riot (in looting, arson, and acts of violence) from those who did not. In so doing, the *Free Press* separated “radical” and “moderate” black voices in Detroit.¹⁰ This separation also implied a division between the city’s aspirational middle class blacks and impoverished black Detroiters living in the inner city. Even though the newspaper provided the most detailed explanations of the structural factors that led to the riot, its editors and photographers also relied on sensational representations of violence in order to illustrate the separation between lawful and unlawful black Detroiters.

Detroit’s major Black publication, the *Michigan Chronicle*, articulated blame differently than the mainstream *Free Press*. Throughout the riot, the *Chronicle* urged its readers to take responsibility for their actions, which is illustrated by the editorial message inserted into the newspaper’s logo on July 29: “Let’s Stay Cool, Don’t Repeat the Rumors, Obey the Law.”¹¹ The *Chronicle*, however, also directly implicated the law and Detroit’s notoriously brutal police force as the catalyst for the riot. The *Chronicle*’s editorial voice argued that personal accountability must extend beyond black communities in Detroit, a position the *Detroit Free Press* did not as clearly express. The *Chronicle*, however, used sensational images of destruction in a similar fashion to the *Free Press*. Taken into context with the many editorial articles surrounding these

¹⁰ Frank Angelo, “It’s Time to Listen, At Last, To the Soft, Unheard Voices,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 3, 1967. Box 378, Folder 1, Jerome P. Cavanagh Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of American Labor and Urban Affairs (heretofore referred to as “ALUA”), Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

¹¹ *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.

images, the *Chronicle* visually places blame on those who act without accountability for their fellow black Detroiters.

The riot was not only significant to Detroiters; for the national media, Detroit was the climactic moment in the narrative of the violent 1960s. Sources such as *LIFE* and *The New York Times* illustrated the gravity of the situation by using photographs of the National Guard and Federal troops that were ordered into Detroit by Governor George Romney and President Lyndon B. Johnson, respectively. For national readers, Detroit was only part of the violent and confusing tumult of the 1960s. Although they were surely horrified by the scale and severity of the urban uprising in Detroit, they were not unaccustomed to looking at race riot imagery. In addition to the Newark riot that occurred only weeks before Detroit, they would have been aware of the devastating Los Angeles “Watts” riot in 1965, in addition to violence in places like Harlem (1964), Omaha (1966), and Cleveland (1966).¹² Furthermore, Americans could contextualize these riots with other outbursts of civil uprisings in the anti-Vietnam War movement.¹³ Thus, chapter one argues for parallel connections in the media’s visual treatment of black, urban rioters and Americans involved in the Vietnam War (both antiwar activists and U.S. soldiers). In this way, photographic and journalistic coverage of the Twelfth Street riot can be understood as part of a larger context of violence and blame in 1960s America.

¹² Walter C. Rucker and James N. Upton, *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots* (New York: Greenwood Publishing, 2006).

¹³ For a coherent analysis of these events and the way in which they interacted with each other, please consult: Simon Hall, *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements in the 1960s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

Chapter two addresses the contemporary phenomenon of “ruin porn” in Detroit. Though fine arts photographers Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre, and Andrew Moore aestheticize Detroit ruins as symbols for post-industrial late capitalism, the wide dissemination of their images across popular media allows others to use ruins in order to explicitly blame Detroiters for the state of the city. The popularity of their images has perpetuated the industry of poverty tourism in the city. The analysis in this chapter pulls from the methodology of photography historians such as John Tagg and Alan Trachtenberg by considering the power relations in photographic representation. The first part of this chapter analyzes Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s sweeping *The Ruins of Detroit*, an anthology that contains some of the most iconic images of Detroit’s ruins today. I argue that the seductiveness of their photographs pulls from the visual language of sublime ruins in historical painting. One can better understand Marchand and Meffre’s project by looking to the aesthetic strategies of nineteenth century painters like Caspar David Friedrich. Both suggest a “passing empire” by returning man-made monuments and structures to nature. Though Marchand and Meffre can be contextualized in serious art historical traditions, the social decontextualization they offer turns the city into a necropolis and its residents into the dead.

The second part of the chapter considers the process by which humans are removed from ruin photographs by analyzing Andrew Moore’s 2010 project *Detroit Disassembled*. Moore should be contextualized through twentieth century Precisionist painters such as Charles Sheeler, who purposefully emptied his urban representations of any people. Moore’s erasure of people implies an erasure of history and the people who created it, a point that Detroit-based photographers now challenge. Jim Griffioen, for

instance, provides detailed historical context to locate his images of Detroit's "feral houses."¹⁴ Other local projects, such as *Can't Forget the Motor City*, argue that normalized, de-sensationalized representations of Detroiters are the best refutation against the human erasure of ruin porn. Furthermore, these visual representations of the city also assert that Detroit is best represented from within, which in itself raises a relevant and problematic issue in the historiography of documentary photography.

In analyzing contemporary ruin porn, this chapter must consider the historical value of ruins in the twentieth century. Writers such as Rose Maculay and Walter Benjamin saw ruins as salient *memento moris* and hosts for historical memory. As Nick Yablon argues in *Untimely Ruins*, urban modernity was imagined as the classical antiquity of the future.¹⁵ Contemporary Detroit realizes this future: its modern spaces are now posited as the bones of an ancient, dead empire. Significantly, however, the image of the past that Marchand, Meffre, and Moore suggest is just that—simply a suggestion. They perpetuate the lack of historical discussion in Detroit, which leads to a lack of consideration of the city's people. In this way, they are able to flatten Detroit's identity and project their own fantasies onto it. Such acts of othering are particularly insidious in city with a nearly ninety percent black population. Furthermore, by rendering Detroiters as passive victims, ruin photographers imply that they are unable and unwilling to change the city's future—an implication directly utilized in racist explanations for the state of the city.

¹⁴ James D. Griffioen, "Feral Houses," Sweet Juniper!, July 23, 2009. <http://www.sweet-juniper.com/2009/07/feral-houses.html>. He uses the term "feral house" to refer to structures that have been overtaken by wildness and nature.

¹⁵ Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

The epilogue of this project offers alternative visual narratives for Detroit's future. Centering on three important Detroiters—Peter O'Keefe, Scott Hocking, and Tyree Guyton—this passage shows how Detroit-based artists reclaim vacant spaces and re-imbue them with humanity. O'Keefe's *A Brief and Peculiar History of Detroit* brings together several Detroit-based artists and writers to offer a kaleidoscopic view of the city. These representations, textual and visual, stitch together images of urban blight and images of Detroiters and their businesses, homes, and families. This multidimensional project complicates ruin photographers' mono-focus on one element of the city. Hocking, on the other hand, uses ruins as sites for installations and performances. Hocking describes these projects, at locations such as the Packard Plant and the Michigan Central Station, as deeply site-specific. He directly interacts with the haunting poetics that ruins offer, rather than using them to make a universal comment on ruins as aesthetic objects. In this way, he demonstrates Detroiters' agency to change these spaces and imbue them with new meaning.

Since the late 1980s, Guyton has transformed the blighted neighborhood where he once lived into a multimedia public art space eponymously named the Heidelberg Project. The most well known elements of this space—chaotic assemblages on vacant houses—have been almost completely burned down by arsonists since the summer of 2013.¹⁶ These acts raise troubling questions regarding how Detroiters envision their own city. Guyton's installations are unabashedly historical and racially concerned, using local signifiers of historical events and places (for example, a Rosa Parks Boulevard sign) and more broad historical symbols such as nooses hanging from trees. The recent string of

¹⁶ Charles Jackson and Lauren Podell, "Fire Destroys Heidelberg's 'Party Animal' House: 6th Heidelberg Home Destroyed by Fire," ClickOnDetroit, March 7, 2014. <http://www.clickondetroit.com/news/heidelberg-projects-doll-house-burns-to-ground/24855160>.

arsons violently demonstrates persistent anxieties about race and history in Detroit. The future of the Heidelberg Project, however, lies in its outreach education efforts. These efforts offer young Detroiters the possibility to truly embody the city's motto: "We Hope For Better Things; It Shall Rise From the Ashes."

Chapter 1

Motor City Burning: The 1967 Detroit Riot

the most significant is the progress Detroit has made in race relations. . . . As much as anything else, that specter [the 1943 race riots] has enabled the power structure to overcome tenacious prejudice and give the Negro community a role in the consensus probably unparalleled in any major American city.
--*Fortune* magazine, 1965

*Ya know, the Motor City is burning, babe
There ain't a thing in the world they can do
Ya*

*know, the Motor City is burning people
There ain't a thing that white society can do*

*Ma' hometown burning down to the ground
Worser than Vietnam*
--John Lee Hooker and Albert King, 1967

In February 1967, the Citizens Committee for Equal Opportunity (CCEO) expressed serious concern over the state of housing in Detroit, Michigan. The Subcommittee on Housing wrote: “The issue of housing in our city and nation, being driven to the conscience of private and public responsibility by militants and by visible deterioration, is key to the multiple concerns of urban living and to effectively meeting the challenges of the Sixties.”¹⁷ As the CCEO stated, it was the *visible* deterioration of homes that exposed the city’s housing problems and thrusts them into public debate. The report’s focus on the moral component of urban housing continued, “Decent homes create the pride, dignity, and self-respect people need.”¹⁸ Here, the positive character traits of pride, dignity, and self-respect were specifically linked to a positive physical

¹⁷ Citizens Committee for Equal Opportunity, “A Report to the People of Detroit on Housing in the City of Detroit, Part I,” February 1967, series VII, folder 1, box 336, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs (ALUA), Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

environment. By contrast, then, urban blight and inadequate housing begat shame and humiliation. Public discourse on urban issues in the 1960s utilized this rhetorical link between physical environment and moral character—both for positive change and for negative condemnation. These two poles of interpretation met to form a contentious, complex view of the city—both to citizens and outsiders—in July 1967.

Only five months after the CCEO report, Detroit experienced the most significant urban riot (also often phrased as a race riot) in American history. The statistics are as appalling as they are revealing: Forty-three dead, more than 2,250 injured, and 7,200 arrested. In terms of casualties and economic damage, it was and remains the worst civil disorder in the twentieth-century United States.¹⁹ In both local and non-local press, the riot was attributed to the two agents identified by the CCEO: “militants and visible deterioration.” Local newspapers like the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*, along with national ones ranging from the *New York Times* to *LIFE* magazine presented a story of the riot that simultaneously placed blame on Detroit’s “militant” black community and the physical and racial structures of the city that long oppressed them. Photographs of the riot fostered this public ambivalence, which showed the city’s complex race and class dynamics. This chapter explores those dynamics and the way they were generalized and metonym-ized by popular press publications. Moreover, it seeks to answer the question so many of these publications asked after the fact: “Why Detroit?” In one respect, Detroit is typical—in the national narrative of urban uprisings, Detroit is an unsurprising character alongside other northern, racially diverse industrial cities like Newark and Chicago. In another respect, Detroit is special in its physical geography, socio-historical

¹⁹ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989).

landscape, and in the magnitude of the riot's long-term effects on the city. In both cases, however, Detroit is framed as a site of shame for the denouement of the civil rights movement.

Significantly, scholarship specifically addressing the connection between American urban riots in the 1960s and their photographs is virtually non-existent. This comes in contrast to the burgeoning attention currently paid to photography and the civil rights movement at large. Martin Berger's 2011 book, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, has garnered much attention in art historical and visual culture communities for its exposure of white supremacist intentions in American news media.²⁰

Seeing Through Race must be considered in the wider context of recent publications focusing on visual culture and race in America. Art critic, curator, and theorist Maurice Berger published *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* in 2010, and the book shares much of the same body of evidence that Martin Berger utilizes. Methodologically, Martin Berger emphasizes the necessity of text to anchor and contextualize a photograph's meaning; Maurice Berger, however, places the image in a position of superior significance as being closer to the truth than words for black Americans.²¹ Both these scholars, along with others such as Leigh Raiford and Erina Duganne, emphasize the priority that photographs specifically possess in the struggle for civil rights. Nevertheless, despite the primary significance of the

²⁰ Lakesia D. Johnson, "Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography by Martin A. Berger (review)," *American Studies* 52, 3 (2013), 98-99; Ariella Azoulay, "Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography (review)," *The Art Bulletin* 94, 3 (September 2012), 465; Jane Crellin, "Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography (review)," *Journal of American Studies* 46, 4 (November 2012), 1119-1120.

²¹ Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 9.

photograph for agents involved in the civil rights movement, a consideration of these images' significance across the nation warrant a contextual discussion in the vein of Martin Berger.

Photography's slipperiness in terms of meaning and perspective—particularly when set within the complicated layers of context that popular print publications provide—allow for a multifaceted and critical approach to the construction, maintenance, and subversion of racial categories in the United States. These photographs, however, are limited in subject to the civil rights movement struggle in places like Birmingham and Selma. I argue that one primary reason for this is the symbolism that riots' photographs offer. As documents of the late 1960s, they must be contextualized in the growing fractures in the civil rights movement and the emergence of black power groups like the Black Panther Party. Events imbued with black power ideology do not provide a comfortable segue from, or conclusion to, the civil rights movement, which stressed black integration into white society.

This chapter fills gaps in contemporary visual culture studies surrounding the civil rights movement and draws from the discourse's methodology. The primary importance of photographs documenting the 1967 Detroit riot is in the articulation of racial anxieties in the city. Moreover, a discussion of these photographs in the context of national publications such as *LIFE* demonstrates their importance in forming uncomfortable national attitudes toward Detroit. This argument for the primacy of the image in constructing sociopolitical relationships pulls from contemporary visual culture discourse.²² The anxieties felt about the 1967 riot by Detroiters as well as American

²² Marquard Smith, *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers* (New York: Sage Publications, 2008).

citizens at large about race relations engages with discussions of American urban studies, history, and racial studies.

Concern over the fate of urban, racial integration was one facet of the many converging sociopolitical narratives in the late 1960s. In popular print media, these narratives became tightly interwoven and produced a circular system of meaning. In other words, stories about urban racial politics appeared beside stories about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Sandwiched together in the larger narrative a publication provides, these stories and their images share meanings. In this way, photographs of urban rioters correspond to photographs of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. In both, the subjects are framed with complex ambivalence. While they are both violent and potentially criminal, the publications also implicate the American structures that engendered such violent environments in the first place.

An Incident on Twelfth Street

Detroit has had a long history of public shaming of its non-white residents. This shaming was largely carried out through segregated housing that limited access to decent schools, medical care, and recreation. As numerous scholars working in American cultural studies have noted, segregation is a distinctly visual enterprise. In her book *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*, Elizabeth Abel, an English professor at Berkeley who studies visuality and gendered relationships, explains how segregation relied on an intensive system of visual signs in order to make the abstract terms of the project more concrete.²³ In the Jim Crow South, this entailed the pervasive signage

²³ Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 5.

separating white space from black space. De facto segregation in the North required a different visuality; rather than ubiquitously marking space as appropriate for whites or blacks, northern cities relied on creative and ambiguous modes of segregation enforcement.²⁴ Public housing construction and maintenance, neighborhood organizations, and racist real estate enterprises ensured not only the separation of black and white space, but also the persistent degradation of those spaces designated for black communities. Historian Thomas Sugrue explains:

In the postwar city, blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition. The physical state of African American neighborhoods and white neighborhoods in Detroit reinforced perceptions of race. . . .The barriers that kept blacks confined to racially isolated, deteriorating, inner-city neighborhoods were largely invisible to white Detroiters. To the majority of untutored white observers, visible poverty, overcrowding, and deteriorating houses were signs of individual moral deficiencies, not manifestations of structural inequalities. White perceptions of black neighborhoods provided seemingly irrefutable confirmation of African American inferiority and set the terms of debates over the inclusion of African Americans in the city's housing and labor markets.²⁵

The “Twelfth Street Riot” of July 1967 did not allow white Detroiters to ignore the social realities of the city’s black neighborhoods any longer.²⁶ The visible poverty that Sugrue describes was made public not just to the city, but also to the nation and world.

²⁴ For more on the history and development of black inner-city neighborhoods and their function in America, please consult these classic works of Urban Studies: Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Max Arthur Herman, *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005); Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, eds, *African American Urban History since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 9.

²⁶ Though largely termed the “Twelfth Street Riot” for the location of its genesis, one can frame its events as a “rebellion” rather than a “riot.” Although the term “riot” signifies an uncomfortable level of criminality, I will use it as a way to parallel contemporary media understandings of the event.

In the hot, early-morning hours of July 23, 1967, members of the Detroit Police Department (DPD) raided a “blind pig” on 9125 Twelfth Street. Blind pigs were after-hours drinking establishments that catered to black communities. A few minutes before 4:00 A.M., officers rushed upstairs after undercover agents made an illegal alcohol purchase. Chaos immediately ensued; after arresting all those inside that did not escape, the officers took them outside through the pig’s front door. This fact, caused by the rear door having been sealed shut, was one in a series of unfortunate events that escalated the confrontation. The heat of the evening was another contributing factor. The Twelfth Street neighborhood, a particularly active section of the inner city, consisted of crowded apartment buildings overflowing with tenants. The sweltering heat that night made it hard to sleep, and residents soon gathered outside in the streets to watch the DPD officers wait for a paddy wagon. Meanwhile, rumors began to swirl that the DPD officers were harassing arrestees, especially women.²⁷

News of the alleged mistreatment of arrestees at the blind pig spread quickly. Soon, local youths were heard explicitly calling for a riot.²⁸ Residents began to throw rocks and bottles at cars and storefronts. Police officers called to survey the area around 8:00 A.M. were harassed and had pieces of concrete thrown at them. These initial tactics enacted by the DPD came from a quelled riot in the city a few months prior. The “Kercheval incident,” earlier that summer, was a huge success story for the DPD. Then, it was able to employ peace patrols led by community leaders and used non-excessive force to abate escalating violence. On Twelfth Street, however, these tactics failed

²⁷ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

miserably.²⁹ Black congressman John Conyers and Detroit NAACP leader Arthur Johnson were immediately threatened with violence when they followed that same plan. Conyers recalls residents indicting him for supporting the DPD.³⁰ A photograph in the July 24 edition of the *Detroit Free Press* shows Conyers speaking into a microphone atop his car, surrounded by a dense crowd of visibly angry black residents (Figure 2). The image, contextualized by a caption describing Conyers's "vain attempt" to deescalate rioting, is placed alongside an article concerning local black clergymen's plans to help end the violence.

News that testified to black Detroiters' attempts to stop the riot created a paradox of agency. On the one hand, black men like Conyers are framed (through image and text) as agents of positive, pacifist change, thus challenging the notion of a homogenous, violent, and angry black community. On the other hand, these representations persistently emphasize the futility of these agents' attempts—the incensed black, lawless mob, it seems, violently wins out in the end. Perhaps more disturbing than the violence perpetrated by Twelfth Street blacks, however, is the violence wrought on them by police and military forces.

Local media sources did document the riot neutrally. They were also used in efforts to subdue rioters. Martha Jean "The Queen," a popular disc jockey with local station WJLB, cancelled normal programming to plead with locals to stop the violence throughout the evening of July 23. Other outlets were far less emotional, with local radio

²⁹ Ibid., 165. Fine argues that the DPD should have known such strategies would fail in this instance. For one, they were heavily outnumbered by a crowd of around 3,000. The violence began during a change of shifts at the DPD; as such, their movement into the area was weakened (in terms of manpower) and delayed. Second, DPD commissioner Ray Girardin knew that peace patrols did not work in the previous riots in Newark and Harlem; their success during the Kercheval incident was partly chance. Third, the geography of the Twelfth Street neighborhood differed from Kercheval, making blockades much harder to construct and control effectively.

³⁰ Ibid., 169.

stations and newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* ordering a media blackout regarding the riots throughout the day on July 23.³¹ These blackouts, however, only intensified the “ghetto grapevine” of information. As folklorists such as Janet Langlois and Patricia A. Turner have noted, marginalized communities in America have utilized covert and subversive modes of communication as an alternative to misinformation or exclusion from traditional informational sources such as the press, government officials, and the police.³² In a report on the riot written by Rene Freeman, staff director for inner city community center the West Central Organization, he responded to the question “Why did it spread the way it did?”: “Detroit is not as segregated as are most large northern cities. A high degree of total community consciousness exists among Negroes, north, south, east and west. In each area the young, angry, black factions tend to identify and communicate.”³³ Freeman further located the spread of the riot into impoverished nonblack communities. Rene Freeman was careful not to completely subsume racial issues in class ones, however, as he remarked:

“Make no mistake that the riot began on a racial basis. The 12th Street ghetto, sparked by police brutality, erupted into what is considered as the Detroit holocaust. . . . In the areas densely populated with Negroes, whites stayed away, but in the integrated areas there was integrated looting which must be considered a class action, rather than racial.”³⁴

This comment reveals the complicated task of assigning cause to such a devastating effect. Additionally, published analyses of the riot took pains to distinguish inner city

³¹ Ibid., 184-185.

³² For an account of how these dynamics played a significant role in the “Belle Isle riot” of Detroit in 1943, please consult: Janet L. Langlois, “The Belle Isle Bridge Incident: Legend Dialectic and Semiotic System in the 1943 Detroit Race Riots,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 96, 380 (April-June 1983), 188. For further discussion regarding these modes of social communication, please consult: Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³³ “Report by Rene Freeman,” August 3, 1967, series III, part I, box 3, Detroit Commission on Community Relations (DCCR) Collection, ALUA, Detroit, Michigan.

³⁴ Ibid.

black rioters from middle-class blacks, who did not participate. A published study of Detroit attitudes pointedly uses a photograph of a group of smiling white and black Detroiters, laughing with each other on a city street (Figure 4). The image is paired with a section of the study entitled “The Non-Rioters; A Hopeful Majority.” The report identifies rioters as a small, but deviant subsection of Detroit’s population: “The nation’s worst race riot, which erupted in Detroit on July 23, 1967, was the work of a small minority of Negroes who feel more strongly about racial grievances than the black community as a whole.”³⁵ Several articles in the *Detroit Free Press*’s special issue “Twelfth Street Perspective” make a similar distinction. *Detroit Free Press* editor Frank Angelo challenged readers to listen to the “voices of moderates” in an editorial to readers. Social scientist Dr. Stephen Slingsby separated “militants” and “traditionalists” in civil rights struggles, arguing that only militants believed in riots as a violent catalyst for social change.³⁶ Examples such as these show the Detroit media’s discomfort with reducing the riot to an inevitable result of the city’s treatment of the black community as a whole. Instead, this negotiation of blame strives to maintain the possibility of integration through moderate politics as opposed to the radical black freedom movement.

The act of disengaging the black power movement from the more integrated civil rights movement, however, is problematic. As Peniel Joseph explains in the introduction to *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, liberal efforts to separate the two in the 1960s perpetuates a hegemonic narrative wherein black power is a regressive collapse of the civil rights movement. Furthermore, these efforts

³⁵ “Detroit attitude studies,” folder 32, box 67, DCCR Collection, ALUA, Detroit, Michigan.

³⁶ “Twelfth Street Perspective,” *Detroit Free Press* September 3, 1967, folder 1, box 378, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA, Detroit, Michigan.

have extended into contemporary historiography of the era.³⁷ The simultaneity and dialogue between these two ideologies at work in the Twelfth Street riot, as demonstrated by the local press, complicate this presumption. In doing so, these publications create a dynamic, if confusing, self-narration for Detroit. The complexity of this narrative is decontextualized in national and international coverage of the riot. The attempt to decontextualize and generalize Detroit's socioeconomic history by those outside the city continues in contemporary media.

The Detroit Free Press and Representations of Chaos

The *Detroit Free Press* covered the riot extensively. By the second morning, July 24, the newspaper had dedicated the majority of its page space to the riot. *Free Press* photographers were on the scene almost immediately, as demonstrated by the publication of John Conyer's morning visit to the affected area. Along with chief photographer Anthony (Tony) Spina, numerous Detroit photographers and reporters worked in the thick of the action. Although some journalists reported a non-confrontational atmosphere, others, such as William Serrin, were injured by rioters. The anger and violence inflicted on photographers produced one of the most striking images of the riot. Captioned "Youth hurls rock at a *Free Press* photographer," the image shows a young man the moment the rock flies from his outstretched arm (Figure 3). While his face grimaces with the effort of throwing, the grinning and laughing men around him point to the playfulness of this act of violence. The head-on perspective of the photograph is arresting, as the youths in the frame seem to look past the photographer and at the viewer.

³⁷ Peniel Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York, Routledge, 2006), 21.

This important image is also used as the cover illustration of a section in the *Detroit Free Press* special report on riot attitudes, entitled “The Rioter: What Sets Him Apart.” To a viewer contemporary to the riot, the image evokes the carnival-esque atmosphere reported in the early stages of the event.

The “carnival-esque” environment of the riot is visually emphasized throughout the *Free Press*’s coverage. The extensive looting that took place became the main site of this perspective. A July 23 article entitled “The Tension of Years Echoes in Shouts of Glee Amid the Litter and Rubble that Was 12th Street” features a large photograph that emphasizes the free market chaos of a crowd of looters (Figure 4). A large crowd of people of all ages stretches diagonally across the composition. In the foreground, young women work together to load a haul of household items onto a Radio Flyer. A few yards in front of them, a group of men can be seen conversing as they hurry past a gutted storefront. The ground is littered with trash, and in the distance a plume of smoke wafts out of a scorched building. Though it is certainly a scene of mass disorder, nothing about the image suggests a particularly gleeful atmosphere. Despite this, the caption reads: “LOOTERS went on a spree, turning Twelfth St. into a giant grab bag of more drums, toasters, toys, [...] and soft drinks for anyone with arms to carry.”³⁸ The narrative transformation of Twelfth Street into a veritable party favor, along with the identification of youth-oriented products like toys and soft drinks, suggests more of a rebellious, celebratory atmosphere than a vengeful one.

The interaction between photographs and their textual companions in the newspaper often creates a confusing dialogue of messages. Atop the polemic headline

³⁸ Gene Goltz, “The Tension of Years Echoes in Shouts of Glee Amid the Litter and Rubble that Was Twelfth Street,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 1967.

“An Orgy of Pillage Erupts Behind Fires and Violence” rest two photographs. One is of police officers frisking a young black man as a fire blazes in the background (Figure 5). The other has a considerably different tone—a black man casually reclines on a sofa in the middle of a gutted sidewalk (Figure 6). The image is somewhat humorous, as the man appears to be watching a looted building much the same way one would watch television. The caption also assumes an ironic tone: “A Twelfth St. “reveler” takes his ease on a stolen chair after a hard day in the street.”³⁹ The positioning of this photograph on top of the frisking one suggests a cause and effect dialogue. First comes the spirited looting and celebration; next comes the consequence of the law. The headline, however, in its hyperbolic admonition of an “orgy of pillage,” grotesquely suggests that the violence of looting spills over the capabilities of the law. This juxtaposition is purposefully jarring and helps incite fear in the reader—specifically, fear of black criminals.

The Detroit Free Press and the Isolation of Black Detroiters

The state of the field concerning the racialization of criminality is expansive; as Jeanette Covington points out, this does not happen solely at the academic, scholarly level. The knitted-together strength of the black/criminal association is driven by images in popular media.⁴⁰ In the wake of the Rodney King riots of 1992, the “ghetto action movie” trope became prevalent in Hollywood in films such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. In these representations, Covington argues, “the most important

³⁹ Barbara Stanton, “An Orgy of Pillage Erupts Behind Fires and Violence,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 1967.

⁴⁰ Jeanette Covington, *Crime and Racial Constructions: Cultural Misinformation About African Americans in Media and Academia* (Plymouth, U.K.: Lexington Books, 2010).

experience in making blacks more prone to violence seems to be living in the ghetto.”⁴¹

Examples such as these demonstrate the persistence of links between physical environment, race, and character. Hollywood achieves this by positing the ghetto as a separate world, beyond hope or the help of institutional or societal structures. Such hopelessness can be traced back to the hyperbolic images of the Twelfth Street ghetto in 1967. In a letter to Mayor Cavanagh dated November 8, 1967, Cincinnati resident Caroline Engle provided a detailed plan for demolishing the remaining structures on 12th Street and rebuilding the neighborhood. She, like others, emphasized the sense of personal responsibility that comes with home ownership. Her recommendation of home ownership as opposed to renting apartments, however, had a more insidious intent:

I feel they still haven’t learned to live together in close quarters and be respectable. I do believe the white man can live in high-rise apartments compatibly. The white man has had 5,000 years (since Moses) to learn to live by the ten commandments [*sic*]. . . .But the Negro is too closely related to the jungle type of living. Don’t misunderstand me—I’m all for them having their place in the sun. . . .[But] They must be limited to one family, or no more than four adults. Business houses must be limited to one block per 12 block area, and liquor stores [must be] very limited.⁴²

The racist language and assumptions evident here—aligning black communities with the “jungle” and concern over their consumption of alcohol—resemble responses to the ghetto and ghetto films in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴³ Although this is an overtly bigoted example, others responding to the riot took a more structural approach to black crime in (and at) the ghetto. Based on interviews with some of the 3,800 citizens jailed during the riot, *Detroit Free Press* reporters found that rioters saw the hope of positive outcome from the arson destruction of the Twelfth Street neighborhood, as “something new would

⁴¹ Ibid., 129.

⁴² Caroline Engle to Jerome P. Cavanagh, November 8, 1967, Box 336, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

⁴³ Covington, *Crime and Racial Constructions*, 61-89.

have to be built.”⁴⁴ In an undated outline of the riot, Detroit-based writer David Carson directly implicated the “imposed physical and social isolation” in the criminal behavior of blacks living in the ghetto.⁴⁵ Although Carson acknowledged the othered, separate world of the ghetto in this analysis, he approached it more critically than the filmmakers and audiences that Jeanette Covington cites. Such a critical approach, however, is difficult to achieve in an exclusively pictorial language.

In order to visualize the complete separation from the Twelfth Street neighborhood from recognizable liberal society, the *Detroit Free Press* found it important to publish photographs of the physical destruction of the riot. These images are significant because they operate in a similar way to contemporary ruin photography in Detroit. In both, physical destruction allows the photographer to other Detroit and to marginalize it from the rest of society. In particular, images of arson littered the newspaper in July 1967—much like how images of Detroit’s infamous arson cases litter local newspapers today.⁴⁶

The July 24th, 1967 article “Detroit...A City Put to the Torch” demonstrates this in dramatic fashion. Paired with the article is a large, aerial view of Linwood Avenue on fire (Figure 7). Massive clouds of smoke obscure most of the street. On the east side of the road, nearly every building is shown currently in flames. The text accompanying the article emphasizes the horrible futility of fighting the fires. Blocks of Twelfth Street were “solid mass[es] of flame.”⁴⁷ The Lodge freeway virtually shut down due to smoke-

⁴⁴ Lacy McCrary, Tom Suchan, and LaRue Heard. “Prisoners Tell Why They Rioted,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 30, 1967. This same argument has been articulated by young arsonists in Detroit today.

⁴⁵ David Carson, “Riot Outline,” Box 393, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

⁴⁶ For a salient and recent account, see: Monica Davey, “Fires in Detroit Destroy an Artist’s Canvas: Vacant Homes,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2014

⁴⁷ “Detroit...A City Put to the Torch,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967.

obscured visibility. Underneath the article appears a stunning image of burning cars in front of a ruined store. The photograph was taken at the intersection of Grand Boulevard, Grand River, and Dexter—one of the hardest hit areas in terms of arson and looting.⁴⁸ The destruction of housing dwellings on Grand River, for example, numbered 100.⁴⁹ Behind clouds of flame lay some of the most dramatic scenes of violence in the riot.

The Detroit Fire Department was unable to stop the walls of flame overtaking the city owing to heavy sniper fire. During the apex of the violence, between 11:00 P.M. and midnight on July 24, fire department crews called repeatedly for increased police backup as hidden snipers attacked as they attempted to quench fires. Sixteen entries in the Detroit Police Department log list calls for help due to such attacks. As Hubert G Locke described, “By midnight on the second day of the riot veteran police officers were convinced they were engaged in the worst encounter in urban guerilla warfare ever witnessed in the United States in the 20th century.”⁵⁰ The scale and severity of the events warranted the deployment of National Guard and federal troops on July 25.

The Detroit Free Press and Coverage of Armed Authorities

The most popularly circulated images in the *Detroit Free Press* followed the perspective of rattled Detroit police and state and federal troops. Tony Spina, the chief photographer for the *Free Press*, took the majority of these photographs. The visual juxtaposition of Twelfth Street residents and the authorities not only struck Detroiters as especially poignant, but the nation as well. Combined with extensive textual reporting,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Re: Dwelling Unit Destruction and Family Relocation Need,” James Wiley to Charles A. Blessing, July 28, 1967, Box 398, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

⁵⁰ Hubert G. Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 41.

the *Free Press* earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1968 for its “coverage of the Detroit riots of 1967, recognizing both the brilliance of its detailed spot news staff work and its swift and accurate investigation into the underlying causes of tragedy.”⁵¹ As chief photographer, Spina not only played a major role in the visual editorial voice of the paper, but provided the majority of featured images as well. His coverage acts as a visual investigation of one of the major “underlying causes” of the riot—that of police and civilian interactions in Detroit.

One example of such a photograph has been preserved at the Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs (Figure 8). The negative is explained by Spina: “Three National Guardsmen patrol the corner of Hazlewood and Linwood with weapons drawn as residents from the neighborhood look on with a mixture of amusement and anger. Detroit, Michigan.” Spina stands behind the Guardsmen so that the viewer sees their backs and the faces of the neighborhood crowd. In the center of the composition, between two of the Guardsmen, stands a black man with his arms crossed. His weight rests on his back leg, angling his hip outward with his elbows. He gazes down the street toward the other men. The result is an image of amused contempt. A woman next to him appears in mid-laugh, and an older man behind them shares the same expression. Although the viewer of the photograph cannot clearly see the faces of the Guardsmen, it is clear through their body language that they do not share the amusement. The men hold their firearms straight out from their bodies, visibly unnerved by the crowd.

Spina utilizes the same compositional technique in a photograph dated to the same day (Figure 9). In the background of the scene, three men stand with their hands pressed

⁵¹ “1968 Winners: Journalism (Local General or Spot News Reporting),” The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1968> (accessed February 10, 2014).

against a car, waiting to be arrested by an unseen member of the DPD. In the foreground, a National Guardsman crouches behind the officer's squad car, training his rifle on the three arrestees. Once again Spina aims his camera right over the shoulder of the Guardsman. This framing of the image allows the viewer to focus on the Detroiters in the scene rather than the military—all the while being guided into the composition through the Guardsmen.

Spina's less intimate, more detail-oriented photographs have become the most iconic documentation of the riot. These wide-angled shots encompass the many factors of the riot—looting, arson, police and military activity—in dramatic compositions. These photographs starkly show the extent of physical damage and social chaos wrought on the city. As such, they have been republished in numerous secondary-source publications concerning the riot and urban race relations in America more generally.⁵² One such example in the Reuther archives shows National Guardsmen disembarking from a military truck into the midst of a burning Linwood Avenue (Figure 10). A row of storefronts on the left side of the street are patrolled by more recently transported Guardsmen, while the right side lies in total ruin. Massive clouds of smoke obscure the vanishing point further down the street. On the back of the photographer's first print he noted: "National Guardsmen enter the Riot area. I took this photo standing on top of the cab of the following truck. I used a 35 mm lens to encompass a large area of background."⁵³ This degree of technical detail shows the dedication of photojournalists like Spina, which led to a visually stunning narrative of the riot and contributed to the extensive documentation that earned the *Free Press* the Pulitzer.

⁵² Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 230; Tony Spina Collections, Urban Affairs and Planning collection, ALUA.

⁵³ Tony Spina, memo to the *Detroit Free Press*, 1967, Tony Spina Collections, ALUA.

Despite the positive national reception of the *Detroit Free Press*'s coverage of the riot, Detroiters' own response to the paper was more ambivalent. Inner city readers leaned more toward the black-run newspaper, the *Michigan Chronicle*. In a September 1968 survey of riot-affected Detroiters, the DCCR found that 47% of respondents read the *Free Press* regularly, 33% sometimes, and 31% not at all. By comparison, 48% of respondents read the *Chronicle* regularly, 37% sometimes, and only 15% not at all.⁵⁴ Furthermore, while 43% of the Detroiters surveyed thought that newspapers in the city reported the riot fairly, a significant 40% thought it was covered unfairly. The underground newspaper *The Fifth Estate* harshly criticized the *Free Press* and its more conservative parallel the *Detroit News*. In a contribution to a Detroit media analysis of crime following the riot, the *Fifth Estate* wrote a long indictment of their coverage, arguing that "The *News* and *Free Press* have either unwittingly or consciously reacted in such a manner as to actively create a condition of misinformation and polarization among its readers in metropolitan Detroit."⁵⁵ The papers joined the "mob reaction" and failed to account for the ways the black community expressed itself during the riot.⁵⁶ By contrast, the *Fifth Estate*'s editorial board (including John Sinclair, founder of radical anti-racist collective the White Panther Party) emphasizes the importance of inner city Detroit's self-narration. The *Michigan Chronicle* offers an alternative to the more mainstream *Detroit Free Press*, one edited and written by black Detroiters.

⁵⁴ DCCR "Detroit Riot Attitude Stories," 1967, Part 3, Box 67, Cavanagh Papers, ALUA. Interestingly, in a corresponding survey of 500 Detroit-based prisoners in March 1968, 167 respondents read the *Free Press* regularly (26.3%), while 76 respondents read the *Chronicle* regularly (11.9%). The majority of the prisoners surveyed read the more conservative *Detroit News*.

⁵⁵ DCCR, "Detroit media analysis of crime," Part 3, Series VI, Box 69, Cavanagh Papers, ALUA.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The Michigan Chronicle and Accountability

The difference in editorial perspective between the *Free Press* and the *Michigan Chronicle* is best captured in the large headline in the paper's July 29 edition. "IT COULD HAVE BEEN STOPPED!" runs across the front page in bold letters. Other article headlines on the front page are conspicuously different in tone than those published in the *Free Press*: "Did Police Just Write Off 12th?" "Who Are the Fiddlers As Our City Is Burning?," "Don't Look Past Yourself for Cause," and "The White Community Repeatedly Asks 'Why?'."⁵⁷ The photographs accompanying these headlines, however, are not entirely dissimilar to those taken by the *Free Press* crew. In the center of the page sits an image of neighborhood residents standing in front of a looted loan office (Figure 11). The caption pulls from the same language as the *Free Press*: "FREE FOR ALL—Hoodlums and just by-standers hit the U.S. Loan office on 12th Street. This was one of the first businesses hit." The image does not show a sensationalized scene of looters in action; instead, the photographic subjects stand idly and look at the photographer. Other photographs on the page show more chaotic scenes, including two of looters running away with their hauls. Taken out of context, these images could be pulled from the *Chronicle* and placed in the *Free Press* without a noticeable deviation from the latter's editorial voice. The content of the articles appearing alongside these images, however, provides an entirely different context for these photographs.

As Martin Berger explains, liberal, northern white publications decontextualized images of racial violence so that those images could be understood as individual,

⁵⁷ *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.

interpersonal instances. In this way, viewers could ignore deeply engrained institutions of racism and their own stake in such a system.⁵⁸ The *Detroit Free Press* can be understood as such a publication—based in the North, it is generally understood as having a moderate liberal editorial voice. The context provided by the *Free Press* demarcates Detroit’s Twelfth Street community between criminal and moderate individuals. Although this is not to say that the *Michigan Chronicle* ignores personal responsibility in the events of the riot, the articles pay considerably more attention to the larger American context of racism in the nation’s cities.

The paper’s treatment of personal responsibility comes from a different point of view than the *Free Press* (Figure 12). On the front page of the July 29 edition, an editorial message appears next to the *Chronicle* logo: “Let’s Stay Cool, Don’t Repeat Rumors, Obey the Law.”⁵⁹ The use of the inclusive “us” pronoun illustrates the paper’s intimate position within the Twelfth Street community. This language extends to the editorial entitled “Don’t Look Past Yourself for Cause.” The editorial staff uses empathetic language of inclusion with the goal of causing the reader to critically question where his or her blame for the riot lay: “Everyone is looking for a scapegoat. Can we be the responsible ones? [...] Looking around us for someone to blame, we fall to blame ourselves.”⁶⁰ This call to personal responsibility parallels the ethics of civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 47.

⁵⁹ *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.

⁶⁰ “Don’t Look Past Yourself for Cause,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967

⁶¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions” (speech, Atlanta, GA, July 26, 1953, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol6/26July1953AcceptingResponsibilityforYourActions.pdf>).

The *Chronicle* extends personal responsibility to the failures of the police department. Like black community leaders, the *Chronicle*'s editorial staff criticizes the slow and timid response by the DPD and federal troops as evidence of Detroit's "writing off" of the Twelfth Street neighborhood. Rather than taking direct action to address both troubling events before the riot—such as the police slaying of Twelfth Street resident Vivian Williams—and in the early stages of the riot, the DPD lacked any sense of responsibility for the area and its (majority black) residents. By contrast, this editorial insists that the inner city black community—the *Chronicle* included—must take responsibility for themselves in the absence of structural accountability for them. Albert Cleage articulated this call to solidarity in his 1968 New Year's message: "Through the concept of self-determination, black militants have been able to give unity to a people fragmented by oppression and have begun the laborious process of transforming the black ghetto into a black community."⁶² Although neither Cleage nor the *Chronicle* could anticipate the dramatic transformation of Detroit's racial landscape in the years to come, the intensity of "white flight" in the years following the riot brought such words to fruition. The response by state and federal institutions, however, has cruelly echoed the abandonment of Detroit's newly black majority citizenry in much the same way city institutions abandoned Detroit's racial minority in the 1960s.

Knowing this crucial editorial voice of black inclusion, one can view the photographs appearing in the *Michigan Chronicle* through a different contextual lens. For example, in a photo spread entitled "*Chronicle* Lenses Capture Debacle," an image of a ruined line of stores is captioned: "FUTILE ATTEMPT—Police stand guard over a fire

⁶² As quoted in Hubert G. Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 132.

truck and firemen attempt to check the blaze that completely destroyed stores at 12th and Clairmont. Both Cancellation Shoes and Hardy's Drugs were owned by Negroes."⁶³

Both the image and the caption contain similar content as the *Detroit Free Press*'s images of looting and arson—particularly in the use of “futile” to qualify police and fireman action. The editorial context of these two publications, however, alters the meaning of such photographs. In the *Free Press*, the theme of moderate liberal politics blames, condemns, and criminalizes members of the black community for blame—especially in images of crimes such as arson and looting. In the *Chronicle*, however, the editorial voice posits these photographs as manifestations both of the intentionally futile failures of the DPD in the Twelfth Street neighborhood and of the physical consequences of a lack of accountability in the area. In a circular fashion, that accountability should be enforced by structures of justice such as the DPD.

These nuances of blame and responsibility become more generalized at the national level. Popular press publications in the United States covering the riot—including *LIFE* magazine and *The New York Times*—position images of Detroit in the larger national editorial context of civil rights and war coverage. Although these publications feature photographs that are visually similar to those featured in the *Detroit Free Press* and *Michigan Chronicle*, the way in which they are positioned and juxtaposed speaks less to the local social and racial complexities of Detroit and more to the interests of these non-local publications. These interests hinge on a moderate (or timid), liberal perspective on the civil rights movement and a sensationalized image of the Vietnam

⁶³ “Chronicle Lenses Capture Debacle,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.

War.

LIFE and Sensational Imagery

The August 4, 1967 issue of *LIFE* magazine offers disturbing juxtapositions. The cover, entitled “Negro Revolt: The Flames Spread,” contains a dramatic photograph of a National Guardsman (Figure 13). Captioned “Troops patrol a burning Detroit street,” the photograph places the silhouette of the armed Guardsman against a background engulfed by flames. Although newspaper publications like the *Detroit Free Press*’s daily editions were limited to black and white prints, *LIFE* published dramatic color photographs. It is a striking, serious cover to be sure; the deep orange and red of the background evoke the sweltering heat of Detroit on fire. On the reverse side of the cover, however, an advertisement appears for Total Electric Living (Figure 14). A joyful, white, nuclear family smiles at each other from the domesticity of their mid-century suburban home. The telling juxtaposition of this advertisement and the startling cover emblemizes the magazine’s approach to narrating the riot.

As a publication, *LIFE* magazine’s editorial content maintains a commitment to creating a popular national narrative through photographs and text. The magazine’s politics eschew the radical in favor of a more moderate voice. In the discourse of popular publications, it is important to distinguish the knowledge that an image, as an autonomous object, produces and the knowledge produced by an image in its immediate visual context. It is equally important, however, to consider how these images communicate their meaning *through* their immediate visual contexts. These two poles—the image itself and its contextual placement—are in constant dialogue with each other.

This dialogue has the capacity not simply to complement each side harmoniously, but to interrupt and disrupt each side as well.⁶⁴ As stunning and provocative as the photographs in this issue are, the articles and captions with which they appear adhere to the mainstream narrative of civil rights written by moderate liberals in the 1960s. This narrative, while not unsympathetic to the ongoing struggles of black Americans, constructs and exposes a deep fear in mainstream society of radical black politics and black power.

The photographs that appear alongside the main article concerning Detroit, “City at the Blazing Heart of a Nation in Disorder,” closely follow the perspective of the police and military. Some focus on the individual faces of officers, which show evident distress and anxiety. Others show their interaction with Detroit citizens. In one shot, a police officer shoves the butt of his rifle into the face of a black man, whose hands are held above his head (Figure 15). The caption provides no real context other than an assumption of aggression and criminality: “Above, the hard stock of a policeman’s riot gun stops Negro suspect.”⁶⁵ The following two pages, subtitled “Troops against snipers under the cover of night,” share a similar perspective. A dark centerfold image shows a U.S. Army tank looming in front of a derelict home; another shows heavily armed Guardsmen patrolling the streets in a military Jeep. The third photograph is visually similar to the image of the officer with the rifle (Figures 16-18). A Guardsman points a handgun at a young black man who stands with his hands pressed against the tank. The caption for this series of images reveals the context: “Chasing an arson suspect through a west side Negro residential area, a National Guard tank rumbles to a halt and a

⁶⁴ Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 35-38.

⁶⁵ *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967, 19.

Guardsmen leaps off to pursue him on foot. Flushed from cover, the suspect is braced against the tank and questioned at gunpoint by a sergeant.”⁶⁶

Except for one photograph, every image of a black Detroiter in the article shows him or her as a criminal suspect. The textual content of the article also implicates blacks in the escalation of the riot. The narrative is familiar: Jerome P. Cavanagh’s anti-poverty and urban renewal plans were a model for the rest of the nation’s cities, making Detroit “one of the least likely candidates” for racial unrest.⁶⁷ Despite this, the article claims, residents of the Twelfth Street neighborhood remained impervious to social change and were influenced by “Black Power advocates [who] capitalized on the turmoil and tried to stir up more.”⁶⁸ The impossibility of reasoning with the Twelfth Street neighborhood due to their abject social marginality, as explained in this article, was a popular perspective in analyses of the riot—including Mayor Cavanagh’s own viewpoint. In a *Los Angeles Times* article entitled “Crushed Detroit Mayor Ponders Cause of Rioting,” Cavanagh identified the rioters as “People who are not part of society and felt they had nothing to lose.”⁶⁹ In a letter to U.S. Representative Joseph S. Clark the next month, he reflected on living conditions in Detroit’s inner city: “The overall conditions of degradation, disorganization and poverty in which the young grow up without hope of legitimately sharing in the supposed fruits of the affluent society.”⁷⁰ Local residents’ criminal characterization of rioters was even more direct. In a letter to Cavanagh, Dr. Melvin K. Pastorius wrote, “Law abiding citizens agree its [sic] not police brutality they fear here in

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24. Even though the article notes how much money has been poured into urban renewal programs, it makes no mention of the harmful effects of displacement that many of those programs entailed.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁹ “Crushed Detroit Mayor Ponders Cause of Rioting,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1967. Box 379, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

⁷⁰ Jerome P. Cavanagh to U.S. Representative Joseph S. Clark, August 17, 1967. Box 379, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

Detroit, its [sic] the brutality of the multitude of felons that cause such untold trouble [...] If it is a case to chose [sic] between the two I'd prefer a 'police state' to a criminal outrage and anarchy.”⁷¹

The hopelessness identified in Detroit's inner city black neighborhoods comes with a sympathetic nod to the structural inequalities that initiated such desperate marginalization. For his part, Cavanagh responded to numerous citizen letters explaining the blighted living conditions pervasive in those neighborhoods and called for measures to eradicate housing and educational inequalities between not only black and white Detroiters, but between impoverished and middle class black Detroiters as well. This distinction, first seen in Rene Freeman's contribution to the post-riot Detroit attitude study, is visually demonstrated by *LIFE*. In the August 1967 issue, a photograph of a black storeowner appears alongside the article subheading “On guard, specter of backlash.” He stands behind the closed glass door of a convenience store, holding a large rifle against his body (Figure 19). A co-worker stands beside him, looking at the photographer with visible anxiety. Attached to the lower half of the door, a sign proclaims “SOUL BROTHER.” The caption reads: “Behind the locked door of his grocery store, the Negro proprietor backs up—with a shotgun—the “soul” sign he has hung there in hopes it would deter Negro looters. Many such signs were ignored by the mobs, who pillaged indiscriminately.”⁷² Examples such as this, along with analyses offered by those like Cavanagh, Freeman, and other Detroit citizens, imply that blacks will turn not only on their white-controlled physical environments, but on each other as well. As we shall see, contemporary visual reactions to Detroit offer more of the same

⁷¹ Dr. Melvin K. Pastorius to Jerome P. Cavanagh, August 5, 1967. Box 394, *ibid*.

⁷² “On Guard, Specter of Backlash,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967, 25.

perspective, positing the city's population as hopelessly violent and totally disengaged from mainstream society.

Scholars have framed *LIFE*'s coverage of civil rights struggles as creating a spectacle of racialized violence. The May 1963 article "The Spectacle of Racial Turbulence in Birmingham: They Fight a Fire That Won't Go Out" not only openly describes the violence in Birmingham as a "spectacle," but provides a spread of dramatic photographs to embody such a term. Martin Berger explains how articles in liberal northern publications such as *LIFE* persistently frame the civil rights movement as a fight between active, violent whites and passive, docile blacks.⁷³ As the Civil Rights movement progressed into the urban riots of the late 1960s, popular publications reversed these roles. In both instances, however, these publications use images and text to show what Berger calls "a dramatic spectacle of...victimization."⁷⁴ Local publications offer a more nuanced, dynamic understanding of race and agency in Detroit. In doing so, they document a reality closer to the lived experience of black Detroiters during the riot.

The *Michigan Chronicle* contextualizes the use of "Soul Brother" signs more thoroughly than *LIFE*. In a July 29 article, *Chronicle* staff writer Rita Griffin explains how drugstore owner Carl Perry made many "Soul Brother" signs to display in the windows of black-owned businesses.⁷⁵ Though Perry found the front window of his business shattered, he does not make statements of the abject fear *LIFE* projects on the unnamed black storeowner: "Naturally I was pretty nervous at first, I still am, but I've

⁷³ Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 19.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Rita Griffin, "'Soul Brother' Signs Worked—For a While," *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29.

managed to keep cool. That's about all I can do."⁷⁶ Rather than offering photographs of visibly intimidated storeowners as *LIFE* did, Griffin provides interview dialogue that illustrates the tight-knit community bonds in the Twelfth Street neighborhood. As a group of teenagers entered Perry's shop, they told him that the shattered window was an accident, as intent looters would have destroyed the rest of the store as well. To this, Perry turns to Griffin and says, "as far as I can see or hear, the looters are not out to get the Negro yet."⁷⁷ In fact, the *Chronicle* implicates white looters in the destruction of black property (Figure 20). Underneath a photograph of two "Soul Brother" signs sitting in a shop window appears the caption: "MEANINGLESS SIGNS—These signs placed in windows had little meaning as many businesses owned by Negroes were sacked as whites joined Negroes in the looting." This visual example, along with the interaction between Perry, young looters, and other black storeowners challenges the notion that the riot universally caused inner city blacks to turn against each other. This rejection of a spectacle of violence shows the importance of Detroit's internal narration to demystify citizens' experiences.

LIFE's editorial voice, however, does not simply homogenize black civil rights struggles as victimized or demonized. One could argue, as many scholars have, that making the distinction between rioting, black Detroiters and non-violent ones enforces the more pluralistic idea that there is no one characteristically homogenous "black race." *LIFE* visualized this position in their September 10, 1956 issue. Captioned "Faces of the Contemporary American Negro," a photograph showing twenty-five black men appeared as an illustration to the five-part series for the magazine, entitled "Segregation." In the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

chapter “Gazing at Race in the Pages of *LIFE*,” Wendy Kozol problematizes the 1956 issue’s liberal intentions in showing the diverse range of physical features on those twenty-five black men: “Although the writer argues against concepts of racial purity, an essentializing quality persists as we are invited to peer at skin color and other physiognomic characteristics. The layout relies on physical characteristics to construct a racial gaze that once again suggests that we can *see* race.”⁷⁸ The difference between the distinction made in this photograph and that made in the “Soul Brother” image from 1967 is that this 1956 image speaks specifically to *physical* differences between black people, as opposed to the moral or ethical distinction made in 1967.

The fact still remains, however, that aside from the “Soul Brother” photograph, every black individual in the *LIFE* article is framed as a criminal. The positioning of an article about black power immediately after the Detroit riot piece further strengthens the relationship between criminality and blackness. Entitled “Newark: Post-riot summit for Black Power,” the article covers the Newark Black Power conference in July 1967. Alongside images of radical leaders like SNCC chairman H. Rap Brown, writer Amiri Baraka (née LeRoi Jones), and former Malcolm X aide Charles Kenyatta, the article details their “fiery” speeches at the conference, which covered topics related to the use of violence in the black power movement. The mainstream fear of radical black politics is anchored in the last few sentences of the piece. The author quotes the chairman of the conference, clergyman Dr. Nathan Wright:

People who are part of a majority group, no matter how sympathetic they may be with those who are oppressed, can never fully identify with the oppressed. It is a psychological impossibility. The era of white breast feeding has come to an end.

⁷⁸ Wendy Kozol, “Gazing at Race in the Pages of *LIFE*,” in Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2001), 167.

We are now flexing our own muscles. Power, *real* power, can never be a gift; it must be wrested.⁷⁹

The author then concludes: “Against the backdrop of gunfire in Newark and the pall of smoke over Detroit, such words are frightening.”⁸⁰ In an instance of cruel irony, a glamorous advertisement for Nice ‘n’ Easy hair color by Clairol is placed on the page opposite Wright’s serious proclamation (Figure 21). A lily-white blonde woman bounding across the beach faces a photograph of H. Rap Brown being arrested on charges of inciting a riot and arson in Cambridge, Maryland (Figure 22). The juxtaposition is an embodiment of Wright’s words. Majority groups, exemplified by publications like *LIFE*, may have been sympathetic to the struggles of black Americans in the 1960s, but only to the extent that those struggles could be ameliorated through assimilated integration. The photographs in *LIFE* document and signify, in dramatic fashion, the consequences resulting from the failure of realizing that goal.

The New York Times and the “Agony of Detroit”

The coverage of the riots in other national publications demonstrates the extent to which America was gravely concerned with the possibility of black integration—particularly in the nation’s cities. These publications use Detroit to symbolize the critical situation of race relations in the United States. Although it contains no photographs, a July 27, 1967 editorial entitled “The Agony of Detroit” exemplifies a fearful national perspective. The editorial answers the question “Why, then, Detroit?” with a sympathetic analysis of the Detroit Police Department’s actions. According to the editorial board, the DPD would have been doomed to the same violent fate as Newark had they initially

⁷⁹ “Newark: Post-Riot Summit for Black Power,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967, 28.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

responded to the disorder with force. The alternative the DPD chose—a (too) slow and restrained response—also doomed Detroit and allowed the situation to reach the disastrous extent it did. It concludes: “If Detroit shows anything in this regard, it is that the police are damned if they do and damned if they don’t.”⁸¹ The editorial, however, is also careful to contextualize riotous behavior such as looting and arson in the long-standing oppression of black Detroiters and their physical environment.⁸² This structural violence, the authors argue, is of the utmost importance to the United States as a whole. The editorial ends with two conclusions:

One is, that if Detroit is an example of America’s best efforts to solve the racial and other problems confronting its cities, the best is not nearly good enough. The other is, that even if progress is achieved on a broad front, the United States must be prepared to contend with serious turbulence in the cities for a long time to come.⁸³

Detroit’s best—and the editorial qualifies that label by detailing the many positive programs Cavanagh brought to the city—is unfortunately still a failure in the rising tide of racial unrest in the 1960s. The failure of Detroit, moreover, may serve as a model for the future of race relations in the United States more broadly.

In other articles, the *Times* provides images that visually realize the “serious turbulence” which faced Detroit and now faces the rest of the nation. Interestingly, these images almost unanimously show the perspective of the Detroit Police Department or federal troops called into the city to quell the riot. Aside the July 24 article “Detroit Leaders Were Optimistic” appears a closely cropped photograph of Governor George Romney touring the riot-affected areas with a helmeted police officer guarding him

⁸¹ *The New York Times* editorial staff, “The Agony of Detroit,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 1967.

⁸² This oppression, however, is not localized. The editorial does not mention situations specific to Detroit, such as the demolition of the Brewster Projects, integration of black Americans into the labor force and the UAW, or previous urban disturbances like the 1943 riot or the Kercheval incident.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

(Figure 23). The expressions on the men's faces bear a resemblance to the faces of the police officers pictured in *LIFE*. Romney gazes past the viewer at the carnage of the city streets as the officer looks around him warily. The tight frame of the photograph gives an intimate portrait of the exhaustion and anxiety evident on the officer's face.

Other images in the July 24 issue of the *Times* utilize more open compositions. The front page of the paper contains an image of National Guardsmen, guns drawn, hurrying past a blazing apartment building (Figure 24). An article headline reading "Negroes in Detroit Defy Curfew and Loot Wide Area," appears underneath the image. The first line of the article identifies the rioters as "thousands of rampaging Negroes."⁸⁴ This article is surrounded by others that attest to the numerous uprisings in American cities at the time—one accounting for the violence in the Puerto Rican section of East Harlem and another covering the Black Power conference in post-riot Newark that evoked so much fear in the editorial voice of *LIFE*. Beside articles such as these, images of the police and military signify order as opposed to the chaos of the riots they fought.

The July 25 edition of the paper creates a parallel between the violence in East Harlem and that in Detroit. Under the article headline "U.S. Troops Sent into Detroit; 19 Dead; Johnson Decries Riots; New Outbreak in East Harlem," appears an agonizing photograph of a fatally injured Puerto Rican boy (Figure 25). The caption definitively marks him as a victim: "VICTIM IN EAST HARLEM: A Puerto Rican youth is carried by bystanders on 112th Street between Second and Third Avenue. He was found on the sidewalk after shooting between police and snipers. He died of a broken neck."⁸⁵ The article, however, provides no further context for the image. Instead, it narrates the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

deployment of Army paratroopers and the National Guard to fight snipers, arson, and looting in Detroit. A photograph on the next page shows federal troops moving into the city (Figure 26). The combined effect of these two photographs—one of a civilian victim and one of military force— evokes the theme of generalized warfare.

Images of the Riot and the Visual Language of War

In the July 25 *New York Times* article, Jerome P. Cavanagh makes a clear comparison between the riot and war: “It looks like Berlin in 1945.”⁸⁶ Considering the image choices in *LIFE*, it seems highly plausible that the photographic editorial perspective of these national publications pulls from the visual language of warfare in the 20th century—particularly the Vietnam War.

Rather than focusing on local citizens, national publications’ attention to soldiers created a more familiar narrative for Americans outside of Detroit. These readers may not be able to identify or empathize with looters and local figures as pictured in the *Detroit Free Press* and *Michigan Chronicle*, but they could more easily do so with the military. Additionally, images of federal troops illustrated, to non-Detroiters, the severity of the situation in the city. This dangerousness gained meaning through the deluge of images and footage of Vietnam on television and in print publications that captivated and deeply disturbed American audiences. At the time of the riot, *The New York Time* published images of American forces in Vietnam on a daily basis. Although these photographs are not as violent as ones that would follow the Tet Offensive in 1968, they still make a strong impact on the viewer. Rather than intimate portraits, these

⁸⁶ Ibid.

compositions are largely shot from wide angles, showing the breadth of American military force in depictions of tanks and ships. Photographs of the United States Navy disembarking from amphibious vehicles, for example, evoke the publication's coverage of armed forces exiting tanks in Detroit (Figure 27).

The cover of the July 30 edition of the *Times* solidifies the representational link between American riots and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. On the left side of the sheet, an article titled "Army's Entry into Detroit: How the Decision Was Made" explicitly places the Twelfth Street riot in a wider national context by narrating the deployment of federal troops into the city.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the border article on the left side of the sheet details President Johnson's creation of a national committee on riots. In addition to domestic significance, these articles about Detroit gain a signification of foreign engagements by appearing next to a large photograph of U.S. forces in Vietnam. The image shows a fire raging across the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *Forrestal* (Figure 28). The chaos of the image—depicted through walls of smoke, burning airplanes, and Navy men battling the blaze—is made even graver by its accompanying article detailing how seventy men died on this ship off the coast of Vietnam. The image's caption immediately evokes chaos as well: "AFTER DISASTER STRUCK: Crew men fighting the blaze on flight deck of *Forrestal*. Fire destroyed 25 planes." This aerial image of burning disaster evokes chaos with the same visual cues used by photographers covering the widespread arson during the Twelfth Street riot. On one level, this visual effect is a trope of disaster imagery. Natural disaster footage, for example, often utilizes high angles to emphasize the scale of the damage. Nevertheless, it is significant that *The New*

⁸⁷ Max Frankel, "Army's Entrance into Detroit: How the Decision Was Made," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1967.

York Times readers were able to make the link between Detroit and Vietnam. During the 1960s, news publications were faced with the task of converging the multivalent narratives of violence and chaos across the nation. The complicated intertextual exchange between these stories not only affected viewers, but publications' editorial voices as well.

Fred Turner argues in *Echoes of Combat* that *The New York Times*'s coverage of Vietnam shifted throughout the course of the war. Prior to the Tet Offensive, *The New York Times* covered the Vietnam War with much the same patriotic zeal that characterized the paper's coverage of World War II.⁸⁸ As violence escalated, however, the paper became more interested in investigating soldiers' darker experiences, including post-traumatic disorders upon returning to the United States.⁸⁹ The *Times* was not the only publication to face this narrative shift. As cultural historian John Gennari explains, in the last years of *LIFE*'s publication run (it folded in 1972), the magazine attempted to bring two conflicting veins of American life together: the radical counterculture and the white, moderate, liberal mainstream.⁹⁰ This conflict was encapsulated in *LIFE*'s internal disagreements over Vietnam. Though the magazine publicly endorsed Richard Nixon in 1972, by their last issue in 1973 the publication featured graphic images of American bombing campaigns in Vietnam alongside articles with headlines such as "The Waste of War."⁹¹ These changes demonstrate the complex exchange between the media's editorial voices and the popular reception of such narratives. As Americans became increasingly

⁸⁸ Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ John Gennari, "Bridging the Two Americas: Life Looks at the 1960s," in Doss, ed., *Looking at LIFE Magazine*, 266-267.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

frustrated with the nation's involvement in Vietnam, so too did popular American publications.

Local Media and War Comparisons

As scholars such as Martin Berger and Wendy Kozol demonstrate, national publications understood the Civil Rights movement as a progressive march towards equality by way of black assimilation into civic society. They perceived events such as the 1967 riot in Detroit as transgressions against such a march. The photographic treatment of such “transgressions” persistently frames Detroiters as criminal, while framing police and military forces as the stoic sentinels of law and order in the streets. These images play upon tropes of military-focused war photography. As Mieke Bal details in “The Pain of Images,” the reception of violent images hinges on the invocation of historical, subliminal iconography.⁹² In the context of the 1960s, the sight of armored tanks and armed soldiers in Detroit elicited a comparison to images of these same subjects in Vietnam—a comparison made familiar through the overwhelming deluge of Vietnam images in our “living room war.” In this way, the Twelfth Street riot becomes another trope in the repetition of painful images to define the violent social landscape of America in the late 1960s. Jerome Cavanagh appeared on *Meet the Press* shortly after the riot. In one segment, Cavanagh not only recognized the connection between Detroit and Vietnam, he also directly interrogated it:

I think it is time we stopped dodging the issue and look squarely at the bloodshed, arson and terror in our city streets and ask the \$64 question? Hasn't the time

⁹² Mieke Bal, “The Pain of Images,” in Mark Reindhardt, et. al., eds., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 93-115.

come to make some adjustments in the Vietnam War and turn some of the billions spent there into programs to lift our cities out of the violence and bloodshed?”⁹³

The visual language of war photography does not appear exclusively in national publications. Local Detroit papers not only feature images that parallel the tropes of war photography, but contain textual information that directly references such a visual vocabulary. The local conservative publication, the *Detroit News*, provides a wealth of such examples. In terms of content and editorial voice, the *News* stands somewhere between local publications like the *Free Press* and national ones like the *New York Times*. Although the *Free Press* is generally understood to have a moderate liberal voice, the *News* is distinctly more conservative. This does not diminish the importance of images that appeared in the paper during the riot. One *News* article entitled “City’s Scars Remind Pilot of War Scenes” features a large aerial photograph of the residential area bordering Clairmont, Woodrow Wilson Boulevard, and 12th Street immediately following the riot (Figure 29). The content of the article follows the headline, offering the perspective of a local pilot flying over the “sad sight” of the area. Rows of houses are visibly gutted, and large vacant lots mark spots where structures were totally eliminated. The visual similarity to images of the 1945 Nuremberg bombing is not lost on the pilot, who experienced that devastation as well.

The most poetic evocation of war in news coverage of the riot comes not from photography, but from painting. Detroit-based, Yugoslavian-born artist Igor Beginin was commissioned by the *Detroit Free Press* to sketch and paint scenes from the riot-torn area of Twelfth Street. A spread of his work appeared September 3rd in a special edition

⁹³ *Meet the Press*, “Jerome P. Cavanagh Questions and Answers,” July 36, 1967. Folder 21, Box 398, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

of the paper. Rendered in acrylic paint, his images of smoldering Detroit buildings speak from a more expressive authorial perspective than newspaper photography (Figures 30-31). Protracted tongues of fire abstract the shape of buildings as glimpses of the sky peek through the remaining architectural fragments. The visual allusion to war-torn Zagreb, where Beginin grew up, is obvious. The prosaic text he provides crystallizes the parallel: “These are not buildings of an American scene. They belong to another continent...another era. During World War II I had seen them in my hometown. Today I recognize them as shapes materialized out of a nightmare.”⁹⁴ Beginin does not simply compare the spectacle of Twelfth Street to the aftermath of a world war; he also compares it with the aesthetic tradition of ruins: “The mid-day sun was hazy behind a canopy of smoke and ashes giving the environment an eerie appearance of moon-lit medieval ruins.”⁹⁵ Beginin assigns Detroit with the same symbolism that artists have assigned such ruins for centuries, comparing the sight of it to a “passing phase of life,” and, more dramatically, “a fearsome symbol of the God of Madness.”⁹⁶ Even though his romantic language differs from the documentary dedication of news publications, he calls to mind many of the same social questions Americans (particularly Detroiters) had on their minds after the Twelfth Street riot. He writes:

Destruction is a creation in the sense that the pains, the sorrows, fears, illusions and aspirations unite us. It is beauty that endures in spite and because of our difficult conditions of existence. It may also be called the truth. Even a dark corner of our existence deserves a glance of wonder and pity.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Igor Beginin, *Detroit News*, September 3, 1967, Folder 7, Box 399, *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

By contextualizing this statement with local calls to inner city solidarity immediately following the riot, one can go beyond reading these lines as generalized, metaphysical meditations. Instead, one can read them similarly to proclamations of black persistence by agents such as the *Michigan Chronicle* and black community figures like Albert Cleage. The destruction of Detroit in the Twelfth Street riot created a space from which inner city blacks could unite and affect change in the city. The social ills that had long plagued Detroit were exposed in a “glance of wonder and pity” during the riot. This glance, as a psychologically similar project to gazing at images of war, captured the nation and thrust Detroit into the national spotlight as a terrifying symbol of the shortcomings of integration efforts and the rise of black power in their wake. This metaphorical transformation of the city into a warning persists in representations of Detroit’s ruins today.

Chapter 2

“And You Shall Say God Did It”: Contemporary Ruin Photography

Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our society and their changes

--Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

Well it's 1 2 3 4

take the elevator at the Hotel Yorba

I'll be glad to see you later

all they got inside is vacancy

--Jack White and Meg White

On October 2, 2010, elite members of the international art world gathered in the Diego Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Soon, burly guards herded the guests (including art world superstars like Klaus Biesenbach and Barbara Gladstone) onto charter buses that lumbered along Detroit's east side to an abandoned glue factory on the Rouge River. There, they bore the cold for hours to witness the second installment of Matthew Barney's epic *Ancient Evenings* series, entitled "Khu." Based on a Norman Mailer novel of the same name, the multi-installment *Ancient Evenings* performances used a woman (played by Aimee Mullins) and a 1967 Chrysler Imperial as physical hosts for ancient divinities Isis and Osiris, respectively. The narrative centered on themes of rebirth and transformation. In the climax of the performance, the burnt-out skeleton of the Imperial (destroyed by Barney driving it into the Belle Isle bridge) was melted down and fed into enormous, smoking furnaces in the vacant factory (Figure 32). The parallel between the narrative of mythological rebirth and the narrative thrust upon Detroit in contemporary media was not lost on Barney. In fact, he spent considerable time in the

city before the performance and used local artists and singers for “Khu,” and the performance was received largely as a celebration of Detroit.

This celebration plays on many of the familiar tropes assigned to Detroit. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, much attention has been paid to the narrative of Detroit’s “decline.” Burdened by the failures of the “Big Three” auto companies associated with the city—Chrysler, GM, and Ford—Detroit has suffered immense economic hardship in the past few decades. The city’s tax base has decreased significantly with dramatic shifts in population (a loss of 501,864 residents between 1980 and 2012).⁹⁸ The effect this depopulation has had on Detroit’s physical landscape (at least 70,000 abandoned structures by 2012) has caused the city to become an infamous visual symbol of the reality of deindustrialization in America.⁹⁹ In recent years, however, the declensionist narrative has been layered with one proclaiming the city’s “rebirth.” The city’s motto, after all, is “We Hope for Better Things; It Shall Rise from the Ashes.” Leagues of artists, urban planners, and entrepreneurs—most not from the city—have appropriated the largely vacant city and fashioned themselves as explorers and pioneers starting a new society in Detroit. In this narrative, the city’s rebirth lies not in the hands of its residents, but in the hands of visionaries like Matthew Barney.

“Khu” and its critical reception illustrate the pervasive language used to describe Detroit today. *Art Review* contributor Joshua Mack exclaimed that Barney “brought his prodigious facility with iconography and allegory to bear on the necropolis of American

⁹⁸ Kofi Myler, “Detroit’s population 1840-2012,” graphic, *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 2013.

⁹⁹ Mark Binelli, “How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2012.

industry that is Detroit.”¹⁰⁰ The classicism of the word choice “necropolis” continues as Mack describes Detroit as “a place of myth and historical transformation.”¹⁰¹ In *Artforum*, Hugo Glendinning effusively praised Barney’s choice of a city with a “suppurating soul that is also always in the process of regeneration.”¹⁰² The coexistence of language such as the pus-infected “suppurating” alongside statements of mythological transformation is articulated visually in contemporary ruin photography—pejoratively termed “ruin porn.” This chapter analyzes photographers such as Yves Marchand and Andrew Moore who have constructed an image of Detroit where the most painful symbols of the city’s economic impoverishment—its numerous vacant buildings, or “ruins”—are sources of beauty. One of the most often cited (to the point of cliché) phrases to describe the ruins—“tragic beauty”—exemplifies the tension between pain and aesthetic enjoyment that these photographs offer (Figures 33-34).

The seductive allure of this tension between pain and pleasure has made Detroit valuable currency in the art world and market. In *Variant* magazine, John Cunningham argues that images of Detroit’s ruins carry cultural capital as deterministic visualizations of late capitalism’s crisis of existence.¹⁰³ The artistic commodification of the city raises important questions about poverty, race, the art market, and the ethics of looking. Furthermore, placing these questions in the context of media surrounding the 1967 Twelfth Street riot can historicize them. Although photographs of the riot focus on Detroiters as their subjects and ruin photographs purposefully erase human presence, they

¹⁰⁰ Joshua Mack, “Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler: Khu, Act 2 of Ancient Evenings,” *Art Review* 46, 125 (2010).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Hugo Glendinning, “Crazy, Sexy, Khu,” *Artforum*, October 7, 2010.

¹⁰³ John Cunningham, “Boredom in the Charnel House: Theses on Post-Industrial Ruins,” *Variant* 42 (Winter 2011). <http://www.variant.org.uk/42texts/CharnelHouse.html>.

both parallel the visual language of war and disaster photography in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Even more significantly, both sets of photographs construct and edify a complicated network of blame for Detroit's situation. One can better analyze the painful meanings ruin photographs have for Detroiters by understanding the history of the city's visual identity and the way Detroiters themselves have been projected in popular visual media. The 1967 riots show that despite the influence of local and national sociopolitical structures (such as segregated housing), popular media blamed Detroit citizens for the violence. At the same time, Detroit became the national symbol for the failure of urban racial integration. As such, the city was also framed as the victim of unheeded social problems in the United States. Contemporary perspectives on Detroit are similarly ambivalent. Ruin photographers have localized their context enough to posit Detroiters as hopelessly impoverished and incapable of running a "first world" city. On the other hand, the transformation of Detroit into a metonym for the auto industry has positioned the city as a place for rueful contemplation of the future of American industry. In this way, Detroit is still the spectacular victim of national socioeconomic problems.

In order to fully explain this process of fractured visual identity, one must unpack the complicated components at work in "ruin porn." The phrase itself must first be defined and problematized. Jim Griffioen, a prominent local blogger and photographer, is popularly thought to have introduced the phrase in a 2009 interview with Thomas Morton in *Vice* magazine.¹⁰⁴ Intimately connected with the theoretical underpinnings of

¹⁰⁴ Richard B. Woodward, "Disaster Photography: When Is Documentary Exploitation?," *ARTNews*, February 6, 2013.

poverty and disaster tourism, “ruin porn” connotes the seduction of voyeurism and the implied distance between subjects of such pornographic images and their viewers.

Pornography can be defined as a decontextualized spectacle offered up as a commodity for eager voyeurs. Photographers like Yves Marchand and Andrew Moore have taken live segments of reality and flattened them into works of art and, thereby, into commodities. This is painfully ironic in light of the economic destruction these works of art depict. In “The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish,” Amelia Jones writes, “In trying to critique the commodity, artists too often buy into commodity. They collapse into commodity, collapse into spectacle.”¹⁰⁵ The cool critique of American capitalism that artists like Marchand and Moore offer is complicated by their profitable involvement in the capitalist contemporary art market. Moreover, the definition of pornography has proven to be slippery at best in the recent decades of the culture wars and censorship. Writers such as Mark Binelli have emphasized the “know-it-when-you-see-it” approach to defining pornography in the case of ruin porn, highlighting the ambivalent and shaky ground on which Detroit’s meaning has been constructed.¹⁰⁶

Two landmark projects by fine arts photographers have seduced others to scout out and document Detroit’s urban decay. The first, *The Ruins of Detroit* by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, was anthologized in a coffee table book publication in 2010. That same year, American photographer Andrew Moore published *Detroit Disassembled* in much the same style as that of Marchand and Meffre. Marchand and Moore have worked together intimately; in fact the French photographer

¹⁰⁵ Amelia Jones, “The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish,” in Henry Rogers and Aaron Williamson, eds., *Art Becomes You! Parody, Pastiche, and the Politics of Art. Materiality in a Post-Material Paradigm* (London: Article Press, 2006), 51.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis* (New York: Picador, 2013), 272.

introduced Moore to Detroit.¹⁰⁷ Together through visual and contextual repetition, these artists have created a popular, public, visual discourse for Detroit. The tendrils of their success run far, across publications such as *TIME*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The New York Times*. Images from both projects (Marchand's in particular) densely populate the Internet. From popular blog sites to social media, these dramatic photographs of decay and destruction have become the virtual face of Detroit.

The Ruins of Detroit and *Detroit Disassembled* are both extremely popular and extremely divisive. Critics and scholars have analyzed and criticized the exploitative aspects of these projects. Moreover, reviewers have highlighted the ethical gravity of poverty tourism with the thousands of photographers who have visited Detroit in the wake of Marchand, Meffre, and Moore. Detroit-based English professor John Patrick Leary firmly roots them in a tradition of urban photographic sensationalism, dating back to Jacob Riis and *How the Other Half Lives*.¹⁰⁸ As a publication, *Vice* magazine has been particularly outspoken on the cultural dangers of ruin porn, as illustrated in the article headline "Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff."¹⁰⁹ Other fashionable art criticism sources such as *Hyperallergic* have trended along these same lines.¹¹⁰ Journalistic and cultural criticism publications, including *The New York Times*, have contributed to the discussion. Not only is Detroit the "hot topic" of public conversation in America right now; its visual identity is too. In his impressive and popular book, *Detroit City Is the Place to Be*, Mark Binelli

¹⁰⁷ John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism," *Guernica*, January 5, 2011. http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Morton, "Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff," *VICE*, July 31, 2009. <http://www.vice.com/read/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8>

¹¹⁰ Wayne Northcross, "Detroit Redux," *Hyperallergic*, March 5, 2012, <http://hyperallergic.com/47738/detroit-redux/>.

summarizes the forceful bind of Detroit's visuality and ruin porn succinctly: "In Detroit, you can't talk aesthetics without talking ruin porn."¹¹¹

Despite the dense analysis of these images, ruin porn discourse tends to elide the troubling issue of race. The Twelfth Street riot immediately led to waves of white Detroiters leaving the city for its growing suburbs.¹¹² The statistics are a dramatic illustration of the post-urban phenomenon of "white flight." In 2012, 82.7 percent of Detroit's population identified as "Black/African American alone."¹¹³ Although ruin porn is devoid of real human presence—black or white—one cannot help but notice the *traces* of human life that flood these photographs: furniture, graffiti, clothing, and machinery. The racial and population dynamics of Detroit better contextualize the emptiness of Marchand and Meffre's images of abandoned factories and homes.

Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre: The Ruins of Detroit

A 2011 *Time* magazine online photo essay exemplifies the contradictory language that has been used to discuss contemporary Detroit. The article, "Detroit's Beautiful, Horrible Decline," plays upon the tension between the city's surreal aesthetics and its abject poverty. The article uses disquieting images of Detroit's ruins, taken by Marchand and Meffre. The first photograph in the gallery shows Detroit's iconic Michigan Central Station, a massive Beaux-Arts Classical structure near the Ambassador Bridge (Figure 35). The building has become the metonym for Detroit's ruins; the *Detroit Free Press*

¹¹¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 272.

¹¹² Conveniently for these people, many of the exurbs had been deeply engrained in white supremacy for years. For a captivating and disturbing account of the deeply racist long-time mayor of Dearborn, Orville L. Hubbard, please consult: David L. Good, *Orvie: The Dictator of Dearborn* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

¹¹³ United States Census, "Detroit, Michigan," 2010.
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html>

recently termed it “unquestionably one of the world’s pre-eminent examples of urban ruin and spoiled grandeur.”¹¹⁴ The photographs that follow are also of the city’s most dramatic ruins, including the Packard Plant, David Broderick Tower, and the United Artists Theatre (figures 36-38). Although the images are undeniably fascinating, *Time* puts little effort into providing context for these shots. Instead, each image’s caption reads like the engraving on a tombstone, noting the year the building was constructed and when it stopped being used. Only the last photograph in the essay contains any significant use of explanatory text. *Time* pairs this image, a view of downtown Detroit from a weathered window frame, with a quote from Marchand and Meffre’s website:

Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our societies and their changes . . . the volatile result of the change of eras and the fall of empires. This fragility leads us to watch them one very last time: to be dismayed, or to admire, it makes us wonder about the permanence of things.¹¹⁵

The gravity of this coda, combined with the quietude of the photographs in the series and their terse, grave-like captions elicits a mournful response in the viewer. John Patrick Leary calls the style which gives rise to such a response “The Detroit Lament.”¹¹⁶ Of the three “Detroit Stories” Leary identifies in the article—including “The Metonym,” in which Detroit becomes a postindustrial American symbol, and “Utopia,” in which the city is envisioned as a blank slate—the lament is the most characteristic element of ruin porn. These photographers are preoccupied with loss and the irretrievable passing of an age. Artists such as Marchand and Meffre articulate their melancholy through a medium that has an inherently complex, tangled, and at times tragic relationship to the past. In

¹¹⁴ Dan Austin and JC Reindl, “After a Century, Michigan Central Train Station’s Last Stop is Limbo,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 26, 2013.
<http://www.freep.com/article/20131226/NEWS01/312260030/Detroit-Michigan-Central-Station-depot-100th-anniversary-1913-open>.

¹¹⁵ “Detroit’s Beautiful, Horrible Decline,” *Time* Photos, 2011.
http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089_1850985,00.html

¹¹⁶ Leary, “Detroitism,” 2011.

this way, although the photographs do not directly address the 1967 riot, Detroit's history is implied by the choice of medium.

In the book publication of *Ruins of Detroit*, leading urban historian Thomas J. Sugrue (a Detroiter himself) provides an authoritative and detailed history of Detroit's deindustrialization and depopulation. The analysis he provides, however, is clearly one of decline. Significantly, a declensionist narrative lends itself visually to ruins, which are a literal embodiment of decay. Following a lengthy narrative of the city's shift towards deindustrialization, Sugrue notes: "But other forces—racial and demographic—also contributed mightily to Detroit's long decline."¹¹⁷ He goes on to characterize Detroit as "an increasingly black city [that] was surrounded by a ring of communities that were all-white."¹¹⁸ Here, the city represents the failure of integration efforts in the North and demonstrates the negative consequences of white flight.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, he implicates white flight and hostile housing segregation in the "urban destruction" of the 1967 Twelfth Street riot.¹²⁰ Sugrue confronts blame for the city's past (and present) in much the same way newspapers did during the riot. Publications such as the *Detroit Free Press* and *New York Times* had to confront long-standing racist housing practices in the city. Although the event was undoubtedly a violent tipping point in race relations and the physical and economic state of the city, it occurred for a number of social and political reasons. Similarly, the history Sugrue provides suggests multicausal explanations for Detroit's current, ruinous state.

¹¹⁷ Thomas J. Sugrue, "City of Ruins," in Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, et. al., *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010), 13.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 14. Sugrue explains how tax dollars and economic resources left Detroit with fleeing whites.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

The majority of people who see Marchand and Meffre's photographs, however, do not view them in the book. A new copy of the publication costs nearly \$340.¹²¹ Most of the images appear widely across the Internet, in sources ranging from *Time* to social media sites such as Reddit. In addition to print digital sources, publications such as *The New York Times* use Marchand and Meffre's photographs as illustrations for Detroit articles.¹²² In these instances, there is no historical context. Instead, the images project a new and dramatic visual identity for Detroit much as popular print publications constructed a vision of Detroit in 1967. In this case, however, the absence of people—rather than active Detroiters themselves—characterizes the city.

John Tagg argues in *The Burden of Representation* that the photographic process “is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality. . . . but the production of a new and specific reality.”¹²³ Tagg, among others, emphasizes the agency enacted by the photographer in creating and making a newborn image.¹²⁴ Significantly, one can observe the “new reality” focus that Tagg proposes in rhetoric surrounding Detroit. In addition to the ubiquitous “new Detroit” trope in popular media, historians such as James J. Connolly have argued that Detroit has seen a permanent transformation instead of decline.¹²⁵ On the other hand, this view can generate and perpetuate a disinterest in history, a problematic issue that plagues Detroit and its representation in the media. Furthermore, although Marchand and Meffre demonstrate a longing for the past through

¹²¹ Amazon search, March 15, 2014.

¹²² Julien Dobbs-Higinson, “Visions of a Lost City,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2013.

¹²³ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3.

¹²⁴ Ibid.; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977); Joanna Sassoon, “Photographic Meaning in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1, 0 (March 2007), 299-319.

¹²⁵ James Connolly, *After the Factory: Reinventing America's Industrial Small Cities* (Washington, D.C.: Lexington Books, 2012), 20.

depictions of particularly formerly glamorous cultural spaces like theaters, these photographs create produce a new reality for Detroit. The reality they provide the viewer posits Detroit literally as a “passing empire” and a purely architectural site of late capitalist mourning. In so doing, they construct a world that Detroit’s citizens do not inhabit. While Andrew Moore occasionally shows lone figures or small groups of black Detroiters in *Detroit Disassembled*, *The Ruins of Detroit* is completely devoid of human life.

The emptiness of Marchand and Meffre’s photographs overwhelms through sheer numbers. *The Ruins of Detroit* is a massive collection of nearly 225 full-page color prints. Some of these pages form series for one especially poignant and desolate location, in which it is difficult to picture Detroit with any human population. Centerfold spreads showing rows of blighted, abandoned houses seem to concretize this feeling; it appears as if there are not even places for Detroiters to live (Figure 39). The effect can be characterized as post-apocalyptic. In the postwar period and in the wake of the truly apocalyptic power of nuclear weaponry, “apocalypse” has become a concept that densely permeates culture and society, particularly in America.¹²⁶ As many cultural historians and theorists argue, the horror of events such as World War II and the Holocaust has fundamentally changed the way in which artists and writers conceived of the ethics of their work.¹²⁷

Apocalyptic concern yields a preoccupation with the dialectical meanings of past, present, and future. Time—the past, present, and future—collapses in the tableau of the

¹²⁶ Richard Dellamora, “Introduction,” in Richard Dellamora, ed., *Postmodern Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 2.

¹²⁷ Norman Rosenthal, “Introduction,” in *Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art*, ed. Norman Rosenthal (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000). One thinks of the Theodor Adorno quote “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.”

ruin. For some, this presents a certain nostalgic joy. In *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, Robert Ginsberg celebrates the palimpsest of ruins, arguing that “Here the past is past, and the ruin is present. It sets us free from bondage to time, so that we may dwell in the moment’s wholeness.”¹²⁸ In this way, the contemporary ruin always carries traces of the past. In the magazine *Variant*, John Cunningham suggests that, in the postindustrial era, this quality of the past coming into contact with the present positions the urban ruin in an “anti-capitalist utopian trace.”¹²⁹ The economic dismantling of Detroit has passed, leaving the present with the skeletons of buildings that housed such narratives. For Cunningham, these skeletons not only expose the failure of capitalism; they also present utopic spaces for a post-capitalist future.¹³⁰ In *The Ruins of Detroit*, Marchand and Meffre directly implicate American neoliberal capitalism in Detroit’s decline.¹³¹ To many viewers of their photographs however, capitalism is less to blame than Detroiters themselves. Furthermore, this cycle of blame can be traced back to 1967. If black Detroiters were the victims of failed urban integration and simultaneously the perpetrators of the riot, then in the 1990s they are victims of neoliberal deindustrialization in the United States. At the same time, the way in which ruin photographs render Detroiters passive implies a condemnation of the citizens themselves.

¹²⁸ Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2004), 363.

¹²⁹ John Cunningham, “Boredom in the Charnel House,” 2011.

¹³⁰ Ibid. Cunningham argues that ruins expose the “ephemeral qualities of socio-economic structure” and suggest the “possibility of non-productive spaces that might be productive of non-capitalist relations.”

¹³¹ For a detailed history of the intertwined narratives of American capitalism and industrialization, see: Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Ethics of The Ruins of Detroit

Neoconservative champions of capitalism exploit ruin imagery as visual evidence of the failure of a politically liberal, black-run city. In a recent tirade on Fox News, Rush Limbaugh used Detroit's ruins as proof of the social ills of white flight, further arguing that black mayors such as Coleman Young ruined the city in the years following the 1967 riot.¹³² Although Limbaugh's claims have been thoroughly critiqued and countered, the extremity of this view is not a fringe belief. A recent Google search for the inflammatory phrase "blacks ruined Detroit" netted 206,000 results. The comments section of any given online *Detroit Free Press* article about ruins overflows with white supremacist statements (largely from residents of Detroit's suburbs). The dramatically titled film *DeForce: A History of Tyranny in the Heart of America* closely follows several narratives of political corruption in Detroit. Dan Georgakas makes a cogent argument that suburban Detroiters isolate these narratives in order to "demonstrate the immaturity of black voters."¹³³ Furthermore, this racism extends to visual imagery. In a recent blog post entitled "Black Political Corruption Story Number #2,654," a cartoon by Jeff Davis (likely a pseudonymic reference to Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy during the Civil War) shows a racist caricature of the city (figure 40). Several black Detroiters are drawn with the physiognomic tropes of racist illustration. One wears American flag boxer shorts and holds a broken "No Parking" sign as a spear, the man behind him gleefully holds a beer bottle aloft, and another in the background hangs onto a light pole like King Kong. Others drift down the street like zombies, around wrecked cars and

¹³² "The Truth About Detroit: Rush Limbaugh's Top Detroit Distortions," *Detroit Free Press*, September 8, 2013. <http://www.freep.com/article/20130908/NEWS01/309080074/Rush-Limbaugh-truth-about-detroit-Orr-bankruptcy-Chafets-Devil-s-Night>.

¹³³ Dan Georgakas, "Detroit: An Urban Zombie. Motown Images in Three New Documentaries," *Cineaste* 37, 4 (Fall 2012), 19.

storefronts and a policeman's skull. The text on the image reads: "Visit the Vast Ruins of Detroit! Come see abandoned auto factories, the ruined skyscrapers and future of all other US [*sic*] cities."¹³⁴ This text, combined with the image of the comic, presents a black apocalypse. Davis invokes the trope of Detroit as a warning, and he specifically racializes the problem. Although Marchand and Meffre are not virulent racists, the public presence of their photographs across many sources of media has undeniably engendered a terrified attention to Detroit, and the sensationalism of these images has made it easy to posit the city and its (invisible) citizens as an abject disaster.

This phenomenon engages the ethical implications of ruin pornography. In *ARTNews*, Richard B. Woodward emphasizes that, for Detroit, "excessive news coverage has become the norm and might rightfully earn the name 'porn.'"¹³⁵ Such coverage allows viewers to witness Detroit's destruction from a safe distance. The distance is not in itself ethically wrong, although, as Susan Sontag notes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching."¹³⁶ Looking at ruin photographs is not *prima facie* immoral; rather, it is ethically ambiguous. Ruin photographs' meanings are highly malleable and can be dramatically transformed depending on their context. Although in their book Marchand and Meffre provide historical context, the images' presence on the Internet is either recontextualized to illustrate a shameful decline or highly romanticized. The artists blatantly romanticize and glamorize Detroit's ruins on their website; instead of including local history, their *Ruins of Detroit* page features

¹³⁴ Jeff Davis, "Black Political Corruption Story Number #2,654," Locust Blog, May 23, 2011. <http://whitelocust.wordpress.com/2011/05/23/>.

¹³⁵ Richard B. Woodward, "Disaster Photography," 2013.

¹³⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 92.

only a sweeping essay by the photographers. The first sentence illustrates the grandiloquent style of the piece: “At the end of the XIXth Century, mankind was about to fulfill an old dream.”¹³⁷ The artists proceed to tell the city’s familiar story of deindustrialization and ends with a justification of the importance of Detroit: “Its splendid decaying monuments are, no less than the Pyramids of Egypt, the Coliseum of Rome, or the Acropolis in Athens, remnants of the passing of a great Empire.”¹³⁸ The hyperbolic statement distances Detroit from its own specific history and places it in the grand, teleological narrative of time. Marchand and Meffre visually illustrate this attitude toward Detroit’s ruins in their dialogue with Romantic art historical sources.

Ruins and Art Historical Traditions

Ruin pornography is most legitimized in its association with prominent aesthetic traditions. As Richard B. Woodward concedes:

To condemn images of blasted lives and places that carry a whiff of “exploitation or detachment” would be to do away with a sizeable chunk of pictorial and written history. Shattered cities have long aroused the imagination of Western artists, even before the Renaissance Italians sought to rebuild a tradition out of the classical one they found strewn in fragments across their former empire.¹³⁹

In this passage, Woodward justifies the cultural function of ruins as visible fragments from which to construct a historical tradition. In addition to the historical importance of ruins, they hold a psychological power as well. In the late eighteenth and early

¹³⁷ Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, “The Ruins of Detroit,” artist website, accessed February 1, 2014.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Woodward, “Disaster Photography,” 2013.

nineteenth centuries, painters associated with German Romanticism looked to Gothic ruins not only as traces of their national ancestry but also as sites of transcendence.¹⁴⁰

Caspar David Friedrich, a painter, poet, and philosopher in the German Romantic movement, sought the spiritually seductive presence of ruins. Near the beginning of the nineteenth century, Friedrich wrote in relation to a cathedral in Meissen: “From the debris filling the interior emerge mighty pillars with slender and gracious columns bearing lissome vaulting. For this temple, the time of glory is long gone; and from its ruins issues a new time, a new longing for clarity and truth.”¹⁴¹ Friedrich collapses the past, present, and future upon the image of the ruin. Alice A. Kuzniar makes a cogent argument that Friedrich used ruins as a temporal space wherein he could create allegories.¹⁴² Furthermore, the many immaterial and obscured significations that Friedrich created through ruins “elicit[s] the sublime or an infinity (rather than a totality) that the imagination cannot fathom, let alone represent.”¹⁴³ In this way, the mysterious layering of time that ruins offer evokes the sublime.

For Friedrich, ruins were not strictly temporal structures; they were also spatial ones. *Der Träumer (The Dreamer)* shows his characteristic emphasis on dramatic scale (Figure 41). Friedrich situates a lone figure reclining on the crumbling window frame of a church. The figure is overwhelmed by the size of the composition, a visual technique he employed in other images such as *Two Men by the Sea* and *The Monk by the Sea* (Figure 42). Kuzniar argues that the unending (or infinite) distance in such images characterizes Friedrich’s sublimity.

¹⁴⁰ Michel Makarius, *Ruins* (Paris, France: Flammarion, 2004), 134-137.

¹⁴¹ S. Hinz, *Caspar David Friedrich in Briefen und Bekenntnissen*, quoted by Michel Makarius, *Ruins*, 143.

¹⁴² Alice A. Kuzniar, “The Temporality of Landscape: Romantic Allegory and C.D. Friedrich,” *Studies in Romanticism* 28, 1 (Spring 1989), 69-93.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Marchand and Meffre's photographs carry distinct references to the visual strategies utilized by Friedrich to illustrate the sublime. Most importantly, both sets of ruin imagery use scale as the primary indicator of the overwhelming vastness that characterizes the sublime. Akron Art Museum curator Barbara Tannenbaum indicated that the "operatic scale" of Detroit ruin photographs transcends into the sublime.¹⁴⁴ The sublime is not inherently joyful; rather, Friedrich embraced its overwhelming distortion of space and time. Writer Karl Töpfer explained how the dizzying effect of scale in Friedrich paintings such as *Der Watzmann* envelops the viewer into "a bleak void without comfort, standing high up yet not uplifted."¹⁴⁵ The "bleak void" in Friedrich's paintings are not only spatial, but temporal as well. Brian Dillon identifies the sublime in Friedrich's ruin paintings as an articulation of "fretful modernity," giving the sublime a characteristic temporal function.¹⁴⁶ In analyses of these works and other creations born out of ruins, Dillon redirects the gaze of Friedrich's human figures towards potential future human disasters.

Friedrich's French contemporary, Hubert Robert, imagined this by transforming the Louvre into impressively colossal ruins (Figure 43). In *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie in the Louvre in Ruins*, Robert affected the sublime not only through the awesome scale of the place, but also through the invocation of time. Tourists and artists are shown in awe, gleaming inspiration from the remaining art historical artifacts in the museum. In a similar fashion, Friedrich depicted a lone figure contemplating the ruinous

¹⁴⁴ "Detroit Disassembled: Photographs by Andrew Moore at the Akron Art Museum," *Art Daily*, 2011. <http://artdaily.com/news/38549/Detroit-Disassembled--Photographs-by-Andrew-Moore-at-the-Akron-Art-Museum#.UyVCamSwKkE>.

¹⁴⁵ Karl Töpfer, quoted by Julian Bell, "Caspar David Friedrich at the Edge of the Imaginable," *The London Times Literary Supplement*, October 26, 2012. <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1155202.ece>.

¹⁴⁶ Brian Dillon, "Ruin Lust: Our Love Affair with Decaying Buildings," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2012.

tomb of Ulrich von Hutten.¹⁴⁷ In this way, the figures in these artists' paintings (and, by extension, viewers of the paintings) look backwards into the void of history in order to better understand their own modernity. Moreover, visualizations of the spatial void of the ruin engender this transcendence of time.

Marchand and Meffre undoubtedly offer a "bleak void" in their photographs. In particular, their images of Detroit's abandoned theatres are shot from a high angle to allow the viewer to witness the full extent of the devastation. In other scenarios, Marchand and Meffre utilize the aesthetic strategy of singularity to emphasize a point (Figure 44). In Friedrich works such as "The Abbey in the Oakwood," he isolates the abandoned structures, imbuing them with what art historian Alice A. Kuzniar terms "special, hieroglyphic significance."¹⁴⁸ The symbolic importance of such locations, Kuzniar argues, comes with their decontextualization from the rest of the natural world.¹⁴⁹ This decontextualization, both visual and symbolic, best describes Marchand and Meffre's photographs. These buildings gain their symbolic significance—as evidence of the failure of integration, capitalist industrialization, or even liberalism—in their decontextualization from the rest of Detroit. In this way, the photographs in *The Ruins of Detroit* can be read in dialogue with the media framing and manipulation of 1967 riot images. In both bodies of work, Detroit has been metonymized and decontextualized as a singular moment of shame.

¹⁴⁷ For an analysis of this image's sociopolitical importance, see: Albert Boime, *Art in the Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 175-180.

¹⁴⁸ Alice A. Kuzniar, "The Temporality of Landscape: Romantic Allegory and C.D. Friedrich," *Studies in Romanticism* 28, 1 (Spring 1989), 84.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

Andrew Moore: Detroit Disassembled

In September 2013, the Smithsonian Institute purchased two photographs taken by Andrew Moore. These two images, entitled *The Rouge* and *Model T Headquarters*, were part of Moore's massively popular 2010 Akron Art Museum exhibition, *Detroit Disassembled*. *The Rouge* has become synonymous with Moore's Detroit project; it graces the cover of the *Detroit Disassembled* book publication and has served as the illustration image almost ubiquitously across reviews of Moore's work.¹⁵⁰ It is not difficult to imagine why Moore and critics have chosen this image as the face to his work; it is both aesthetically stunning and visually symbolic of the photographer's goal to capture the sublime expanse of industrial ruins (Figure 45). The composition stares down what appears to have once been the main assembly floor in the plant. Pieces of gutted machinery, broken pallets, and leftover scaffolding lining the walls indicate the enormous scale of the place. Brick and metal walls alternate with large, broken window panels to the vanishing point in the composition. The soft beams of light that filter into the structure reveal how Moore used a tripod and extended exposure time to best capture the intimidating scale and haunting atmosphere of the place. These visual techniques parallel those found in *The Ruins of Detroit*.

The title—*The Rouge*—is vague enough to avoid the idiosyncratic nature of this image in relation to the *Detroit Disassembled* narrative. The Ford River Rouge Complex is not in Detroit, but in the exurb of Dearborn. The second image selected by the

¹⁵⁰ "Detroit Disassembled: Photographs by Andrew Moore at the Akron Art Museum," *Art Daily*, June 9, 2010. <http://artdaily.com/news/38549/Detroit-Disassembled--Photographs-by-Andrew-Moore-at-the-Akron-Art-Museum#.U0hXvK2wKzh>; Jeffry Kaczmarczyk, "Detroit Dissassembled: Startling Photos of the Motor City at the Grand Rapids Art Museum," *MLive*, June 20, 2012; Steven Litt, "Andrew Moore Photographs of Detroit Ruins Create Stunning Show at Akron Art Museum," *Cleveland Arts*, July 4, 2010, http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2010/07/andrew_moore_photographs_of_de.html

Smithsonian, *Model T Headquarters*, does not show a Detroit location either (Figure 46). The empty, moss-covered office shown in that photograph is located in the former Ford Motor Company headquarters in Highland Park, an independent municipality within Metro Detroit.¹⁵¹ Although Moore's book provides the proper locations of *Model T Headquarters* and *The Rouge* in the captions to these images, the Smithsonian Institute holdings contain no such context. Instead, these images are taken as representative of Andrew Moore's work—which itself is taken as representative of the city of Detroit. This act of visual, symbolic substitution elides the reason *why* places like the River Rouge Complex and the Ford Model T headquarters were moved outside the city. Ford purchased land in Dearborn especially for the Rouge complex, while the Model T plant was moved to Highland Park. Ford's Piquette Avenue plant in Detroit, which had manufactured the Model T, was closed. The plants' location in part helps account for the ruinous state of Detroit's economy. Rather than investing in Detroit, Ford invested in Dearborn and Highland Park. The deindustrialized state of the Rouge, however, shows the complex limitations and failures of that investment strategy.¹⁵² Instead of providing local histories like these to suggest these historical nuances, Moore takes Detroit as an end result, a terrifying and inevitable example of American industry.

Andrew Moore is a New York-based photographer; however, Marchand and Meffre introduced him to Detroit. Moore explains in *Detroit Disassembled*, "My initial visit to Detroit started with a dinner in Paris."¹⁵³ Marchand and Meffre admired Moore's work done in Cuba that documented crumbling interior spaces, seen most majestically in

¹⁵¹ Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron, OH: Akron Art Museum, 2010), 30.

¹⁵² For an engaging narrative of the deindustrialization of Detroit and its exurbs, see: "Anatomy of Detroit's Decline," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/08/17/us/detroit-decline.html>.

¹⁵³ Moore, *Detroit Disassembled*, 118.

old theaters in Havana. With the lure of old theaters, the French photographers' specialty in *The Ruins of Detroit*, they invited Moore to accompany them on an urb-ex and photography trip to the city that winter. Immediately captivated by Detroit's bizarre physical landscape, Moore worked there for nearly three months in the next two years.¹⁵⁴ Moore credits this fascination, in part, to Detroiters themselves. He describes them as many others who visit the city do: industrious, imaginative, and "remarkably friendly."¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, most of his fascination has to do with the more suspenseful, frightening future of the city. Throughout Moore's explanatory essay to *Detroit Disassembled*, tellingly entitled "The Phoenix and the Pheasants," he pinpoints Detroit as on the "precipice of change," and as a true embodiment of its motto ("We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes").¹⁵⁶ Alongside Detroit as a "phoenix," however, are the pheasants: Moore details the majority of the short essay with descriptions of the city's vacant fields (now populated with animals such as pheasants and wild turkeys) and decaying, nineteenth-century mansions. Moore utilizes this language of juxtaposition not only in his explanations; he uses juxtaposition in his photographs as a way of highlighting the surreal absurdity of Detroit's (and its exurbs') ruins.

Detroit Disassembled and Urban Realism

Some of the most striking juxtapositions in Moore's project hinge on the relationship between nature and industry in Detroit. Marchand and Meffre, among others, exploit this aspect of ruin photography as well. Similarly, local photographer Jim Griffioen's 2009 project *Feral Houses* extensively documented the numerous vacant

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

homes in the city overtaken by vines, shrubs, trees, and tall grass. For many, these images are less sinister than the concrete wastelands offered by much of ruin photography. Griffioen himself states that the overabundance of flora sentimentalizes the buildings, and several bloggers commenting on the series argue that the images show the return of wildness and life to Detroit.¹⁵⁷ The poignancy of this evidence, however, comes with the juxtaposition of it with decaying, “dead” man-made structures.

Moore plays upon the “Rose That Grew from Concrete” narrative in his photographs at the infamous Detroit Public Schools Book Depository.¹⁵⁸ Moore contextualizes one of these images in its caption: “Birches growing in decayed books, Detroit Public Schools Book Depository.”¹⁵⁹ Taken from a low angle, the photograph shows a large room with a massive section missing from its roof, exposing it to the sky (Figure 47). Amongst the piles of garbage, destroyed books, and gutted pipes, a small copse of birch trees reaches out through the hole in the roof. Their growth is even more remarkable given the fact that this is clearly the top level of the multi-storied building. Moore appears to have taken this image in the early fall; the leaves near the tops of the trees are tinted yellow against a cloudy sky. The light and color that the trees emit at the center of the composition fade into the muted, gloomy corners of the ruinous room. The living trees mock the lime-eroded cement columns around them. Jim Griffioen also visited the depository in 2008 and captured a young tree sprouting up from a heap of

¹⁵⁷ Jim Griffioen, “Feral Houses,” July 23, 2009, *Sweet Juniper!*, <http://www.sweet-juniper.com/2009/07/feral-houses.html>; Sara Distin, “Where the Lions Sleep: James Griffioen’s Feral Houses of Detroit,” November 23, 2009, *Flavorwire*, <http://flavorwire.com/52070/where-the-lions-sleep-james-griffioens-feral-houses-of-detroit/>; “Steph,” “Decay in Detroit: Feral House Photos by James Griffioen,” May 31, 2012, *WebUrbanist*, <http://weburbanist.com/2012/05/31/decay-in-detroit-feral-house-photos-by-james-griffioen/>.

¹⁵⁸ Tupac Shakur, “The Rose That Grew from Concrete,” *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*, Amaru/Interscope, CD, 2000.

¹⁵⁹ Moore, *Detroit Disassembled*, 36.

decomposing books (Figure 48). Also taken on one of the warehouse's top levels, this image is an early incarnation of Moore's. Put differently, Moore's photograph is the result of the moment captured in Griffioen's photograph. The young saplings captured by Griffioen have grown into mature trees as seen in Moore's image.

Despite the glimmer of hope captured in the birch tree image, Moore's other photographs at the depository are his clearest evocation of tragedy. *Art in America* critic Christopher Stackhouse suggests that the symbolism of decomposing, warped books as a "stand-in for the overlooked citizens [of Detroit]." ¹⁶⁰ Detroit's public school system has highly publicized, serious issues. In 2010, plans to close forty-five public schools made headlines in national publications such as *The New York Times*. ¹⁶¹ In 2011, the National Institute for Literacy reported that forty-seven percent of adults in Detroit were functionally illiterate. National media publications instantly latched onto the statistic, displayed in dramatic form by the *Huffington Post*. ¹⁶² Although the figure was disputed as outdated and inaccurate, it became engrained in public discussions surrounding Detroit. ¹⁶³ Thus, photographs of the massive heaps of books that litter the vacant depository are a comprehensible symbol for Detroit's seemingly incomprehensible shame and despair.

In his publication, Moore only provides the location of the shot, but no further contextual information. Griffioen's photographs of the depository come with explanatory text, citing the city's educational woes as the catalyst for the "cycle of violence" that has

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Stackhouse, "Andrew Moore: New York, at Queens Museum of Art," *Art in America* December 28, 2011. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/andrew-moore/>.

¹⁶¹ Susan Saulny, "Detroit Plan Would Close 45 Schools," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2010.

¹⁶² "Nearly Half of Detroit's Adults Are Functionally Illiterate, Report Finds," *Huffington Post*, May 7, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/07/detroit-illiteracy-nearly-half-education_n_858307.html

¹⁶³ Erik Kain, "Detroit Illiteracy Numbers Questionable," *Forbes*, May 6, 2011.

made Detroit one of the most dangerous cities in the nation.¹⁶⁴ After detailing local school policies, Griffioen states that exploring the depository was a de-sentimentalizing experience. As opposed to his *Feral Houses* series, which allowed him to indulge in sentiments about the wildness of nature, this building allowed no such reverie: “To walk around this building transcends the sort of typical ruin-fetishism and “sadness” some get from a beautiful abandoned building.... To walk through this ruin, more than any other, I think, is to obliquely experience the real tragedy of this city; not some sentimental tragedy of brick and plaster, but one of people.”¹⁶⁵ In not providing any real context for the photograph, Moore evokes only a generalized tragedy—one based on opaque data and short national interest articles. Local photographers such as Griffioen, on the other hand, demonstrate their intimate involvement in Detroit by prioritizing a de-sentimentalized understanding of the city’s social history. Analyzing Moore’s project next to Griffioen’s work reveals the ways in which ruin photography elicits important and problematic questions about documentary photography and an “authentic” urban experience.

Griffioen’s photographs, when removed from their context on *Sweet Juniper!*, appear startlingly similar to Moore’s images. The two photographers employ the visual tropes of ruin photography; namely, low-angled wide shots and high-dynamic-range imaging (HDR). HDR has become a cliché in ruin photography, to the extent that photography and urban bloggers mark it as the identifiable trait of ruin porn.¹⁶⁶ In layering different exposures, HDR imaging not only gives the photograph remarkable

¹⁶⁴ Jim Griffioen, “It Will Rise From the Ashes,” *Sweet Juniper!*, November 26, 2007.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ HDR and pseudo-HDR photographs comprise nearly the entirety of the many thousands of photographs tagged “Detroit” on the popular photography sharing website, Flickr.

luminosity, but also enhances the field of focus and detail. HDR ruin photographs expose (literally and figuratively) the frightening extent of decay in these buildings in a highly aestheticized, romantic style. The juxtaposition offered by HDR photography between gritty detail and luminous tones and shades is the perfect embodiment of a genre that finds beauty in the harsh realities of post-industrial ruination. Given the date of Griffioen's book depository project (2007), it is probable that his images built the foundation for this HDR trope later exploited by photographers like Moore. Regardless, the two artists' images achieve the same visual result: hyper-detailed, saturated landscapes of surreal ruin.¹⁶⁷

What, then, distinguishes Griffioen from ruin pornographers? Griffioen consciously and conscientiously emphasizes his position as a Detroiters, implying that his artistic intention as a well-informed citizen mitigates the aesthetic effects of ruin porn that he produces. This logic is a response to the accusation of ruin pornography as a sensationally voyeuristic process. One important distinction that Griffioen makes between Detroiters and outsiders is the former's banal, de-sensationalized reactions to the city's ruins. In an essay accompanying one of his *Feral Houses* posts, Griffioen states that locals have become "numb to the things that seem remarkable to people who live elsewhere" and that, put simply, "Detroiters are, after all, used to all the abandoned shit."¹⁶⁸ Instead, he feels compelled to document ruins as a way to preserve localized

¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, the style of HDR photographs does not mimic documentary photography; rather, it invokes painterly aesthetics that are far closer to sentimental ruin paintings than the objective appearance of documentary.

¹⁶⁸ James D. Griffioen, "(More) Feral Houses," *Sweet Juniper!*, June 18, 2010, http://www.sweet-juniper.com/2010_06_01_archive.html

histories in the face of outsiders defining Detroit.¹⁶⁹ Andrew Moore takes that perspective and twists it, arguing:

[...] if you live there [Detroit], you're so jaded to all this decay, dereliction, things falling apart, it's hard to work from it. It's hard to make art from it. So I think as a tourist, as somebody coming with fresh eyes, you have the advantage of a kind of horror and awe of this process and maybe even an enthusiasm.¹⁷⁰

This rhetorical tension between Moore and Griffioen illustrates the paradoxical arguments for documentary authority that photographers can create.

Twentieth-century debates regarding authority in documentary photography have centered on the position of photograph (and photographer) to subject. One major distinction between Griffioen and his outsider contemporaries is his dedication to representing the people of Detroit. A resident of the Lafayette Park neighborhood, Griffioen started *Sweet Juniper!* to detail his and his wife's experiences raising two small children in the city.¹⁷¹ Griffioen's images and stories narrating his and his kids' trips to the Detroit Institute of Arts are particularly popular. His painterly, twee portraits of his children imply the possibility of raising a wholesome family in Detroit.¹⁷²

Even more than his photography, Griffioen's most significant contribution as a cultural critic comes from his writing. On *Sweet Juniper!*, he posts historical essays about neighborhoods, stores, and people in Detroit using detailed primary source evidence. He narrates photographs of places such as the book depository and rows of abandoned homes with an undeniable vernacular familiarity, focusing on the human history of these places with quotes, interviews, and biographical information of past

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Jennifer Guerra, "Art vs. Ruin Porn," podcast, Michigan Public Radio, January 12, 2011.

¹⁷¹ James D. Griffioen, "About *Sweet Juniper!*," www.sweet-juniper.com. Although he was born in Kalamazoo and attended law school at University of Michigan, Griffioen and his wife started their family in San Francisco. They decided to move back to Michigan and raise their children in the city.

¹⁷² James D. Griffioen, "The Selfish Parent, Part Two," *Sweet Juniper!*, May 13, 2008, <http://www.sweet-juniper.com/2008/05/selfish-parent-part-two.html>.

residents. Furthermore, many of his photographic essays surround the city's citizens (including his family) rather than its buildings.

Griffioen is not the only Detroit-based photographer to emphasize the importance of human documentation in the city. In 2008, locals Brian Widdis and Romain Blanquart started *Can't Forget the Motor City*, a website to visually display the relationship between Detroit and its citizens. Like Griffioen, Widdis and Blanquart have found the most effective counterargument to ruin porn is normalization. *Wired* critic Pete Brook explains that for Widdis and Blanquart, "photographs of utter normality are the best to counter negative, shallow depictions of Detroit."¹⁷³ The resulting project shows less mythological archetypes of Detroiters—intrepid urb-exers and urban farmers—and more views of daily life across the city's very diverse population. These include portraits of a young pregnant couple, children celebrating outside Tiger Stadium, a woman crying at a candlelight vigil, and a Buddhist monk at a prayer center. The resulting mixture of social strata is neither a sensational condemnation, nor a rose-tinted celebration. Widdis explains the importance of demystifying Detroiters: "Yes, there are empty houses and factories and yes, there are urban farmers with conviction and energy. But on a day-to-day basis, most citizens are barely affected by either of those extremes."¹⁷⁴

Inherent in this view is the belief that the reality of urban representation comes in the representation of the city's people. In the early twentieth century, the Ashcan School in New York City articulated this very position. The artist group, which consisted of American painters such as George Bellows, Robert Henri, and John Sloan, sought to

¹⁷³ Pete Brook, "Photos of Detroit Need to Move Beyond Ruin Porn," *Wired*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/2012/06/photos-of-detroit-need-to-move-beyond-ruin-porn/>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

integrate art and urban life in order to make each more significant.¹⁷⁵ As Ashcan scholars such as Rebecca Zurier have explained, these artists worked within the context of early Progressive-era journalism to shine light on lower-class urban subjects, such as child laborers and impoverished workers, as more authentically American than the elite urban class.¹⁷⁶ For these artists and many others, the American bourgeois was seen as slick and artificial, and thus not genuinely American. Even Theodore Roosevelt, in a 1911 editorial extolling the authentic and moral substance of the Bowery neighborhood, implored artists to work there amongst its inhabitants in order to create “real” American art.¹⁷⁷ The journalistic imperative to connect directly with an urban community, as displayed in Ashcan School ideology, continues to affect representations of Detroit to this day.

Representation, however, is never transparent. Artists in turn-of-the-century New York had no ambitions to document its subjects neutrally, even in the medium of photography. Both Ashcan painters and Pictorialist photographers glorified their largely lower-class subjects. The urban Pictorialists were loosely a group of photographers working and exhibiting in New York at the same time as the Ashcan School. The public voice of urban Pictorialism, Alfred Stieglitz, often waxed romantically about poor New Yorkers. In an 1896 *Photographic Times* article, Stieglitz is quoted: “Nothing charms me so much as walking among the lower classes. . . . I dislike the superficial and artificial,

¹⁷⁵ Rebecca Zurier, et. al., *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1995), 14.

¹⁷⁶ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, “Dante and the Bowery,” *Outlook*, August 26, 1911.

and I find less of it among the lower classes.”¹⁷⁸ Although the patronizing tone and “charm” found in poverty coexist more with the philosophy of ruin photography, the alignment of a city’s people with authenticity speaks to the position of photographers such as Jim Griffioen or Brian Waddis.

American identity articulated itself through urban identity in the early twentieth century, extending past New York and representations of the city’s people. Precisionist painters such as Charles Sheeler imagined urban landscapes devoid of humanity. Sheeler immaculately rendered impressively large factories free from the human chaos of industrial labor. The most striking example of his erasure of humanity appears in a series of works depicting the Ford River Rouge Complex in Dearborn. Completed in 1928, the Rouge became the epicenter for unionization struggles in the 1930’s.¹⁷⁹ The massive, ninety-three building multiplex was the workplace for 100,000 employees at its production height in the 1930s.¹⁸⁰ Despite this, Sheeler produced several quiet, human-free landscapes of the Rouge during the decade (Figure 49). Sheeler’s River Rouge series and Andrew Moore’s photographs share an aversion to human subjects. The major difference, of course, is the state of these buildings. Sheeler presented the intact buildings in what cultural scholar Miles Orvell called “an aesthetic universe of calm and order.”¹⁸¹ Andrew Moore shows these same buildings in the total, natural disorder of

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 77.

¹⁷⁹ For an analysis of these struggles and the role of unionization, see: Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

¹⁸⁰ “History of the Rouge,” The Henry Ford, 2014, <https://www.thehenryford.org/rouge/historyofrouge.aspx#numbers>

¹⁸¹ Miles Orvell, “Inspired by Science and the Modern: Precisionism and American Culture,” in *Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality*, ed. Gail Stavitsky (Montclair, N.J.: The Montclair Art Museum, 1994), 57. This “order” is part of the post-World War I return to order and realism after the fragmenting horror of the war. Orvell argues that Sheeler found the great unwashed too chaotic to

decay. Their intended subjects are distinct, yet temporally connected: industrialization for Sheeler and deindustrialization for Moore.

Public reactions to each, however, have been remarkably similar. In his 1930 landmark book *Modern American Painters*, Samuel Kootz condemned Sheeler's work as "bloodless" and unconcerned with human life.¹⁸² Elizabeth McCausland criticized Sheeler in a 1939 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art for ignoring the "tension and struggle of the modern industrial world....at any moment in front of these magnificent and immaculate cylinders, police may shoot pickets in the back."¹⁸³ Moore has, in his contributions to the discourse of ruin porn, also been accused of eliding the complexities of humanity in his photographs.¹⁸⁴

The irony of Sheeler and Moore's human-less landscapes is that, by nature, they are implicitly imbued with the trace of humanity. Sheeler's factories, after all, would not exist if not for the architects and engineers that built them and the employees that worked in them. Moore's photographs are commonly understood as a mournful echo of humanity. Moore specializes in showing the former social and cultural majesty of places; aside from his Detroit project he has shown the so-called "fading splendor" of theaters, schools, and government buildings in Havana and post-Soviet Russia.

depict in an orderly fashion. For an engaging analysis of the avant garde's return to form and its effect on contemporary artists, see: Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Boston, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁸² Samuel Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York: Brewer and Warren, Inc., 1930), 35.

¹⁸³ As quoted in Orvell, "Inspired by Science and the Modern," 57.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example: Morton, "Something, Something, Something, Detroit," 2009.

Detroit Disassembled and Missing Context

In the accompanying essay to *Detroit Disassembled*, Philip Levine identifies the human traces in the marks of language (a primary element of culture) left on these ruins.¹⁸⁵ Many of the factory images still bear their former logos, waterlogged books in the depository and library images still display their words, and faded billboards still publicize house liquidation services. Moore's most striking shot of human trace through language comes in an image of the East Grand Boulevard Methodist Church on Detroit's East Side. The photograph shows the interior of the church from the upper gallery (Figure 50). All the subject tropes of ruin photography are present, including mountains of trash and construction scraps, peeling plaster and paint, and evidence of nature seen in the birds in the clerestory windows. All evidence of human presence has been reduced to traces of detritus save for a phrase painted onto the gallery bannister opposite Moore. "And You Shall Say God Did It," printed in old English lettering, remains almost untouched by the surrounding decay. The rest of the composition ensures the gravity of this statement. In his essay for *Detroit Disassembled*, Philip Levine calls it a "found poem" and remarks on its profound irony:

I expect the inscription was placed there in better times and had no reference to the destruction that now greets the eye, but if it were true regarding all that the parishioners once celebrated, it just might be true now. The photograph would appear to think so even if the parishioners wouldn't.¹⁸⁶

In other words, it does not matter to what the previous inhabitants of this building—Detroiters themselves—attribute its ruinous state. For Levine and Moore, the photograph positions Detroit as the victim in a truly eschatological narrative of God's wrath.

¹⁸⁵ Philip Levine, "Nobody's Detroit," in Moore, *Detroit Disassembled*, 115.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

Although Levine mentions the parishioners indirectly, he does not find it important to identify them or the purpose of this church. But these elements expand and destabilize this image's meaning.

The East Grand Boulevard Methodist Church played a significant role in Detroit's racial dynamics in the twentieth century. Following the 1943 race riots on Detroit's Belle Isle, the church made efforts to integrate the congregation. During the 1950s, many of the church's most prominent members and financial backers lived in the suburbs and drove into Detroit every Sunday. When the church received its first black pastor at the end of the decade, those members found suburban parishes and the East Grand Boulevard location became an all-black congregation.¹⁸⁷ Following the integration of several exclusive black churches under the umbrella United Methodist Church in 1967, many of those parishioners worried about the legitimacy of their future in the denomination. In response, a group of black Methodist pastors met at the East Grand Boulevard church in November 1967 to discuss the future of racial equality and to begin to establish the Commission on Religion and Race.¹⁸⁸ The choice of location in post-riot Detroit speaks powerfully to the growing agency of black actors on the American sociopolitical stage. After 1967, the church became the home of prominent black theologians such as Bishop Woodie White, who served as a pastor there before becoming bishop-in-residence at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ruth Dixon Truman, "Letter to the editor," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 2013. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/la-le-1231-tuesday-detroit-tours-20131231,0,764615.story#axzz2viBUt6Bm>.

¹⁸⁸ "Our History," Black Methodists for Church Renewal, 2011. <http://www.bmcrcumc.org/history>.

¹⁸⁹ "White to Preach at Central UMC to Honor Dr. King," The Detroit Conference of the United Methodist Church, January 17, 2013. <http://www.detroitconference.org/news/detail/785#.Ux5rRMEV6PU.email>.

Although the East Grand Boulevard Methodist Church was a site of black agency in post-World War II Detroit generally and in the same year as the Twelfth Street riot particularly, Andrew Moore favors decontextualized lament for the city's apocalyptic state. Rather than negotiate the complicated terrain of blame in Detroit, as first seen in the aftermath of the 1967 Twelfth Street riot, Moore—and other ruin pornographers like him—accepts the city as a loser in the march of capitalism's history. In so doing, these photographers imply Detroiters' total lack of agency, when in fact Detroiters have shown their ability to transform the city since that fateful July in 1967.

Epilogue

“We Hope for Better Things”

In April 2012, *The Atlantic* published a hopeful article about Detroit. Writer K. Scott Krieder urged the reader to “dig deeper than the media’s treatment of the city.”¹⁹⁰ Instead of the pervasive ruin trope, Krieder characterized Detroit as a “resurgent” space for local artists.¹⁹¹ Specifically, he emphasized a transformative theme in a discussion of Tyree Guyton’s Detroit art environment, the Heidelberg Project. Guyton, with the help of many other Detroiters, converted the vacant houses and lots that characterized his home neighborhood into monuments of assemblage. Houses were affixed with large stuffed animals, records, and paintings. As Krieder explained the transformative effect of Guyton’s imaginative and vibrant spaces, he emphasized the importance of fostering pride and a sense of ownership in impoverished communities. Here Krieder used the same argument that the Citizens Committee for Equal Opportunity employed in their housing report only months before the 1967 riot.¹⁹² He linked positive physical environments with self-respect and agency.

Roughly a year after Krieder wrote this article, however, the Heidelberg Project confronted a decided lack of community respect. In October 2013, a string of arsons began to destroy the many houses that were identified with the Heidelberg. Between October 2013 and March 2014, nine fires were set at the project, completely destroying

¹⁹⁰ K. Scott Krieder, “Can Stuffed Animals and Polka Dots Save a Detroit Neighborhood?,” *The Atlantic Cities*, April 12, 2012. <http://m.theatlanticcities.com/neighborhoods/2012/04/can-stuffed-animals-and-polka-dots-save-detroit-neighborhood/1747/>

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Citizens Committee for Equal Opportunity, “A Report to the People of Detroit on Housing in the City of Detroit, Part I,” February 1967, series VII, folder 1, box 336, Cavanagh Collection, ALUA.

six houses and damaging many others.¹⁹³ Although these attacks were undeniably devastating, Guyton and his team have continued to emphasize the opportunities for new life that they provided. The team has cleaned away the debris from the destroyed areas, held public engagements and fundraisers for new security, and started a new three-year plan for the project.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, despite the anger many felt at the anonymous arsonists, Guyton has repeatedly expressed sympathy for them. In an official statement regarding the OJ [Obstruction of Justice] House in October, Guyton said: “We want you to know that we understand your pain.”¹⁹⁵ Although the future of the Heidelberg Project is uncertain, Guyton and his colleagues have met these repeated attempts to victimize the project with determination and positivity. Theirs is not a utopian fantasy; efforts such as these have helped break the cycle of victimization and blame that has haunted Detroit since 1967.

Guyton, along with other artists working in Detroit, are not unaware of the city’s ruins and the popular photography genre that documents them. Jim Griffioen, for example, has created an impressive archive of Detroit’s vacant spaces. These artists, however, also take an active role in Detroit communities—a commitment that does not interest ruin photographers such as Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. By rendering Detroiters passive and nearly invisible and their physical environment as a hopeless wasteland, these artists turn the city and its residents into victims. Nonetheless, their assignation of blame targets the victims themselves. They make the visual argument that

¹⁹³ Charles Jackson and Lauren Podell, “Fire Destroys Heidelberg’s ‘Party Animal’ House: 6th Heidelberg Home Destroyed by Fire,” ClickOnDetroit, March 7, 2014.

<http://www.clickondetroit.com/news/heidelberg-projects-doll-house-burns-to-ground/24855160>.

¹⁹⁴ Emily Bunder, personal correspondence with author, January 16, 2014.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in “As Flames Consume Heidelberg Project, Tyree Guyton Rebuilds,” by Bill McGraw, *Deadline Detroit*, November 21, 2013.

http://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/7311/even_as_flames_continue_to_consume_the_heidelberg_project_tyree_guyton_rebuilds#.UzSTEK1dUcs

even though modern industrial capitalism ruined the city, its residents are unwilling and incapable of changing it. Although ruin photographers remove people from their work while simultaneously victim-blaming them, published photographs of Detroit rioters in 1967 also used the same rhetoric of victimization and victim-blaming. Local publications such as the *Detroit Free Press* and national ones such as *LIFE* simultaneously evoked sympathy for the living conditions of inner city Detroiters and, without irony, blamed them for destroying those living spaces. Contemporary Detroit-based artists, particularly those working with public installations, directly challenge the notion that Detroiters are incapable of affecting positive change in their city.

Scott Hocking has been exploring Detroit's abandoned spaces since he was a child. When asked about his feelings on ruin porn in a 2011 *Bad at Sports* interview, he brushed off the recent phenomenon and its purveyors as "late to the party."¹⁹⁶ His wanderings around the city have led him to create site-specific installations in many of Detroit's iconic abandoned structures. Time and history are crucial themes for Hocking, through which he interrogates the nature of ruins. These works, such as his 2007-2009 monument *Ziggurat*, interact with their surroundings over long periods of time (Figure 51). *Ziggurat*, a pyramid of wooden blocks at the Fisher Body Plant 21, creates a stark visual palimpsest.¹⁹⁷ Hocking calls the placement of the ancient symbol of a ziggurat pyramid in the decayed plant as a "ruin within a ruin."¹⁹⁸ Hocking asked viewers to reflect on connections between these structures: "Why do we look at some ruins with

¹⁹⁶ Sarah Margolis-Pineo, "Seeing Beauty in All Stages: An Interview With Scott Hocking," *Bad at Sports: Contemporary Art Talk*, August 4, 2011. <http://badatsports.com/2011/seeing-beauty-in-all-stages-an-interview-with-scott-hocking/>

¹⁹⁷ Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat*, artist website, accessed March 27, 2014. <http://scotthocking.com/ziggurat.html>. The piece stood for two years before the Environmental Protection Agency cleared the area of all materials deemed "hazardous."

¹⁹⁸ Margolis-Pineo, "Seeing Beauty in All Stages," August 4, 2011.

reverence, and see others as failures?”¹⁹⁹ By engaging the public’s interest in the significance of monuments and ruins, Hocking directly addressed the idea of a lived history in Detroit, in contrast to the generalized, static, and almost timeless effect of ruin photographs.

In addition to monuments such as a pyramid of illegally dumped tires and an egg-shaped cairn made of marble fragments from Michigan Central Station, Hocking continues to work on long-term photography projects that document Detroit. Though the images are elegiac, Hocking conceptualizes them in surprising ways. *The Zone*, a project that spanned from 1999 to 2010, consists of a series of photographs that show streets crumbling into wild prairie, far-off factories surrounded by marshland, wildflower patches, and strewn detritus (figures 52-54). The quiet, melancholic aesthetics of these images pulls from a photographic trend to show Detroit’s “return to nature.” Hocking, however, contextualized the series in his artist’s statement. The spaces Hocking documented are part of the I-94 Industrial Park Renaissance Zone, a 289.6-acre area of vacant land hypothetically open to building projects.²⁰⁰ Since the 1990s, The Michigan Economic Development Corporation has systematically demolished any manmade structures in the area with the hope of luring builders. Instead of redevelopment, however, Hocking has observed that the area has “inadvertently become one of the most natural topographies of Detroit.”²⁰¹ Here Hocking suggests a certain victory of Detroit’s natural landscape over the intrusion of foreign, commercial businesses. Rather than keep these spaces devoid of historical context the way many “return to nature” ruin photographers do, Hocking explains how these lands came to be vacant and overtaken by

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Scott Hocking, “The Zone,” artist website, accessed March 25, 2014. <http://scotthocking.com/zone.html>

²⁰¹ Ibid.

flora and fauna. In so doing, Hocking articulates a history of the city more specifically than in *Ziggurat*. As Scott Hocking and other Detroit-based photographers such as Jim Griffioen show, providing localized context for images of blight de-sensationalizes the phenomenon. This presents a potential future for photographic representations of Detroit.

Peter O’Keefe’s *A Brief and Peculiar History of Detroit* is the most successful and dedicated example of historicizing photographic representations of the city. O’Keefe brought together several artists and writers living in Detroit to create an anthology of textual and photographic essays. Each contributor reflected on his or her history in the city. O’Keefe introduces the book with his personal genealogical narrative in Poletown, a Polish neighborhood that became eminent domain for the General Motors Assembly Plant.²⁰² The subsequent contributions are both personal and deeply historical. Most of the photographs depict Detroiters in past eras. Local photographer Tim Hagerty contributed an archive of photographs that documented Detroiters on the city’s northwest side in the 1970s. The images are arresting examples of snapshot aesthetics, showing Hagerty’s friends and acquaintances in the neighborhood (Figures 55-57). The series brings new life to photographic representations of Detroit after the Twelfth Street riot.

In his own chapter, O’Keefe used anonymously authored archival photographs to narrate the Hamtramck Dodge Main plant’s history. In certain places, O’Keefe paired images of Dodge employees working at the plant in the early twentieth century with representations of those same spaces, now vacated, in the 1980s (Figures 58-59). Even though these comparisons elicit questions about what has been lost in the intervening years, the way in which they are sandwiched between spirited documentary projects such

²⁰² Peter O’Keefe, *A Brief and Peculiar History of Detroit* (Detroit, MI: published by author, 2013), 13.

as Hagerty's asserts a human context. In this way, O'Keefe posits Detroit as a multifaceted space, rather than ruin photographs' narrow focus on a static physical environment. Although the collapse of the auto industry has come to characterize Detroit's plight, the everyday life of its residents also characterizes the city's dynamic reality. By taking this view, O'Keefe asserts that cities should be understood through their humanity.

The most important engagement between Detroit's contemporary arts scene and its surrounding communities is Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project. The project combines the poetics of installation demonstrated by Scott Hocking and the attention to Detroit's human history as demonstrated by Peter O'Keefe. The project's genesis is intimately tied to the reality of blight in Detroit. After spending time away from the city, Guyton returned to his family's home on Heidelberg Street in 1986 only to see the area "riddled with drugs and deepening poverty."²⁰³ He and his grandfather cleaned up the vacant lots in the area, keeping any refuse they came across. Then, Guyton began to transform the existing space with the materials they collected. In addition to the houses that have become the iconic face for the project, Guyton used material assemblage and painting to transform the area's vacant lots, trees, and streets (Figures 60-62). Even more significantly, Guyton has extended the project past its physical manifestation into realms of outreach and community education. With the increasing ephemerality of the actual art environment in light of the recent arsons, it is crucial that the Heidelberg team redouble its educational efforts, particularly for young children. In an area of Detroit where ninety percent of its residents live below the poverty level, drug and gang activity has become

²⁰³ "Heidelberg History," The Heidelberg Project, accessed March 19, 2014.
http://www.heidelberg.org/research_resources/

all the more alluring to impoverished youths.²⁰⁴ For Guyton and his colleagues, the future of Detroit lies in the ability of these people to channel their pain and anger into art, rather than violence.

Art historian and curator Marion E. Jackson has characterized Guyton's social engagement as emblematic of "dialogic art" as identified by Grant Kester.²⁰⁵ Dialogical art has been characterized as socially concerned conversations by public art scholars such as Nicolas Bourriaud and Tom Finkelpearl.²⁰⁶ Rather than a work of art existing as an isolated object, dialogic art such as the Heidelberg Project necessarily engages artists and audiences to transform both parties. In a literal sense, Tyree Guyton has fostered such dialogue by welcoming public contributions and by spending a considerable amount of time on-site, eager to start conversations with visitors.²⁰⁷

On a more symbolic level, Guyton encourages dialogue in his art through visual allusions to serious social issues. In the first years of the Heidelberg Project, Guyton began to install "Soles of the Most High." Shoes have been a prominent theme in Guyton's work for their disquieting signification of homelessness and lynching (Figure 63). Guyton's grandfather told him "You couldn't see the people. But you could see the soles of their shoes," a statement that made a lasting impact in his life.²⁰⁸ Even without this context, the mass of shoes has an unsettling quality. The playful juxtaposition

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Marion E. Jackson, "Trickster in the City," in Tyree Guyton, ed., *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 33-34.

²⁰⁶ For more on this subject, see: Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Boston, MA: The MIT Press, 2000); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris, France: *les presses du reel*, 1998); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); and Erika Doss, "Public Art Controversy: Cultural Expression and Civic Debate," *Americans for the Arts Monograph*, October 2006.

²⁰⁷ Jackson, "Trickster in the City," 35.

²⁰⁸ Quoted in "The Heidelberg Project—Detroit, Michigan," Design Observer Group, n.d. http://places.designobserver.com/media/pdf/The_Heidelberg_659.pdf, accessed March 24, 2014.

between the shoes and other colorful projects scattered across the environment, however, raises a complex and troubling series of questions in the mind of the viewer. Guyton further alludes to issues of racial history in installations such as the Obstruction of Justice house (abbreviated the OJ house, it was informed by the 1994 O.J. Simpson trial). In his allusions, however, Guyton employs a certain personal mythology that redirects interpretations in multivalent ways.²⁰⁹ By obfuscating these statements on race and history, Guyton opens discussion along many different avenues. As Marion E. Jackson explains, “while he alludes, through graffiti-like text, to specific events and divisive social issues such as the O.J. Simpson trial or the Detroit race riots of 1967, he does not offer judgment.”²¹⁰ By refusing to attach judgment to any one side of these issues, he breaks the cycle of blame that has plagued Detroit’s sociopolitical history in the twentieth century.

Despite the “medicine of hope” that Guyton strives to provide, some Detroiters find that medicine too bitter to swallow.²¹¹ In 1991 and 1999, the city abruptly sent bulldozers into the neighborhood to demolish all of Guyton’s structures that were located on public land.²¹² While some city officials have persistently defended Guyton and his project, many are blatantly hateful towards him and it. During preparations to order the destruction of the project in 1998, city councilwoman Kay Everett said, “I want it gone. I’d put on a hard hat and drive the bulldozer myself.”²¹³ The Heidelberg Project has become an intensely divisive issue, splitting Detroiters and suburbanites into two camps:

²⁰⁹ Justine Lai, “Specific Site: The Art of Tyree Guyton,” CUE Art Foundation, 2013.

<http://cueartfoundation.org/young-art-critics-essays/specific-site-the-art-of-tyree-guyton-by-justine-lai>

²¹⁰ Jackson, “Trickster in the City,” 35.

²¹¹ “Biography,” The Art of Tyree Guyton, accessed December 2013.

<http://www.tyreeguyton.com/biography>

²¹² Marilyn L. Wheaton, “Heidelberg and the City,” in Guyton, ed., *Connecting the Dots*, 73-74.

²¹³ Ibid.

those who see the project as artful neighborhood revitalization, and those who see it as “garbage” instead of art. In any given comments section on any recent article concerning the Heidelberg, one user will blame Guyton for perpetuating the literal “trashiness” of inner city ghettos while another praises him as Detroit’s most important and positive cultural leader. This divide, often evident in inner city Detroit communities themselves, illustrates the ambiguous and ambivalent reaction to social and environmental change in the city that has persisted from 1967.

The series of unsolved arsons at the Heidelberg Project, juxtaposed with the outpouring of support that has followed, articulated the complexity of change in Detroit.²¹⁴ Many popular media platforms have published Guyton’s complicated story, particularly online news sources such as *The Huffington Post*. These articles are often illustrated with colorful photographs showing the Heidelberg Project. These stories and images reach around the world and help to create new narratives for Detroit. These accounts are not rose tinted or utopian; rather, they acknowledge the active dynamics of a city in transformation. A remark Marvin Gaye once made regarding his move to Detroit around 1960 has become an eloquent truism for the city: “Detroit turned out to be heaven, but it also turned out to be hell.”²¹⁵ Detroit is, most accurately, a coexistence of heaven and hell. Although Detroit has publicly grappled with volatile questions of race and poverty in the twentieth-century, large spaces of hope continue to exist in the city. Since the 1967 Twelfth Street riot, Detroiters have demonstrated the agency to dramatically transform their physical environment. By turning towards self-narration, Detroiters today

²¹⁴ The Heidelberg Project, “Art from the Ashes: Securing a Legacy,” Indiegogo, December 20, 2013, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/art-from-the-ashes-securing-a-legacy>. The “Securing a Legacy” campaign raised more than \$54,000 in one month.

²¹⁵ David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Marvin Gaye* (New York: De Capo Press, 1991), 55.

challenge the apocalyptic assumptions of ruin porn. In so doing, they reveal the determination and hope that has truly characterized Detroit in the twentieth century.



Figure 1. Detroit UrbEx, A 1988 basketball game over the present-day condition of the old gymnasium (Cass Technical High School), 2012.



Figure 2. Staff photographer, “Rep. John Conyers, atop car, vainly attempts to disperse the crowds,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967.



Figure 3. Staff photographer, “Youth hurls rock at a *Free Press* photographer,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967.



Figure 4. Staff photographer, “Looters went on a spree, turning Twelfth St. into a giant grab bag of more drums, toasters, toys. . . .and soft drinks for anyone with arms to carry,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 1967.



Figure 5. Ira Rosenberg, “Up the street, firemen fight a blaze while police check looting suspects,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 1967.



Figure 6. Ira Rosenberg, “A Twelfth St. “reveler” takes his ease on a stolen chair after a hard day in the street,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 23, 1967.



Figure 7. Ira Rosenberg, “Both sides of Linwood Avenue just north of Euclid were turned into smoking, raging infernos as this dramatic aerial photo points out,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967.



Figure 8. Tony Spina “Three National Guardsmen patrol the corner of Hazelwood and Linwood with weapons drawn as residents from the neighborhood look on with a mixture of amusement and anger, Detroit, Michigan,” July 1967. Image courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.



Figure 9. Tony Spina, “An unseen Detroit Police Officer prepares to arrest four African American men, Detroit, Michigan. In the foreground, a National Guardsman trains his rifle on the suspects,” July 1967. Image courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.



Figure 10. Tony Spina, “Police officers accompany National Guardsmen as they disembark from their transport vehicle onto Linwood Avenue, Detroit, Michigan. In the background one can see burning businesses and a police blockade,” July 1967. Image courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.



Figure 11. Staff photographer, “FREE FOR ALL—Hoodlums and just by-standers hit the U.S. Loan office on 12th street. This was one of the first business places to be hit,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.

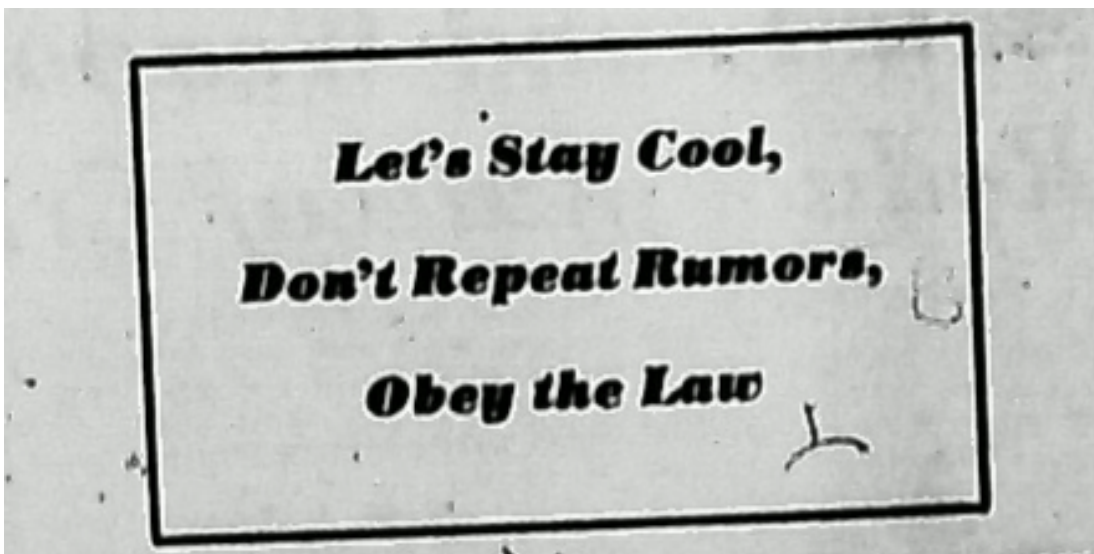


Figure 12. “Let’s Stay Cool, Don’t Repeat Rumors, Obey the Law,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.



Figure 13. "Troops patrol a burning Detroit Street," *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.

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Figure 14. Total Electric Living, “Total Electric Living is a clean break with the past,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.



Figure 15. Staff photographer, “Above, the hard stock of a policeman’s riot gun stops Negro suspect,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.



Figure 16. Staff photographer, “Chasing an arson suspect through a west side Negro residential area, a National Guard tank rumbles to a halt,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.



Figure 17. Staff photographer, "A convoy of Jeeps patrols the darkened streets for snipers," *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.



Figure 18. Staff photographer, “Flushed from cover, the suspect is braced against the tank and questioned at gunpoint by a sergeant,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.

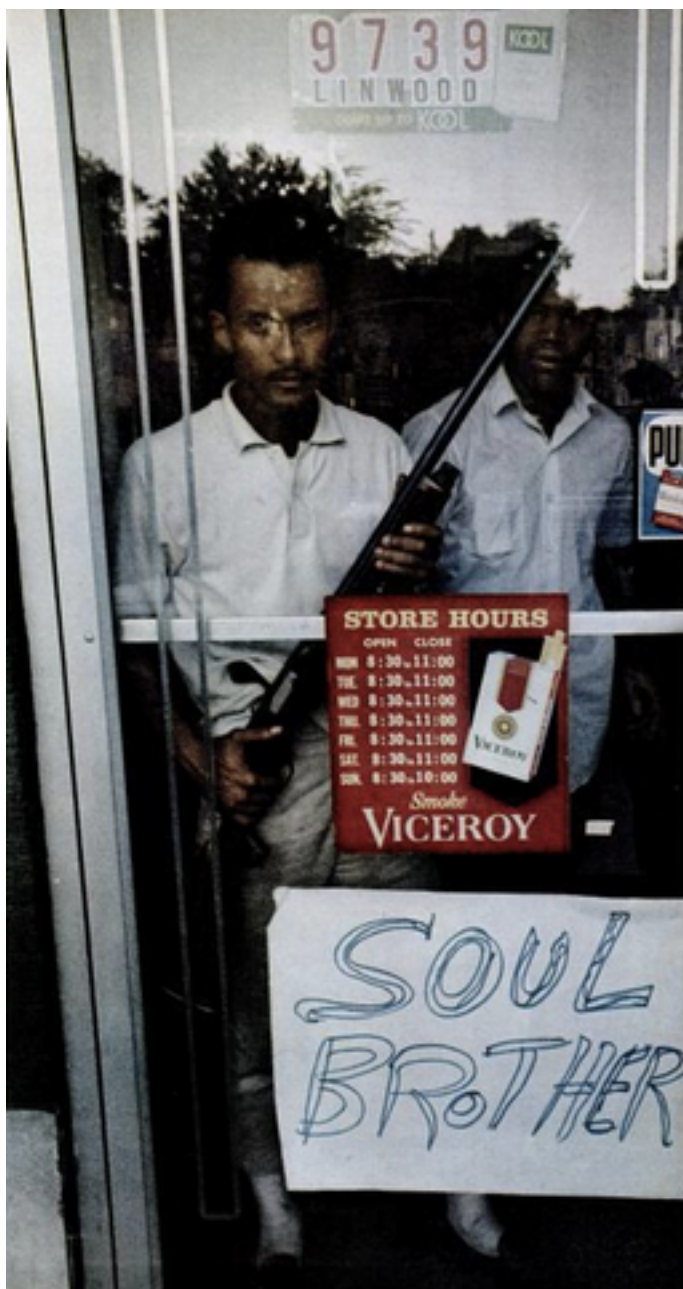


Figure 19. Staff photographer, “Behind the locked door of his grocery store, the Negro proprietor backs up—with a shotgun—the “soul” sign he has hung in there in hopes it would deter Negro looters. Many such signs were ignored by the mobs, who pillaged indiscriminately,” *LIFE Magazine*, August 4, 1967.



Figure 20. Staff photographer, “MEANINGLESS SIGNS—These signs placed in windows had little meaning as many businesses owned by Negroes were sacked as whites joined Negroes in the looting,” *Michigan Chronicle*, July 29, 1967.



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Figure 21. Clairol, “The closer he gets...the better you look!,” *LIFE* Magazine, August 4, 1967.

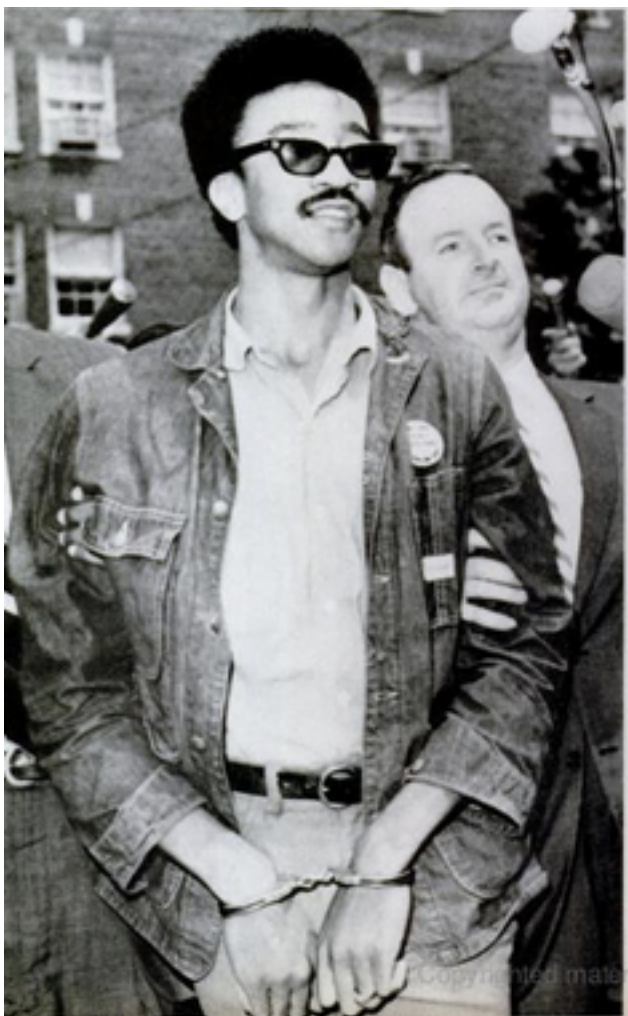


Figure 22. Staff photographer, “Hands manacled, H. Rap Brown is led to the courthouse in Alexandria, Va. To be arraigned on charges of inciting riot and arson in Cambridge, Md. The Negro militant had gone to Cambridge from the Black Power conference in Newark. On arrival he climbed atop a car and yelled: “In w town this size, three men can burn it down.” In the ensuing riot Brown was hit in the forehead by a shotgun pellet. Asked later if he had urged burning of buildings, he replied: “Be serious, man. Do I have to tell black people what to burn?”,” *LIFE Magazine*, August 4, 1967.



Figure 23. AP, "THE GOVERNOR GETS PROTECTION: When Michigan's Governor George Romney toured the riot area in Detroit yesterday, a policeman with shotgun rode next to him," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1967.



Figure 24. AP, “National Guardsmen called to Detroit move through the residential area set afire by rioters,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 1967.

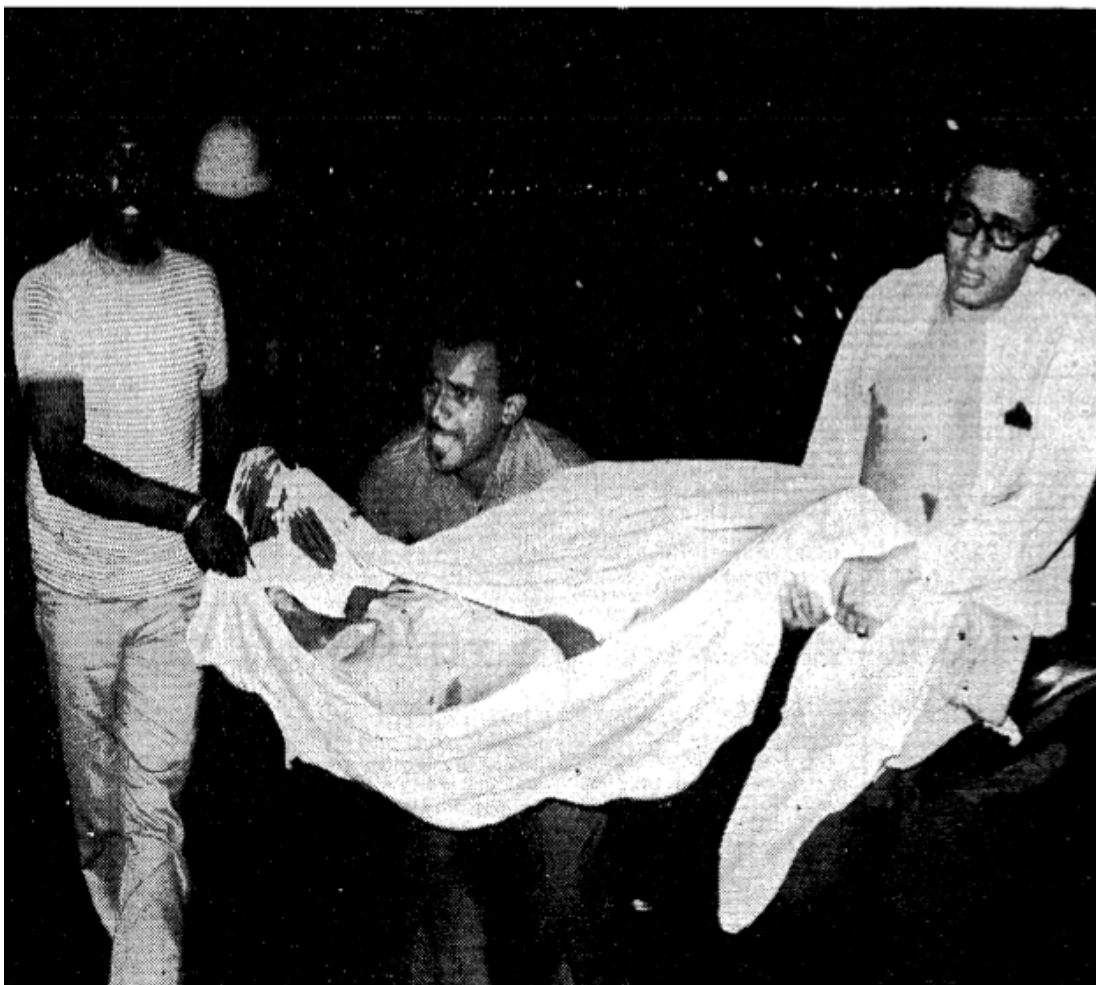


Figure 25. Staff photographer, "VICTIM IN EAST HARLEM: A Puerto Rican youth is carried by bystanders on 112th Street between Second and Third Avenue. He was found on the sidewalk after shooting between police and snipers. He died of a broken neck," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1967.



Figure 26. AP, “FEDERAL TROOPS GO INTO DETROIT: Elements of U.S. Army paratroops on the highway as Federal forces were moved into Detroit last night as reinforcements for the National Guard units and police battling rioters and looters,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 1967.

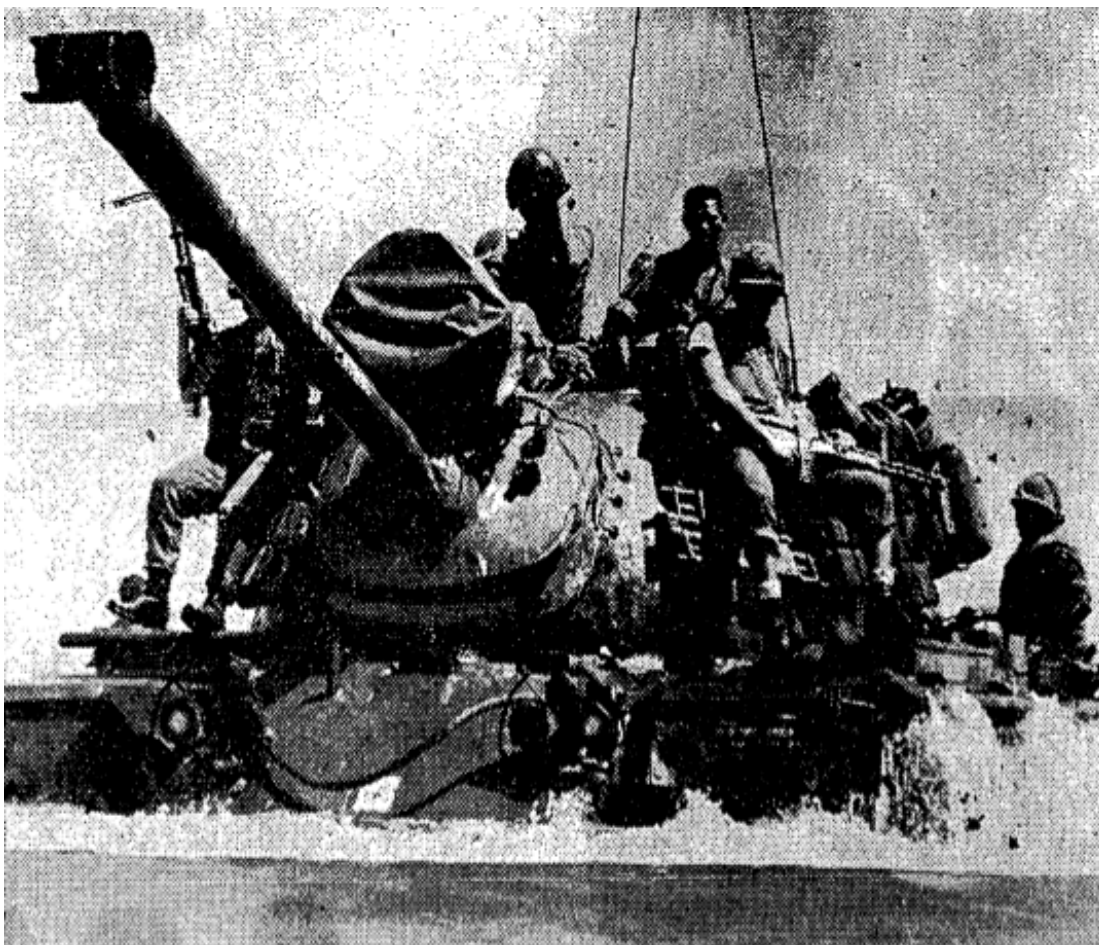


Figure 27. AP, “Two machine gunners keep a sharp lookout as a Marine Corps tank advances through shallow water during an amphibious landing in South Vietnam near the demilitarized zone,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 1967.



Figure 28. U.S. Navy via Associated Press, "AFTER DISASTER STRUCK: Crewmen fighting the blaze on the flight deck of the Forrestal," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1967



Figure 29. “City’s Scars Remind Pilot of War Scenes,” *Detroit News*, September 3, 1967.



Figure 30. Igor Beginin for the *Detroit News*, September 3, 1967.



Figure 31. Igor Beginin for the *Detroit News*, September 3, 1967.



Figure 32. Matthew Barney, *Khu*, 2010



Figure 33. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Ballroom, American Hotel*, 2010



Figure 34. Andrew Moore, *Bob-Lo Boat, Detroit*, 2008-2009.



Figure 35. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Michigan Central Station*, 2010.



Figure 36. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Packard Plant*, 2010.



Figure 37. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *David Broderick Tower*, 2010.

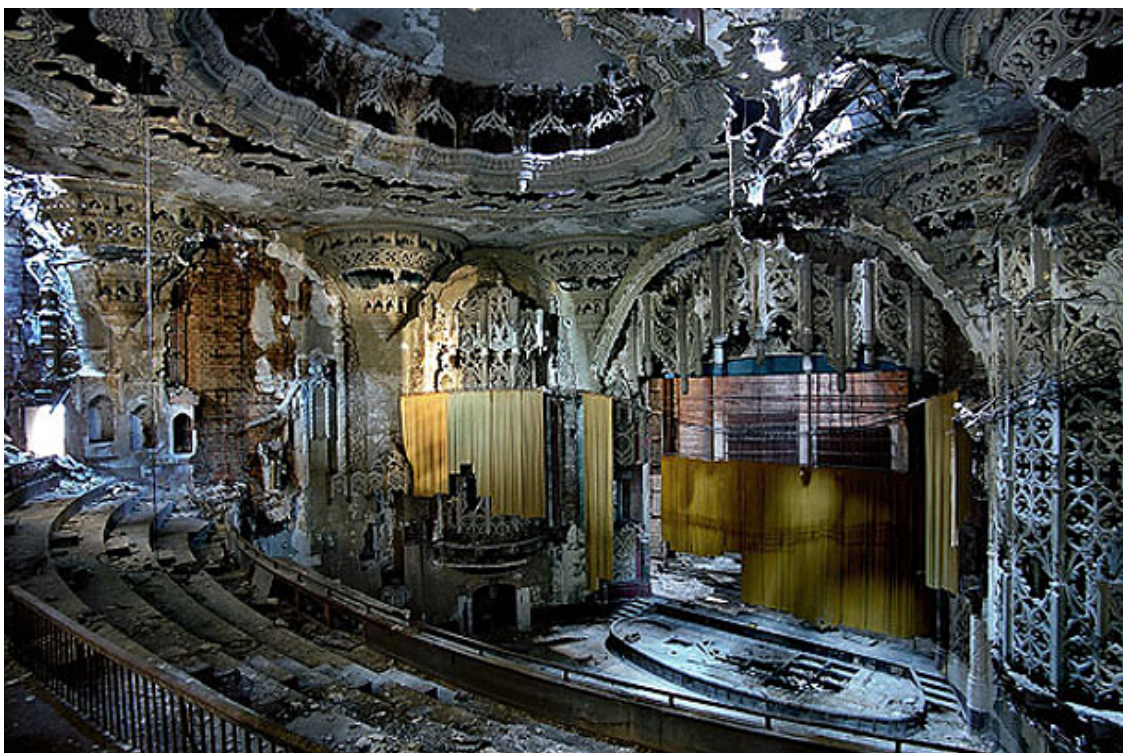


Figure 38. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *United Artists Theatre*, 2010



Figure 39. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Rich Dex Apartments*, 2010.

Visit the Vast Ruins of Detroit!

Come see abandoned auto factories, the ruined skyscrapers and future of all other US cities.



Figure 40. Jeff Davis, "Visit the Vast Ruins of Detroit!" 2011.



Figure 41. Caspar David Friedrich, *Der Träumer* (*The Dreamer*), 1820-1840.



Figure 42. Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men by the Sea*, 1817.



Figure 43. Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of la Grande Galerie in Ruins*, 1796.



Figure 44. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *Ballroom, Lee Plaza Hotel*, 2010.



Figure 45. Andrew Moore, *Rolling Hall, Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Complex*, 2008 (printed in 2009), pigment print. Courtesy of the artist and the Yancey Richardson Gallery. Detroit Institute of Arts.



Figure 46. Andrew Moore, *Model T Headquarters, Highland Park*, 2009. Digital inkjet print, 91.4 x 115.6 cm.



Figure 47. Andrew Moore, *Birches growing in decayed books*, *Detroit Public Schools Book Depository*, 2009, digital chromogenic print scanned from film negative, 62 x 97.5 in.,



Figure 48. From Jim Griffioen's "School's Out Forever," *VICE*, February 1, 2009. "A box elder tree grows from a soil made of ash and pulp from science textbooks in the Detroit Public Schools' Roosevelt Warehouse. A man's body was discovered in a frozen lift shaft here. It is assumed he had been there for some months as his face had decomposed."



Figure 49. Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930.



Figure 50. Andrew Moore, *East Grand Boulevard Methodist Church*, 2009.



Figure 51. Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat, East, Summer*, 2007-2009



Figure 52. Scott Hocking, *The Zone*, 1999-2010



Figure 53. Scott Hocking, *The Zone*, 1999-2010



Figure 54. . Scott Hocking, *The Zone*, 1999-2010



Figure 55. Tim Hagerty, *Kit*, July 1972



Figure 56. Tim Hagerty, *TK and feline friend*, January 1973



Figure 57. Tim Hagerty, *View from the passenger seat of 1970 AMC Matador station wagon*, September 5, 1976



Figure 58. “Strikers, Dodge Main,” March 1937, published in Peter O’Keefe, *A Brief and Peculiar History of Detroit* (March 2013).



Figure 59. ‘Main Gate and Guard House,” 1980, published in Peter O’Keefe, *A Brief and Peculiar History of Detroit* (March 2013).



Figure 60. *Dotty Wotty Mobile*, Heidelberg Project archive photographs, n.d.

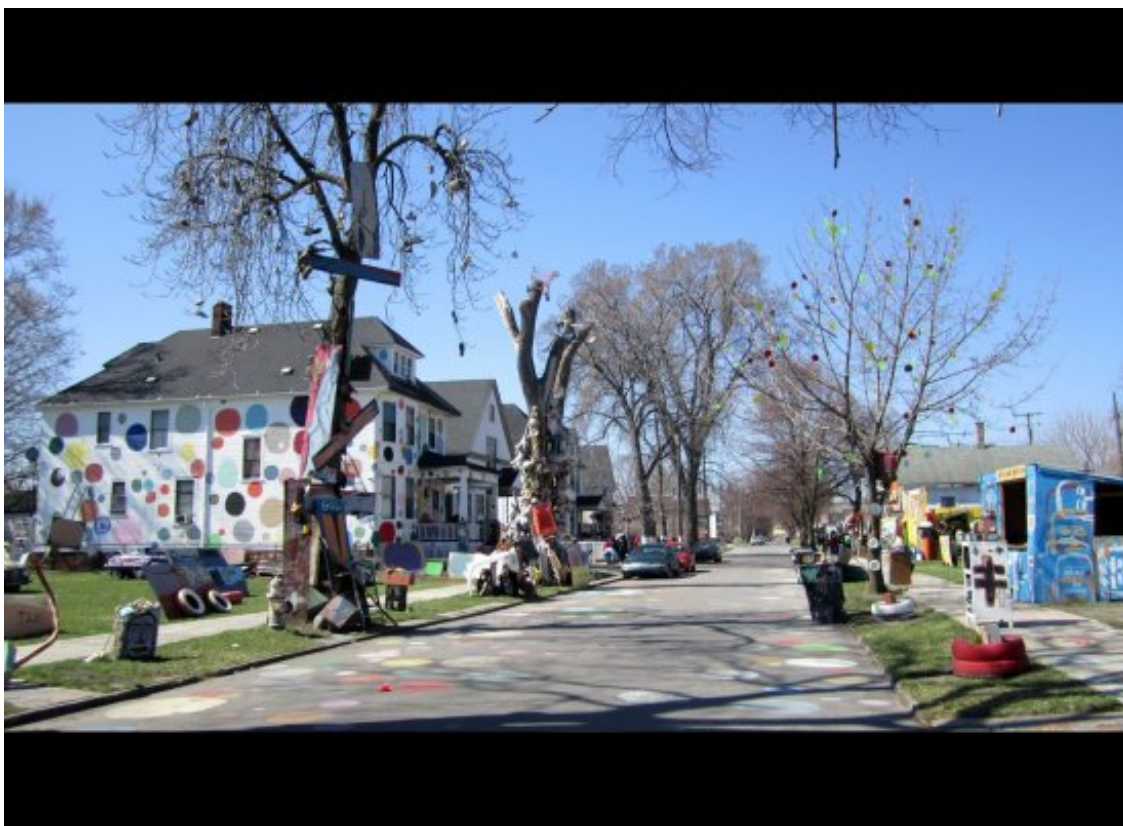


Figure 61. Tyree Guyton, *Heidelberg Project*, 1986 (ongoing).



Figure 62. Tyree Guyton, *Noah's Ark (Heidelberg Project)*, n.d.



Figure 63. Tyree Guyton (photograph by AP), *Street Folk*, 2011.

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