ART IS NOT A CRIME: HIP-HOP, URBAN GEOGRAPHY, AND POLITICAL IMAGINARIES IN DETROIT

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the relationship between hip-hop culture, urban geography, and politics in Detroit, Michigan. I begin by discussing the work of the hip-hop music and arts collective the Raiz Up collective from Southwest Detroit. After discussing the political situation out of which this group of artists emerged, I describe how the Raiz Up works in their community to mediate the spatial antagonisms spawned by the city’s urban development policies. Specifically, I argue that the work of this collective articulates the structural interconnections of issues separated by space and time. Next, I write about visual artist Tyree Guyton’s neighborhood installation the Heidelberg Project and the hip hop and theater group Complex Movements’ piece “Beware of the Dandelions.” My analysis of these two pieces frames them as critical aesthetic and political interventions into urban design itself. Additionally, I argue that these pieces gesture towards alternative political possibilities regarding urban spatial organization. Finally, I analyze the track “Detroit vs. Everybody” by a variety of Detroit hip-hop artists and the work of rapper Danny Brown. My discussion of these songs emphasizes the extent to which they critique media narratives of Detroit’s “revitalization.” Additionally, I suggest that these tracks articulate the precarity that characterizes marginalized subjects’ movements through space.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Detroit is home to a rich tradition and history of black American cultural and musical production. The city – once the home of the legendary record label Motown – has been a center of American musical life and has been called home by luminary artists working in genres such as Motown, soul, jazz, the blues, rock, and hip-hop. Additionally, Detroit has had a fascinating and, at times, turbulent historical trajectory with relation to its politics, economy, cultural, and “race relations.”¹ In this thesis, I will examine the ways the work of Detroit’s present-day hip-hop artists is intertwined with the city’s contemporary political climate. In particular, I will examine the ways in which hip-hop artists and activists challenge the politics of contemporary urban geography and the logic of neoliberal urban design.² I hope, in the ensuing chapters, to examine how hip-hop artists and activists in Detroit create work and engage in resistance that is simultaneously shaped by the city’s present spatial development practices and also represents an intervention into the politics and formation of those practices. Some of the artists discussed in these chapters self-identify as political, and create openly subversive music while engaging in community organizing – others do not. Still, all of the artists discussed below emerge from and seek to mediate complex spatial antagonisms and logics that emerge from a political climate characterized by extreme inequality, austerity, privatization, enclosure, and division.

¹ My characterizations of Detroit here (and in this thesis more broadly) is informed by accounts of the city in Detroit Divided by Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002) and in The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit by Thomas J. Sugrue (Princeton University Press, 2005).
² Discussions of neoliberalism here (and in this thesis broadly) are informed by the framework articulated by David Harvey in his work A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford University Press, 2007).
Recent scholarship in the area of music has sought to probe many of the relationships between music and neoliberal political economy. For instance, in a 2011 article Bart Cammaerts has examined the ways in which practices of file sharing and piracy have disrupted the neoliberal privatization of cultural objects and texts.

Additionally, Timothy Taylor has written (in *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*) about the ways in which the capitalist mode of production has conditioned musical development. Specifically, Taylor argues that as the crises and antagonisms that characterize capitalist sociality have become increasingly protracted, the music industry has abandoned freedom and creativity in pursuit of increased profits. Similarly, Matt Stahl has written in 2013 about the ways in which recording artists are increasingly exploited and deprived of the product of their labor. While these texts are tremendously illuminating with regard to how various music industries operate (and while many of the practices of privatization and exploitation in the music industry characterize neoliberalism more broadly), my aim here is not to frame the artists and pieces I discuss as disrupting the contemporary music industry. Instead, I intend to probe the relationship between music, art, sound, and space in the neoliberal urban city. Additionally, I hope to frame art and music as being weaponized by marginalized citizens of Detroit for the purpose of critiquing neoliberalism and the dominant politics of urban space.

While narratives of Detroit’s recent history and trajectory often emphasize recent events, its current political climate has been shaped by social, political, cultural, and

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economic changes that have taken place over several decades. The city—which is often described as a primary site of American industrial innovation and is sometimes described as the birthplace of the middle class—experienced an economic heyday in the mid-twentieth century as the home of the United States’ auto industry and other manufacturing enterprises. Still, by the early 1970s Detroit’s economic prominence had faded, and the city was experiencing an across-the-board decline. Driven by a variety of forces—including corporate and industrial divestment, the loss of manufacturing jobs, political corruption, and population decline (fueled partially by a lack of employment prospects and partially by white flight to the surrounding suburbs after the 1967 rebellion)—this decline has impacted every facet of social life in the city. The effects of this decline were felt especially strongly by marginalized residents—including the city’s black majority as well as its Latin American and indigenous communities—whose share in Detroit’s prosperity has always been greatly circumscribed and unequal.6

While it is crucial to emphasize the extent to which Detroit’s present condition is rooted in a social and political trajectory spanning more than half of a century, the focus of this thesis will be, principally, on events from the time period spanning 2010-2017. This is a period in Detroit that is in many ways defined by the city’s filing for bankruptcy in July of 2013. That event—a low point for a city that had been mired in financial difficulty for years—has come in the ensuing years to overdetermine policymaking decisions and has had an enormous effect on the lives of residents of the city’s neighborhoods. The declaration of bankruptcy has led to a political climate characterized by budget austerity, the privatization of resources and services that had formerly been in

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public hands, and the adoption of gentrification and attracting new residents and business interests as a broad development strategy. In this thesis, I focus on the ways in which hip-hop artists and activists attempt to critique and mediate this condition by using music and art to bring together communities across spatial divides, by cultivating an aesthetic of resistance and intervention into urban spatial design, and by representing the precarity and marginalization that is typical of everyday life in many Detroit neighborhoods despite a widespread narrative of “revitalization.”

Plan of the Present Work

In the first chapter of this thesis, I write about the work of the Raiz Up collective, a hip-hop arts and music organization founded in Southwest Detroit in 2012. Specifically, I will focus on the graffiti art of Antonio Cosme and William Lucka, Raiz Up’s community organizing events in the Southwest Detroit neighborhood of Clark Park, and the music of MC (and Raiz Up member) Raymond Elwart Jr. (Soufy). In this chapter, I explore how the work of this collective emerges from the spatial antagonisms spawned by Detroit’s urban development logic. Specifically, I will examine the Raiz Up collective’s use of music and art to organize their community against the dual threats of austerity and displacement via gentrification. I begin this chapter by narrating the series of events that lead to the Raiz Up’s founding – beginning with the appointment of the city’s emergency financial manager. In describing important events in Detroit’s recent political history, I hope not only to illustrate the environment that present-day hip-hop artists emerge from and work in, but to reveal the extent to which the city’s political

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Zeitgeist is premised upon a series of spatial policies that effect the everyday lives of residents of Southwest Detroit. Additionally, this chapter is guided by both Fredric Jameson’s notion of an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” and by Michael Warner’s theorizing of the ideas “public” and “counterpublic.” I argue in this chapter that the Raiz Up collective seeks to cultivate, in their work, an aesthetic and political position capable of mediating spatial and temporal divides by gesturing towards the structural interconnections between various conditions and oppressions. Additionally, I argue that their work addresses a counterpublic made up of residents of Detroit whose interests are not reflected in city policymaking decisions and, indeed, are not represented by any presently-existing organized political institution.

In this chapter, I write about the work of the hip-hop/theatre/multimedia group Complex Movement and about Tyree Guyton’s neighborhood art installation The Heidelberg Project. What links these case studies together, for me, is the extent to which they represent musical and artistic interventions into urban design. While in Chapter 1 I discuss the ways in which spatial antagonisms have shaped the artistic and political practices of the Raiz Up collective, in this chapter I argue that the work of these artists and organizations can be framed as interventions into urban spatial design itself. I begin by discussing Guyton’s project – its history, the many challenges it has faced, and the aesthetics of the piece itself. Drawing on my visits to the Heidelberg Project between the winter of 2016 and the spring of 2017, I argue (drawing on ideas from philosopher

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Jacques Rancière\textsuperscript{10} and critical geographer Neil Smith\textsuperscript{11} that Guyton’s piece gestures towards a provocative unity of aesthetics and politics, with particular implications for the management and design of urban space. Next, I write about Complex Movements and about their piece “Beware of the Dandelions.” After describing the origins of this group, I will examine the ways in which their piece and performance gesture towards subversive relationships to urban space and to technology. I will describe the ways in which the work of this group emerges from the recent political trajectory of Detroit and from indigenous and afro-centric understandings of community and space. Ultimately, I suggest that the aesthetics of Complex Movements’ piece suggest alternatives to present political and spatial antagonisms in ways that emerge from the cultural practices of black subjects and other marginalized people.

Chapter 3 will be guided by musicologist Adam Krims’ idea of the “urban ethos.” Krims (in his book \textit{Music and Urban Geography}) defines the urban ethos as “… the scope of that range of representations and their possible modalities, in any given time span […]”. Further, he says “[the] urban ethos is… not a particular representation but rather a distribution of possibilities, always having discernable limits and common practices.”\textsuperscript{12} In this chapter, I will examine musical case studies that partially form the range of representations that constitute Detroit’s urban (hip-hop) ethos. I will examine various representations (in the sound, lyrics, and music videos of the city’s hip-hop artists) of Detroit itself, of the city’s trajectory, of its recent political history, and of life there. I am not principally concerned with the relationship of the “represented” city in

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hip-hop to the “real” physically existing city, or with the tendency of popular music to reflect structural changes to urbanity and the urban experience. Instead, I focus on the ways in which Detroit MC’s represent their home city, its struggles, and its resilience and “resurgence” in the mid-2010s. Specifically, I offer ways to understand how these representations of Detroit’s urban space and sociality are informed by (or constitute) different social and political imaginaries, narratives, and mappings of the city’s space, “decline,” and “renewal.” In particular, I examine the popular track “Detroit Vs. Everybody,” a hip-hop song featuring many of the city’s most prominent rappers – Big Sean, Danny Brown, Eminem, Dej Loaf, and Royce da 5’9”. I describe the ways in which this track reflects and critiques dominant framings of the city’s “revitalization.” Additionally, I discuss the solo work of Danny Brown, arguing that his work functions as a representation of urban life and precarity that undermines dominant narratives of Detroit’s trajectory.

**Methodologies**

In this thesis, I am primarily concerned with the relationship of music, sound, and art to the politics of urban space and place. I use the term “space,” following David Harvey, to refer to an abstract system for the organization of social life that emerges from political processes of material production and structural imbalances of power. I use the term “place” to refer to a locale that is a site for the production of particular cultural identities and meanings.

In Chapter 1, I rely on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Detroit during the early fall of 2016. Specifically, this chapter is structured around two interviews that I recorded at that time – one with Antonio Cosme and one with Raymond Elwart Jr
Additionally, the section of this chapter focusing on Detroit’s recent political history is informed by both media accounts and by numerous informal conversations I had with residents of Detroit between the winter of 2016 and spring 2017. Through these interviews and conversations I have learned about Detroit’s (recent and distant) history, about the founding of the Raiz Up collective, the personal histories of many of the artists to work with the group, and the political, cultural, and aesthetic goals of the collective’s work. My goal, here, is to represent the history and work of the Raiz Up collective, emphasizing their involvement with the politics of urban space and belonging within that space. While my framing of the group’s activities is influenced by the work of Michael Warner and by cultural Marxist thought, I have attempted to describe the Raiz Up’s artistic and political work in terms that would resonate with the statements of the artists themselves. To do this, I have included (often in full) statements by collective members that describe in detail their experiences and the political and aesthetic traditions from which they emerged. Additionally, I have chosen to frame struggles surrounding the politics of urban space in Detroit according to internal colonization theory – a framing suggested to me by many of the people I spoke with.

Chapter 2 is again structured around the ethnographic fieldwork. However, the fieldwork experiences described here are less quantifiable than those discussed in Chapter 1. While the fieldwork that informed Chapter 1 took the form of (albeit informal) interviews, this chapter is structured around experiences of being in the Heidelberg Project and attending a performance by Complex Movements. Chapter 2 is more concerned with experiences of participant-observation than with directly representing the words of artists, performers, and residents of Detroit. Additionally (and especially during
my discussion of the Heidelberg Project), the writing in this chapter is influenced strongly by the field of inquiry that has been codified under the term *sound studies*. While I am additionally influenced in this chapter by cultural Marxist thought and by critical geography (most notably the work of Neil Smith), the writing here is oriented towards the study and critique of urban sounds and space. While I do not overtly adopt an established sound studies framework in this chapter, my attention to sound as a vantage point from which to critique the politics of urban space and development was influenced by the writings of Jonathan Sterne\(^\text{13}\) and Veit Erlmann\(^\text{14}\), both of whom have framed sonic matters as crucial to understanding the politics and sociality of modern life. My engagement in this chapter with the ideas of Alexander Weheliye\(^\text{15}\) is further evidence of the profound influence that sound studies has had on my method of inquiry.

Chapter 3 departs from previous chapters in that it is not premised upon ethnographic fieldwork, but upon reading and interpreting cultural texts – namely, songs and music videos by Detroit hip-hop artists. I hope, here, not to treat these texts as isolated objects but to offer a close reading and theorization of them informed by my experiences in Detroit and my conversations and interactions with Detroiter. My goal in this chapter is not to take the cultural texts of mass mediated music as abstracted or self-sufficient, but to reveal the extent to which the representations of Detroit in my case studies are intimately wedded to deeply contested narratives of the city’s trajectory and


supposed progress and “revitalization.” W.E.B. DuBois’ critiques\textsuperscript{16} of the idea of “progress” and George Lipsitz’s notions of the intersections of spatial and racial imaginaries\textsuperscript{17} especially guide my writing and argument in this chapter.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In attempting to understand Detroit’s political history and trajectory and in seeking to situate my work within a tradition of scholarly radicalism and critique, a number of crucial works have been influential. \textit{Detroit Divided} by Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer and \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit} offered incredibly useful structural analysis of the past and present of the city. These works have greatly aided my understanding of Detroit’s political trajectory, and have served to give my crucial elements of context when approaching the too-often shortsighted media narratives of the city’s history. Additionally, I am greatly indebted to William Bunge’s 1971 classic work of collaborative ethnography and critical geography in \textit{Detroit Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution}. This text was not only important as a historical document of the 1967 uprising, but was invaluable and deeply influential upon my attempts to situate my work politically.

The musical history of Detroit is long and storied. The city’s often-turbulent political history and legacy of radical politics and resistance – from the 1960s era League of Revolutionary Black Workers to the present movements – are deeply present and embedded in the city’s places and in the lives and memories of its residents. I hope, here,


\textsuperscript{17} George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race,” \textit{Landscape Journal} Vol. 26 Issue 1 (2007).
not to offer either a history of Detroit hip-hop, nor a comprehensive glimpse of the city’s tradition of political resistance and radicalism. Instead, I offer a glimpse into some of the artists who make up Detroit’s contemporary hip-hop “scene” and to orient the study of these artists’ work towards the critique of the neoliberal management and production of urban space. In a moment in which the privation and austerity experienced by marginalized Detroit residents is proliferating and protracting globally, I seek to contribute to a large body of work in opposition to this trend. Mostly, I hope that my representations of the lives, work, music, and activism of the artists discussed here will resonate with the people to whom these narratives belong.

The title of this thesis, “Art is Not a Crime,” is taken from a rallying cry used to mobilize supporters of Antonio Cosme and William Lucka, two Detroit graffiti artists who were arrested and charged for their activities in 2014. While the notion of “art” has a distinctively classed and racialized history – indeed, art has a complicated and problematic connection to neoliberal spatial policies – many Detroit artists and musicians have contested this condition. In particular, as the city moves toward a more manicured, redeveloped space, the city’s graffiti artists have been at the forefront of intense conflicts over the nature of public space and citizens’ rights to transform it. Art and music have become, for many marginalized citizens of Detroit, ways of pushing back against city policies that have excluded or even displaced them.
CHAPTER 2: ART IS NOT A CRIME: THE RAIZ UP COLLECTIVE AND POLITICAL COMMUNITY BUILDING

Introduction

In November of 2014, street artists Antonio Cosme and William Lucka (of the hip-hop music and arts collective the Raiz Up) were arrested for allegedly “defacing” the Highland Park water tower in Detroit, Michigan. In response to a city policy that shut off water services for poor residents with unpaid bills and to the ongoing water contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan, the two artists painted “Free the Water” in block letters next to a closed black fist. In a case that would garner national attention via various dissident media outlets such as Democracy Now, the two artists were arrested and taken to court first by Highland Park prosecutors and, later, by Detroit mayor Mike Duggan’s “graffiti task force.” Ultimately, before the case was settled in October 2016, the artists faced up to four years in prison for an act of artistic civil disobedience that occurred in the context of one of the more turbulent political moments that the city of Detroit has ever faced. What motivated Cosme and Lucka to risk their safety in order to (allegedly) create this piece? What type of (geographic, political, artistic) community did these artists come from? What kind of political moment gave birth to this kind of resistance, and around what kind of cultural forms did it coalesce? In what ways might protests based on music, sound, and art contest or alter spatial realities?

2 According to the Detroit Metro Times (in a story by Aaron Robertson published on September 21st, 2016), the graffiti task force is “… a collaboration between Detroit administrators, prosecutors, and police forces […].”
Detroit is home to a wide variety of vibrant cultural, musical, political, and artistic traditions and is also the site of many fierce struggles involving the politics of urban space and the right to the city. The residents in many neighborhoods in this city are facing a number of struggles including displacement due to rising rents, the privatization of vital resources such as water and education, and the prospect of lost community heritage as a result of gentrification and cultural whitening. One of the neighborhoods currently at the forefront of these antagonisms is Southwest Detroit, a large and diverse area sometimes known as Mexicantown. In the Southwest neighborhood, artists and musicians have been at the forefront of resisting these processes through political community building. The work of the Raiz Up collective includes hip-hop music, mural/graffiti art, and community organizing. Built on political organizing through the elements of hip-hop culture, this artistic collective engages with many of the issues facing contemporary Detroit, and Southwest Detroit in particular - such as gentrification, the enclosure of space and vital resources, systemic poverty, and structural racism. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which this group uses music and art not only to create immediate, local community, but to imagine broader communities linked by similar political struggle and solidarity. Additionally, I will argue that the music and art of this organization help to cultivate engaged citizenship among residents of Southwest Detroit and build links between struggles separated by spatial and temporal boundaries through a discourse of resistance to colonization.

While neoliberal urbanity and colonization each have their own historical specificity, the Raiz Up collective has constructed a metaphor linking the two experiences. I adopt this metaphor here not because I feel that there is a homologous relationship between neoliberalism and colonization, but because this framework has been productively articulated by the collective.
Detroit, 2013: Bankruptcy, emergency management, and the founding of the Raiz Up

On July 18th, 2013, Detroit’s government took a step that was (and remains) unprecedented in the history of major U.S. cities. On that day - after several decades of population decline, deindustrialization, political corruption scandals, and white flight to the suburbs – the city declared Chapter 9 bankruptcy. This move allowed Detroit to cut spending, impose an austerity budget, renegotiate debt with its creditors, and appoint an emergency financial manager – or, rather, many emergency managers in charge of various municipalities and departments - to return the city to fiscal solvency. In response to Detroit’s decades-long decline and the declaration of bankruptcy, Michigan governor Rick Snyder appointed corporate attorney Kevyn Orr (who had previously helped the Chrysler auto company to negotiate its own bankruptcy and debt) as the city’s emergency manager.

Orr’s job description as emergency manager was rather benign – the emergency manager’s role in the city was described in the media as “to fix the city's balance sheet and thus avoid a bankruptcy filing.” Orr, upon being appointed to this position, described his position in terms of a banal, unobjectionable centrism. “This is an opportunity for us to work together, to bring people together as Detroit, Michigan,” the attorney said. In reality, Detroit’s emergency financial manager wielded considerable power – in fact, he was given almost sole power over the city’s fiscal policies. Orr was given a number of powers usually reserved for democratically elected city officials, including the ability to defund city public institutions and services deemed too expensive,

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the right to negotiate unilaterally with the city’s creditors, and the ability to sell off valuable assets owned by the city – in other words, to privatize what had formerly been the core of the urban “commons” for the city’s residents. As Michigan state representative Harvey Santana put it,

In the minds of Detroiter, they feel like an emergency manager is going to come in and fix their quality of life and nothing could be further from the truth. An emergency manager’s job is to fix the spreadsheets. And that doesn’t deal with crime or emergency response times, abandoned homes and blight or that my trash is getting picked up at 11:30 last night. How is an emergency manager going to fix those issues?5

If monitoring the functioning of Detroit’s emergency services and combating neighborhood blight were outside of the purview of the emergency manager’s responsibilities, so too was ensuring public, widespread access to vital, biologically necessary resources. In the summer of 2014, in response to pressures from the state to cut the city’s budget, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department began shutting off water services for residents who had unpaid water bills. Despite the fact that many of these unpaid accounts amounted to less than one-hundred dollars (and the fact that nearly half of all of the city’s delinquent bills are held by business and not by private residences), disconnecting residents from water services was seen as a vital budget priority – and a profitable one, since these shutoffs were (and still are) completed by a private company.

In response to these water shutoffs (and to the climate of budget austerity and emergency management more generally), a constellation of grassroots resistance organizations emerged in Detroit. Among these were organizations such as Detroiter

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Resisting Emergency Management, Detroit Eviction Defense, the People’s Water Board, and the Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council, among many others. These organizations, in addition to organizing public mobilizations and protests against severe budget cutbacks and the near-dictatorial power of the emergency manager, have created networks of solidarity to mediate the everyday effects of Detroit’s financial crisis. For instance, in many neighborhoods “water warriors” would help residents to illegally re-connect their water services after they had been disabled. In other instances, members of Detroit Eviction Defense would assemble protestors or construct barricades at homes scheduled to be repossessed in an effort to prevent displacement of the residents. In addition to these political, policy-driven organizations, a number of musical and artistic organizations with commitments to activism also emerged. While these socially conscious arts organizations and collectives are far too numerous to name, among them are the hip-hop artists and groups, Will See, Complex Movements, Cold Men Young, Bryce Detroit, and the Raiz Up collective.

The Raiz Up collective was founded in 2012 at the Allied Media Conference, an annual gathering in Detroit focused on media-based organizing strategies for social change. While the group was formed before the declaration of bankruptcy and the appointment of the Emergency Manager, their work has always been rooted in political resistance and many of their most prominent projects occurred since July 2013. Cultivating a method of grassroots organizing rooted in hip-hop cultural practices, the Raiz Up is made up of artists from Southwest Detroit who practice all four of hip-hop’s “elements” – DJing, rapping, graffiti, and breakdancing. While the group has grown considerably since its 2012 founding, its original members were graffiti (or “graff”) artist
Antonio Cosme, MC’s DPress and Subverso, DJ/beatmaker Sacramento Knoxx, and breakdancer/poet Candida. Before officially forming the Raiz Up, many of these artists had been active in the city’s underground hip-hop scene, and had a variety of shared experiences within Detroit’s culture of radical art and politics. Describing the vibrant social, artistic, musical, and political scene that the collective emerged from, Antonio Cosme said,

There are a lot of foundations to the Raiz Up that had been developing in many ways. A lot of the Raiz Up members were part of the Urban Arts Academy. And there was another forerunner group called Dirty Politics, which was like a hip-hop group, and a record label at one time. There’s a basis and a history for hip-hop, for graffiti, for art and music in Southwest Detroit that’s really strong that we’re building on. We didn’t reinvent the wheel or anything. We got together in 2012 – it was myself, [Sacramento] Knoxx, Eddie [DPress], Candace [Candida], and Vicente [Subverso] – and the five of us just started kicking it. Some of the people were dating… There’s also a radical feminist, queer women’s house in [Southwest Detroit neighborhood] Clark Park, across from the stage. We used to go there and hang out, party. Many of the group’s ideas were formed in that cauldron of feminist thought by women of color.6

These grassroots, community origins of the collective are also reflected in their name – the moniker “Raiz Up,” Antonio says, comes from the Spanish word “raíces,” meaning “roots.” This name and association with cultural neighborhood “roots,” speaks not only to the collective’s community-oriented nature, but to the group’s cultural commitment to a particular type of hip-hop culture and to their shared sense of history and identity. “Our thinking was, everything that grows starts underground. We wanted to look at underground hip-hop and underground hip-hop artists. The name came from our desire to

6 Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
be grassroots, and also our desire to be underground, to represent hip-hop in that way,” Antonio said. Additionally, this choice of name was related to the group members’ various rootedness within Latinx, Chicano, black, and indigenous identity and culture in Detroit.

In addition to emerging from a culture of hip-hop music, street art, and radical thought in Southwest Detroit, the Raiz Up also grew out of the political and geographical antagonisms facing the neighborhood in the 2010’s. Southwest Detroit in general (and the Clark Park neighborhood in particular) is an area with a rich indigenous, Latinx, Chicano, and African-American cultural heritage. This urban region is also one that has been designated for “redevelopment” and “revitalization,” processes that involve coalitions made up of non-profit organizations, business interests, public-sector organizations, and new neighborhood residents. While these revitalization projects are a boon to urban business communities and can combat crime and neighborhood blight, they are also often accompanied by soaring rents, gentrification, displacement of long-time residents, and cultural whitening. Due to neighborhood demographic changes and intersections of race and class, gentrification often means that businesses and other elements of an area’s public sphere operated by people of color are often priced-out of “revitalized” areas. These businesses and cultural centers are often replaced by other commercial enterprises owned by whites from outside of the city. The result of this type of gentrification is not only the displacement of long-time residents of color, but the displacement of many cultural landmarks and centers of social life as well. Despite the changes to neighborhood demographics that redevelopment projects often bring, these policies are encouraged by

7 Ibid.
dominant political forces within urban planning as a way to re-establish a tax base in the wake of deindustrialization and population decline. Long-time residents of Southwest Detroit – many of whom are working class people of color – thus face a dual threat: large-scale state divestment from public sector services, social programs, and vital resources on one hand, and atomized, entrepreneurial processes of neighborhood change and displacement at the hands of non-profit and business interests on the other.

In response to these processes of neighborhood change, the Raiz Up has hosted a number of public events in Southwest Detroit for the purpose of promoting community engagement with radical politics through participation in hip-hop cultural forms. The collective, for example, has hosted annual events at Clark Park that seek to marry music and graff art with conversations about city policy. At these events – which are held in a public park without official permission from city authorities – there are places for participatory art-making through turntablism, rapping, poetry reading, and breakdancing. Additionally, there are places for cooking and eating tamales and other foods cooked by collective and community members. “Dragging speakers to a public space, bringing a bunch of MC’s, breakdancers, people involved with hip-hop culture – it brings people together! A lot of these breakdancers have no political consciousness… but they want to come and dance,” Antonio Cosme says. After community members have eaten and celebrated with music, painting, and dancing, Raiz Up members ask attendees to “circle up” to discuss issues facing the community. Describing the discussions that follow, Cosme says,

While people are together, we’d take a break from the entertainment and circle up. We’d use prompts and questions. Within people’s experiences, they have all of the answers. Especially in the hood – people understand how
fucked up the education system is. Because we have relationships with other activist organizations and groups, we would bring in, maybe, a member of the school board who is also a radical person. We’d have a prompt – let’s talk about education! Parents would talk about schools closing, about all of these issues. Then I would come in and talk about a systemic approach to all of these problems. Our goal was to connect people’s situations and lived experiences to the systems that create those situations and experiences. It’s not a talk or a lecture, it’s an exchange.  

At these events, Raiz Up collective members and residents of Southwest Detroit seek to create a dialogic political environment in which people’s experiences within a rapidly changing city and neighborhood are supplemented, but not overshadowed, by the perspectives of socially conscious artists and those with policy experience. Unlike the “community meetings” hosted by city officials, the political figures who attend the Raiz Up’s events come with sympathetic politics and a spirit of solidarity – not to lecture neighborhood residents on why their demands are unfeasible from a policy perspective.

In Southwest Detroit, Antonio Cosme describes a condition where neighborhood residents understand the oppressions that they face and can articulate viable solutions to these problems, but (in some cases) lack the political and policy-driven experience to understand intuitively the ways in which these antagonisms operate in an interconnected, systemic fashion. By taking this systemic approach, the Raiz Up seeks to illuminate the connections between gentrification in Southwest Detroit, school closings on the Eastside, and water shutoffs throughout the city’s neighborhoods. In this way, they are able to bridge the spatial and conceptual boundaries and atomization that can often complicate efforts for political resistance. This process of creating narratives of resistance and

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8 Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
networks of solidarity across spatial boundaries through music and art resemble what Fredric Jameson has described as an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping.” Jameson describes the late capitalist city as “… a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves […].” To mediate this condition, Jameson argues for an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” which would enable “a … representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” By engaging dialogically with socially conscious artists and (genuinely radical) city officials from their own community, residents are able not only to be affectively involved in the politics of their neighborhood, but experience their own articulations of their struggles as hierarchically central to those politics. The work of the Raiz Up seeks, in this way, to cultivate engaged citizenship among long-time residents of Southwest Detroit. Additionally, by talking with artists and officials, residents are able to “connect the dots” between issues such as education, school closings, gentrification, and access to water that are sometimes spatially separate but systemically connected. They are able to begin a “cognitive mapping” of the systemic nature of the antagonisms that they face – and their own experiences (rather than abstract theoretical concepts) are central to that cognitive mapping. This antiphonal method of political organizing finds an especially idiomatic home within the practices and aesthetics of hip-hop culture, which have always been premised upon dialogic processes of exchange and circulation.

In addition to the need to draw neighborhood residents to their events with entertainment, there are other reasons for the Raiz Up collective to structure their events

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around hip-hop cultural practices. “Not all young people today like hip-hop,” Cosme says, “but a lot of people from the community do – a lot of people from Detroit do.” He continues,

> We have an indigenous, communal sense of how things like this should be done. The circle, the cipher, for us these are sacred things. Circling up and having people talk, having people commune – it’s like a hip-hop church for us. We also connect it to indigenous, ancestral understandings, practices, and cultural exchanges.¹⁰

When Cosme observes that “not all young people today like hip-hop, but a lot of people… from Detroit do,” he is making a point about which communities and (counter)publics within the broader Southwest Detroit neighborhood his collective is trying to speak to. By locating their subversive discourse within cultural practices that many long-time Detroiters are familiar with and fond of – namely hip-hop music, dancing, and visual art - the Raiz Up is able to isolate those elements of their community whose interests align with their political vision. This is all the more true when these cultural practices are framed as coming from the sacred traditions of indigenous communities and other people of color – the circle, the cipher, and the commune. In *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Michael Warner writes that the notion of the “public” as one monolithic space or group of people is limited and anachronistic. Instead, he argues for the existence of many “publics,” which are discursive constructions and are continually contested and revised. Additionally, there exist many “counterpublics” or “…some publics [which] are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general.”¹¹ In a gentrifying neighborhood with

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¹⁰ Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.

soaring rents where long-time, working class residents are rapidly being displaced by new, wealthier tenants originally from other cities, the terms “public” and “counterpublic” are productive concepts that help situate the current movements. In neighborhoods of this kind, such as Southwest Detroit, it can be said that there exists a “public,” comprising wealthier new residents whose interests and business ventures align with neighborhood “revitalization” projects, and a “counterpublic,” consisting of long-time residents of color whose interests lie in opposition to these same projects. Because of this oppositional relationship to dominant urban planning policies, long-time residents of Southwest Detroit are essentially disenfranchised and marked off from the category of “citizen” in the way that Warner describes – their interests lie outside the parameters of mainstream political discourse.

In a rapidly gentrifying, contested neighborhood such as Clark Park (and Southwest Detroit more broadly), the work of the Raiz Up collective seeks to defend the interests of increasingly marginalized residents. In addition to doing the vital work of organizing neighborhoods for resistance and allowing community members to express their personal and political narratives through discussion and participatory art-making, the practices of this hip-hop collective also gesture towards a nascent alternative to the status quo. In a city where urban planning is oriented to the interests of the privileged and where resources as basic and vital as water are being privatized and denied to citizens, the Raiz Up creates a space for the sharing of food, education, music, experiences, and knowledge. “We’re creating an intellectual commons,” Cosme says, “while participating within the commons of a public space – a public park – in a contested community.”

12 Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
Soufy, “Rise Up & Disrupt,” and Decolonization

On a crisp autumn day in September 2016, I sat down outside of the empty, fenced-off shell of Detroit’s Michigan Station to talk with Raymond Elwart, Jr., a native MC from Detroit who goes by the stage name “Soufy.” Elwart joined the Raiz Up after the collective’s founding and has worked on a number of projects with the group and their collaborators. Soufy has a deep connection to Detroit – he was born in the Southwest neighborhood and is of Anishinaabe (specifically, Ojibwe) descent, from a group of Native people indigenous to the southeast Michigan area. After writing poetry since he was very young, Soufy began rapping at the age of 15 after being encouraged to do so by a friend. From the beginning, his rhymes have been centered on the indigenous experience of Detroit and on the need to build political community in the city. Due to his cultural background and artistic preoccupations, the Raiz Up was a natural creative home for Soufy. “That’s what the Raiz Up stands for,” he told me. “The people, the community. We constantly show that – through our music, our actions, our art.”

After he told me about the history of Michigan Station and described some of the “revitalization” projects that have been considered by ? as ways to transform this famous historic site, I asked Soufy how he was able, in his music, to connect present struggles to histories of oppression and resistance in Detroit. He told me,

I do it by being myself! I’m Anishinaabe, Ojibwe. Being here in Detroit, it’s stolen land! I get the effects of assimilation and colonization from my culture being taken away from me, from my grandmother being put into boarding schools, having her culture taken away from her.

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13 Elwart, Raymond, Jr., Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
He continued,

The oppression isn’t something from centuries ago, the oppression is here in the modern day – because we all get the effects from everything. We still get the effects now.\(^{14}\)

What became clear in the course of my conversation with Soufy was the fact that neither he nor the other Raiz Up artists with whom he worked ever made a cognizant decision to become socially “conscious” hip-hop artists. Instead, the work of these artists (like that of nearly all hip-hop artists since the genre’s founding) is forged in the crucible of their experiences in the post-industrial city and in the afterlife of colonization and white supremacy. Indeed, the political narrative of internal colonization and resistance via decolonization is central to the type of political consciousness that the Raiz Up seeks to cultivate. “Everything we do, we have that aim and that goal in mind before we even do it,” Soufy said.

The hip-hop, the music – one of the things we talk about in our lyrics is decolonization. Decolonizing your mind and the way you think. One of the messages that we try to get to people is how to be self sufficient, how to rely on the earth that we have.\(^{15}\)

When I met with Soufy in early fall 2016, he was immersed in work on his album “The Ogichidaa Project,” scheduled for release in February 2017. Named for the Ojibwe word for warrior, this album features a number of tracks that articulate this narrative of colonization and resistance. At the time of our meeting, Soufy had just released the first music video from this album for a track titled “Raiz Up & Disrupt.” In this track and its accompanying music video, Soufy seeks both to connect struggles in Detroit to

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Raymond Elwart Jr., Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
nationwide narratives of oppression and resistance, and to situate the city’s present antagonisms in relationship to longer histories of colonization.

The music video for “Raiz Up & Disrupt” begins with footage of Soufy performing his song at one of Detroit’s many graffiti sites – areas within the urban environment that have been symbolically “reclaimed” via the efforts of graff artists. In the opening lines of this track, which are recited by the MC in front of a large mural commemorating the life and work of black suffragette and civil rights organizer Daisy Elizabeth Adams Lampkin, Soufy expresses solidarity with victims of police violence and the Movement for Black Lives. Over a propulsive “old school” beat produced by the Detroit producer Native Keyz, Soufy raps

Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland/many cops – what a jam/ po-po and the murder going hand in hand/I said 1,126 killed/by these motherfuckin’ thugs with badges that’s packing steel.

By opening this song – which also deals with issues such as Detroit’s water shutoffs and Flint’s water contamination crisis - with a declaration of solidarity with the victims of state violence, Soufy articulates the extent to which the struggle to decolonize Detroit is embedded within broader struggles for liberation on the part of marginalized people in various localities around the country and world. That these lines are performed in front of various graffiti and mural pieces that memorialize struggles for black liberation – taken together, these lyrics and imagery can be said to “cognitively map” translocal systems of colonization and articulate broad networks of organizing and solidarity for decolonization across spatial and temporal boundaries.

Other scenes in the music video for “Raiz Up & Disrupt” draw on histories of colonization and resistance that span decades and generations. For instance, many scenes
in this video depict a young woman (intended to represent Soufy’s grandmother) being lectured in what appears to be a modern-day boarding school for native people. The young woman, who is depicted wearing indigenous clothing and with her hair in long braids, sits quietly at a desk while a menacing white teacher writes on a white board – statements such as “assimilation,” “look to Jesus,” and “Columbus discovered America!” After the teacher cuts off the young woman’s long braids, Soufy enters (along with another figure who is wearing indigenous clothing) and lead the girl out of the classroom. In addition to representing a symbolical reclamation of cultural heritage, this sequence is structured around and aesthetic of temporal blurring. While the scene depicts something in the past – the boarding school experience – it is set in contemporary Detroit and is costumed to reflect the present day. Similarly, Soufy’s entrance at the end of the video – to rescue the young woman – is an act of symbolic liberation of the MC’s own grandmother and her cultural heritage and legacy. This temporal blurring has the effect not only of connecting present struggles to histories of oppression and resistance, but of depicting the ways in which the effects of a colonial “past” have an afterlife in the present. The cultural theft that Soufy’s grandmother experienced at the hands of the boarding schools also robbed the young MC of his own heritage and history of resistance – until that history was actively decolonized.

In the music video for the track “Raiz Up & Disrupt,” Soufy reaches across spatial and temporal boundaries to construct a narrative of colonization, cultural theft, and oppression on one hand – and decolonization, resistance, and organizing on the other. In *I Mix What I Like!: A Mixtape Manifesto*, Jared Ball argues that underground hip-hop is a form of subversive journalism that directly addresses marginalized people of color
broadly – who he suggests represent an internally-colonized “hip-hop nation” within the United States. Whether or not the people whom Soufy addresses in his music conceive themselves as a nation or have nationhood as a political goal, his music certainly seeks to document the experiences and struggles of many marginalized communities, and to mobilize these communities for resistance via decolonization.

**Free the Water!**

When I met with Antonio Cosme in September 2016, we talked about the Raiz Up’s response to Detroit’s water-shutoff policy and to the water contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan. I also asked him one of the questions that I posed at the beginning of this chapter: what had motivated Antonio and fellow artist William Lucka to risk their safety and freedom to create their “Free the Water” piece on the Highland Park water tower?

Antonio responded:

> It was a move of desperation. We had hosted events, held press conferences, done educational work in the community – and the message was not getting out. We were not being heard. We brought the U.N. here to condemn the water shutoffs, we did all of this media stuff, and the message still wasn’t getting out.

Antonio’s statements reflect the condition and frustration of being a member of Detroit’s counterpublic of disenfranchised neighborhood residents, whose citizenship is circumscribed because their interests and demands lay outside the parameters of dominant urban planning and political discourses in the city. Faced with this exclusion and marginalization, Raiz Up members such as Cosme and Lucka turned to civil disobedience through artistic intervention. By painting “Free the Water” and a black

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17 Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
power fist on the Highland Park water tower, these artists were able to get the attention of city residents and officials who had been, until then, inclined to ignore Detroit’s many dissident voices.

In addition to their frustration and desperation, a number of other spatial and political factors influenced Cosme and Lucka’s decision to “deface” the Highland Park water tower. Discussing their choice of location for their piece, Antonio referenced the popular hip-hop track “Detroit vs. Everybody,” recorded by many notable Detroit rappers such as Eminem, Big Sean, Royce da 5’9”, Danny Brown, Dej Loaf, and others. While Cosme understood the mass appeal of the “Detroit vs Everybody” framing of a besieged but resilient city, he felt that “Detroit vs. Metro Detroit” would be a more accurate description of the antagonisms facing the city. Cosme describes a situation where wealthy neighborhoods just outside of Detroit have a parasitic relationship to the city itself – these areas depend upon Detroit’s economy and resources for the livelihoods of their residents, but the taxes paid by these residents benefit only their local community and not the city at large. In contrast to the commonly held view that the Detroit area is home only to poverty and decay, Cosme says, “Detroit is one of the wealthiest metro areas in the entire fucking country.”

The Highland Park water tower is an ideal location for mediating this type of neighborhood and regional atomization, as it is clearly visible from the I-96 freeway that cuts through the city. “I think freeways are an amazing place for political discourse,” Cosme says.

18 Antonio Cosme, Interview by author. September 26, 2016.
Freeways are ways for individuals to access public areas in a private way. Suburban white folks can drive through Detroit and have no idea what the fuck is going on in the neighborhoods. They’re disconnected from it – they can drive downtown, see downtown, and drive home without ever seeing anything else. […] They are the ones driving in and out of Detroit everyday – but when it comes to mass transit, they try to block mass transit projects that would allow us to access their communities! There are all of these processes of enclosure that keep black and brown people within small segregated spaces.  

In addition to hosting a water tower that was visible from I-96, Highland Park was also chosen as the site for the “Free the Water” piece because of that neighborhood’s history of colonization and resistance. Despite the fact that Highland Park is geographically located in the center of the city of Detroit, it is a “donut hole city,” which is considered its own municipality. The reason for this is that the neighborhood once hosted a large auto plant – and the wealthy, white executives who ran the plant. By marking off Highland Park as separate from the larger Detroit, tax revenue from this auto plant and from the incomes of wealthy executives could be designated for use only to develop Highland Park, not the broader city - or the lives of its mostly-black citizens. In addition to this history of internal colonization and enclosure, however, the Highland Park area has also been home to proud struggles for liberation – the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed there, and the neighborhood is now home to the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

Conclusion

Contemporary Detroit is a city not so much defined by a reductive single story, but one caught between two equally pernicious and mutually reinforcing stories. On one
hand, Detroit is often portrayed as a city that is beyond the brink – a site of postindustrial urban decay that will never regain the vibrancy of decades past. On the other hand, the city has more recently been described as undergoing “revitalization” or even “rebirth” – mainly via gentrification, privatization, and cultural whitening. The work of the Raiz Up collective of hip-hop artists conforms to neither of these dominant narratives. Instead, the events that they hold and the pieces that they create outline both the systemic nature of the oppression that many Detroiters face, as well as the broad-based, coalition-minded nature of the resistance that will be required to overcome these antagonisms. The Raiz Up’s art, music, and organizing do the work of speculating about what a decolonized Detroit might look like – and what it will take to arrive at that point.
CHAPTER 3: TYREE GUYTON’S HEIDELBERG PROJECT AND COMPLEX
MOVEMENTS’ “BEWARE OF THE DANDELIONS”: INTERVENTIONS INTO THE
POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF URBAN DESIGN

Introduction

In 1986, the Detroit-born painter and sculptor Tyree Guyton began “… waging a personal war on urban blight on Detroit’s East Side […]”\(^1\) After witnessing decades of accumulating urban decay following the 1967 Detroit uprising, Guyton was moved to orient his artistic production towards ground-up beautification and revitalization of Heidelberg, the neighborhood in which he was born. The resulting neighborhood installation – aptly named “The Heidelberg Project” – represents a radical transformation of a neighborhood plagued by population decline and gang violence\(^2\). Featuring houses (both abandoned and inhabited), the skeletons of rusting cars (many of which were built decades ago in Detroit by Ford, Chevy, and Chrysler) collections of discarded children’s toys, and empty lots that have all been painted with polka dots, clock faces, and other symbols, the Heidelberg Project represents an intervention by urban neighborhood residents into the environment in which they live. Additionally, while the relationship between the Project and the surrounding community is deeply contested and problematic, this neighborhood installation represents a critical engagement with the aesthetics and politics of “decay,” and suggests an emergent, alternative political relationship to urban space.


\(^2\) This description of life in the Heidelberg neighborhood comes from Guyton’s own observations as quoted in Deborah Che’s article “Connecting the Dots to Urban Revitalization with the Heidelberg Project” from Material Culture, Vol. 39 No. 1 (Spring 2007)
In 2013, four Detroit artists in various mediums – an emcee, a music producer/filmmaker, a graphic designer, and a performance systems architect – formed Complex Movements. This group, which explores the interconnectedness of hard science and social justice movements, creates multimedia installations and performances rooted in hip-hop music, theater, video installations, and audience participation. One such performance/installation is the 2015 piece “Beware of the Dandelions.” This piece, which takes place inside of a small aluminum installation space that can be moved from city to city as the group tours, is science fiction-esque exploration of a dystopian future in which all space and resources are enclosed and controlled by corporate forces – the “captains of industry.” Throughout the performance, audience members collaborate with the members of Complex Movements and engage with the installation space itself to remediate this condition and take popular control of the environment’s space and resources. By creating an audience-engaging piece that takes place in a fully-privatized, dystopian environment that is in many ways similar to neoliberal Detroit, Complex Movements’ “Beware of the Dandelions”, creates a performative and sonic blueprint for community organizing, resistance, and alternative political forms in Detroit.

Taken together, these projects represent a history of musical and artistic interventions into urban design and spatial logic. In this chapter, I will consider the work of the hip-hop/theatre/multimedia group Complex Movements and Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg project. In Chapter 1, I described the ways in which the work of Detroit hip-hop collective the Raiz Up emerged from the spatial antagonisms spawned by neoliberal urban development logic. Here, I will argue that the works of the above mentioned

musicians, activists, and artists can be considered interventions into urban design itself, and describe the ways in which the aesthetics of the pieces that they create gesture towards an emergent political and spatial alternative to the present neoliberal constructions of urbanity. Specifically, I argue that the political aesthetics of these pieces articulate demands for the democratic management of space and resources, critique the logic of artificial scarcity and decay, and speculate about nascent alternatives to “revitalization” via gentrification.

Tyree Guyton, the Heidelberg Project, and the Aesthetics of Decay

In the early evening of January 30th, 2016 I take my first trip to the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street on Detroit’s East Side. Walking on this block, which is the home to Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, I am immediately struck by the variety of visual stimuli that make up this neighborhood installation. On first glance alone, the viewer notices a house painted with multi-color polka dots (perhaps the most famous and recognizable image of the Project), boards painted with clock faces indicating various times, paintings of polka dots and faces on the sidewalk, and the shells of many thoroughly rusted cars painted with words and images. In the distance, the setting winter sun shines through the frame of a recently burned-down house (formerly the “House of Soul,” a portion of Guyton’s installation that was destroyed in an act of arson in late 2013) to which the artist has nailed several vinyl records and old advertising signs. A group of neighborhood residents congregate on the porch of their home – which is itself part of Guyton’s piece – and visitors to the Project anxiously avert their eyes as they pass.

If the Heidelberg Project has become a popular destination for Detroiters and visitors from elsewhere to experience an artistic re-imagining of urban decay, the
presence of neighborhood residents might be a haunting reminder of the intersections of aesthetics and politics, and of the problems that arise when these two realms are elided too easily. Posted on the front of these residents’ home is a sign instructing visitors not to take photographs of the porch or of the people living there. This sign, in addition to reminding viewers of the humanity of neighborhood residents, is an uncomfortable reminder of the privilege and mobility with which some visitors approach the Heidelberg Project. The access to mobility that allows outsiders to visit Guyton’s installation is starkly juxtaposed with the experiences of neighborhood residents, for whom the sight of urban decay (in both bare and aestheticized forms) is quotidian – as is the probing gaze of outsiders. If the aestheticization of neighborhood decay critiques the logic of urban development and presents a powerful opportunity for community organizing, the aestheticization of human lives – and the structural violence to which they are subjected – is something else entirely. The decision to remind visitors to the Project of residents’ humanity and to instruct against the taking of their photographs indicates that Guyton is aware of this nuance and against the exploitation or objectification of his neighbors.4

The sonic profile of the Heidelberg neighborhood stands in stark contrast to this dizzying visual complexity. On the winter day that I first encountered the project, and on many visits since then, the sound that seemed to define this place was a still, almost foreboding silence. Despite being located in the heart of Detroit’s eastside – a mere four blocks from the busy Gratiot Avenue and just north of the city’s historic Black Belt – the

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4 Initially, I felt that these signs instructing against disturbing neighborhood residents prevented me from talking with the people who live in the Heidelberg Project. Upon further reflection, I feel that greater immersion in this space would have allowed me to form relationships and have conversations that would have greatly impacted my view of Guyton’s piece and the politics surrounding it. Indeed, it is possible that Guyton intends these signs to direct the visitor’s gaze toward neighborhood residents for the purpose of encouraging a reflexive examination by these visitors of their own position and privileges.
Heidelberg Project site is absent the sounds of traffic and other typical sonic signifiers of urban social life. During my first visit to the site, the occasional conversation among other visitors was audible, and at one point Tyree Guyton could be heard helping a friend to jump-start his truck engine. Apart from these few words that cut through the breeze and the frustrated sounds of an aging automobile – which are indeed salient reminders of the Heidelberg Project’s dual identity as an art installation and lived-in neighborhood – the vibrancy and vitality suggested by Guyton’s visual work is contrasted with the pervading quiet of the block. This austere silence – where the sounds of neighborhood residents and their lives only rarely rise above the ambient sounds of the nearly-empty Project on this winter day - is especially apparent when the viewer confronts what remains of Guyton’s “House of Soul.” The burned-out frame of this house is adorned with a number of vinyl records, many of which are historic releases from Detroit’s Motown label. The silence of the Heidelberg Project resonates especially powerfully in the sight of pieces of the city’s musical history - rendered mute and affixed to the shell of an abandoned home, surrounded by urban refuse.

Tyree Guyton returned to the city in 1985 after spending time in the armed forces. After briefly attending Detroit’s College for Creative Studies, Guyton turned his gaze to the Heidelberg neighborhood in which he grew up. Returning to his home after several years away, the artist was stunned to witness the changes it had seen since the 1967 uprising, when many of the city’s black residents confronted police and the National Guard in response to widespread poverty and harassment by law enforcement.5 The white flight and capital flight that occurred in response to this uprising – coupled with

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deindustrialization and resulting population decline – had devastated Guyton’s formerly thriving neighborhood. Describing the scene he saw upon returning to Detroit, Guyton said

I came back home in 1985. Let me share what I saw – a blank canvas… There were a lot of drugs, crack, heroin, prostitution. The people were a reflection of what’s around them – a broken neighborhood. I asked how do I make sense of the craziness, chaos. I need to turn it around, into something.\(^6\)

Guyton began his efforts to turn the Heidelberg neighborhood around by painting polka dots on his grandfather’s house. The scope of Guyton’s project quickly grew, and the artist began rearranging and aestheticizing the detritus left in a number of neighborhood lots, painting the sidewalk and street, and transforming a number of abandoned and inhabited houses.\(^7\) Among the most haunting aspects of the Heidelberg project are the piles of dolls and other children’s toys that Guyton has assembled on the southern side of the street. The hauntingly still, penetrating faces of these discarded dolls and the other abandoned children’s toys are a disconcerting reminder of the families that left the neighborhood. The extent of the changes to social life in the Heidelberg neighborhood are reflected in the accumulated decay of residents’ former possessions.

Despite being a popular destination for tourists and some Detroiter since the time of its creation, the Heidelberg Project has had a contentious relationship to both city authorities and to residents who live nearby. In 1991, despite the fact that Guyton’s project had established a relationship with the broader community and had established educational programs aimed at getting neighborhood youth involved with the arts, Detroit

\(^7\)Ibid.
mayor Coleman Young ordered the demolition of several components of the installation. In 1997, despite having received a grant from the City of Detroit Cultural Affairs Department, several city council members attempted to have the Heidelberg Project dismantled in response to claims by East Side residents that it was an eyesore. In the 2010s, several of the structures belonging to Guyton’s project were destroyed by arson. The fires were presumably started by East Side residents who either found the aesthetics of the project distasteful or were concerned about the effect the installation would have on the values of their properties. Why, despite being a popular tourist destination, have many residents of the east side rejected the Heidelberg project? Why, at a time when artistic creation and innovation are often seen as opportunities for urban economic renewal in the wake of deindustrialization and corporate disinvestment, has Guyton’s work had such a fraught relationship to the city and urban policymakers? What about the aesthetics of this piece have caused it to have such a contested relationship to dominant politics of urban space?

Despite often being framed in the media and, occasionally, by Guyton himself as a beautification project (or as part of a “war on urban blight”), the Heidelberg Project is not, in any conventional sense, beautiful. The unmoving stares of discarded dolls, the rusted shells of automobiles, and the contorted faces painted on Heidelberg’s sidewalks represent a curatorial aestheticization of and critical engagement with urban decay rather than a rejection and removal of blight as such. In geographer Neil Smith’s 1996 book The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City, he examines the politics

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and aesthetics of neighborhood change and urban redevelopment in the wake of
deindustrialization. Probing the relationship between arts communities and the rapid
gentrification of Manhattan’s Lower East Side in the 1980s, Smith describes the ways in
which art galleries “…converted urban dilapidation into ultra chic.”\textsuperscript{11} The presence of art
galleries and installation that are integrated into dominant urban redevelopment logics
reduce complex histories of spatial antagonisms and decay to chic, “bohemian”
aesthetics. As Smith argues,

“For physical effacement of original structures effaces social
history and geography; if the past is not entirely
demolished it is at least reinvented – its class and race
contours rubbed smooth – in the refurbishment of a
palatable past.”\textsuperscript{12}

For art to be compatible with gentrification and dominant development logics, its
aesthetics must contribute to the erasure of neighborhood histories - creating the
appearance of an untouched “frontier” that is ready to be claimed by new residents. By
using urban refuse and detritus as his medium (and by aestheticizing urban decay rather
than removing it), Tyree Guyton positions his Heidelberg Project as antithetical to the
aesthetic logic of historical and cultural erasure - and the resulting political logic of
displacement and gentrification. Guyton’s piles of children’s toys and collections of
historic records represent and insistence upon (rather than an effacement of) his
neighborhoods history and the spatial and political antagonisms that transformed a
vibrant community into a site of underdevelopment and blight. In a city whose
development logic is premised upon wiping urban spaces clean and making them
palatable for new (mostly white) residents and their business ventures, Guyton’s

\textsuperscript{11} Neil Smith, \textit{The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City}, (Routledge, 1996), 17
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 25.
Heidelberg Project insists on the history and identity of his neighborhood and critiques the logics according to which it has been underdeveloped. If art sometimes paves the way for gentrification by wiping space historically “clean,” the Heidelberg Project can only be considered a bitter pill by city authorities who embrace displacement as a strategy for redevelopment.

The extent to which the visual appearance of the Heidelberg Project partially defines the piece’s dissident position relative to Detroit’s spatial policies and logics reflects the reciprocal relationship between politics and aesthetics described by Jacques Rancière. Rancière’s view that aesthetic practices can represent critical interventions into the realm of politics is rooted in his idea that the aesthetic and political are both systems for the “distribution of the sensible.” For Rancière, the notion “politics” is defined by the oppositional struggle by marginalized and excluded social forces to gain recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion within the dominant social order. The aesthetic realm is an important venue in which these marginalized but emergent social forces seek recognition of their subjecthood and interests, and demand inclusion within the parameters of political discourse.13 Seen in this light, the Heidelberg Project is a site for marginalized and excluded Detroit residents to contest the neoliberal spatial logic represented by city policies such as disinvestment from social services and the encouragement of gentrification. By transforming his East Side neighborhood – and including other neighborhood and city residents into the process of doing so through formal and informal arts education programs – Tyree Guyton reminds city authorities that his is a community that will not easily be moved, displaced, or disrupted. Guyton and his community

13 Jacques Rancière, Politics of Aesthetics, (Bloomsbury Revelations, 2013)
collaborators interface with the “distribution of the sensible” on aesthetic and political levels – by altering the spatial distribution of urban detritus in the aesthetics of the Heidelberg Project itself, and by challenging a dominant political distribution of bodies and resources that is premised upon dislocation and dispossession.

In addition to critiquing the Detroit’s political-economic status quo and contesting present spatial realities, the Heidelberg Project does the work of speculating about what an emergent political relationship to urban space could look like. As Raymond Williams has written, historical moments do not exist in stasis or uniformity but comprise phenomena from three distinct categories – the residual, the dominant, and the emergent. Residual social phenomena are those that conform to the logic of a previous historical era, such as elements of feudal societal organization that partially continued after the development or market capitalism. Dominant phenomena are those that reflect the pervading (political, economic, spatial, racial, gendered, etc.) logic for social organization in a given era. Emergent social phenomena exist in a given political and historical moment, but do not operate on the terms of that moment’s dominant logic. Emergent phenomena may indicate the partial development of a nascent, contingent vision for an alternative to the dominant social condition.\textsuperscript{14}

The aesthetic and political practices of making and maintaining the Heidelberg Project articulate an emergent relationship to urban space that is premised upon democratic, social ownership and management of that space. By symbolically reclaiming urban space through aestheticization, Guyton and his collaborators frame neighborhood space as \textit{public} space (rather than as a collection of private spaces), to be structured

\textsuperscript{14}Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,” in \textit{Marxism and Literature}, (Marxist Introductions, 1978) 121-128
according to the cultural, political, and spatial priorities of the residents who live there. The Heidelberg Project spatially embodies the nascent urban commons – it is a speculative posture about what an alternative politics of urban design might look like. Additionally, the aesthetic and political practices of Guyton’s project articulate a development logic centered on the resources already available in a community rather than on displacement and removal. The artist rearranges, reimagines, and refashions the “blight” and “refuse” that signify his neighborhood’s history, but does not remove these objects to make way for something new.

The implied politics of the Heidelberg Project’s aesthetics make an impact not only on the community members who experience them every day (and who may have had a part in the piece’s construction and maintenance), but on visitors who view (and hear) it as well. As I traversed the Heidelberg Project on my visits there, I found myself viewing and hearing urban space with a political gaze cultivated through the aesthetics of the piece. Exploring the installation, my eye was often drawn to the peripheries of the space. While the project has an epicenter – the 3600 black of Heidelberg Street – it has no firm borders. As my eyes wandered to the edges of the piece, I could see Guyton’s distinctive clock faces painted on homes several blocks from 3600 Heidelberg. Seeing this community installation slowly creep outwards, the viewer begins to ask a number of questions. Specifically, one wonders: if the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street can be symbolically reclaimed as common space and reactivated using the resources that are already present there, why not the rest of Detroit? Indeed, why not all space?

And yet, for all of the political promise that the Heidelberg Project offers, Guyton’s installation raises many important questions as well. While many of the
difficulties that have faced Guyton’s piece have come from the city of Detroit’s policymakers, still others have come from neighborhood residents themselves – including the complaints and arsons described earlier. While not universally true (as Guyton’s educational programs and increased efforts toward community involvement illustrate), attitudes about the Heidelberg Project vary greatly according to proximity. As a New York Times article about the project stated “… the farther people lived from the Heidelberg Project, the more they seemed to like it.”\(^{15}\) The artist himself states “…the African-American community still does not quite understand what we do.”\(^{16}\) How should the ambivalence (or even hostility) with which many black Detroiter react to Heidelberg be interpreted?

I am reminded, here, of the stillness and silence that accompany the visual complexity of Heidelberg Project. How should this stark juxtaposition, this sonic aesthetic of solemn quietude, be framed and interpreted? Does this silence and juxtaposition tell us merely that the revitalizing work of the Heidelberg Project is not yet finished, that more time will be required to restore the sociality and community engagement that once characterized this East Side neighborhood? Or, instead, does the stark contrast between Guyton’s prolific visual imagination and the austere sonic environment surrounding the piece tell us something about the ambivalent (or even caustic) response of actual East Side residents to the Project? Does the presence of so many (mostly white) visitors render mute or inaudible the grievances of (mostly black) neighborhood residents? Does the Project’s silence reflect a condition where the presence


of so many white onlookers (of which I am one) renders this neighborhood and installation an inhospitable place for autonomous black sociality? Are the aesthetic and cultural priorities of Tyree Guyton and the Project’s admirers fundamentally out of synch with the aesthetic and cultural priorities of neighborhood residents?

If the aesthetics and politics of the Heidelberg Project articulate a vision for an urban commons, the qualitative nature of that emergent commons remains a deeply contested matter. Tyree Guyton’s project represents both a critical intervention into the aesthetics and politics of urban design and a piece that is somewhat abstracted and alienated from the black sociality of Detroit’s East Side. The extent to which Heidelberg Project represents both of these things simultaneously belies the extreme complication involved in imagining and articulating alternatives to the cultural and political present. The important questions and challenges that are raised by the Heidelberg Project are deepened, rather than resolved, by the fact that the piece is scheduled for dismantling during the summer of 2017.17 The physically-existing piece will be replaced by an online version of the Project dubbed Heidelberg 3.0. The ways in which the Project’s new ephemerality will affect the implied politics of its aesthetics and the community response to the piece remains to be seen – as does the future of the Eastside neighborhood through which Guyton’s work has been created.

**Complex Movements, “Beware of the Dandelions”**

Complex Movements is an interdisciplinary arts collective based in Detroit and founded in 2013. Blending hip-hop music, theatre, audience engagement, architectural design, and video projections, Complex Movements describes their goal as “… exploring

the connections of complex science and social justice movements through multimedia interactive performance work.” This group comprises the emcee Invincible (whose real name is ill Weaver), graphic designer Wesley Taylor, music producer and filmmaker Wajeed, and multimedia artist/performance architect L05 (Carlos Garcia). Complex Movements has deep roots in Detroit’s traditions of hip-hop culture and radical politics. For instance, Wajeed has collaborated with luminary Detroit hip-hop, R&B, and electronic artists such as Slum Village, J Dilla, Saadiq, and Theo Parrish. Additionally, Invincible’s career in activism and music began under the tutelage of noted Detroit dissident Grace Lee Boggs, whose work emphasizes far-left politics mobilized by grassroots action. In her writing, Boggs sought to apply concepts from the hard sciences towards developing effective tactics for political intervention. Complex Movements often describe their work in terms derived from Boggs’ ideas about community organizing and building a new world. Describing their methods, the group references Boggs directly.

She said we need to move away from Newtonian approaches to organizing: mass rallies and singular issues in linear strategies… [Adopting instead] a quantum approach: small-scale and deeply rooted community projects that are interconnected through decentralized networks and webs. This led us down a rabbit hole of exploration into quantum physics and then complexity science, particularly emergence theory.

Emergence theory in the hard sciences is not unlike Raymond Williams’ notion of the emergent in social theory. This scientific concept essentially describes a process by

which changes to a large structure occur via smaller changes that occur in various, disparate parts of that structure.

In their 2015 installation and performance piece “Beware of the Dandelions,” Complex Movements engages with a number of these concepts and ideas. Describing the project during its development in 2013, Invincible said

> In performance… you are one of thirty-five participants who are invited by the Guardians of the Seeds to enter the Pod. […] Upon entering the Pod… you are transported to an otherworldly, science fiction parable. You are indoctrinated by the Captains of Industry, who run a corporatized, militarized urban apple orchard. The Pod serves as their surveillance and control mechanism to exploit the Townspeople as their workforce who are paid through water liters. You realize that the townspeople have transformed the Pod as an archive to pass on their stories of triumph, contradiction, and failure to future travelers such as yourself. But first, you and your fellow participants must work together to hack the Pod to unlock the stories trapped inside.²⁰

In this piece, the fictional world of the apple orchard is an allegory for the contemporary neoliberal condition – the system of ruthless exploitation and totalitarian labor practices depicted in “Beware of the Dandelions” closely resemble the quotidian violences experienced by marginalized people in the contemporary late capitalist epoch. The privatization and enclosure of vital, biologically necessary resources (apples, water, etc.) – and the brutal enforcement that accompanies that enclosure – are particularly evocative of neoliberal practices in Emergency Management-era Detroit. In this piece, Complex Movements imagines a dissident relationship to technology capable of enabling

interventions into the political production and management of urban space. Additionally by combining (in their fictional, allegorical narrative) traditional and ancestral practices with complex science and technology, the group critiques dominant framings of modernity – which typically exclude the epistemic practices of marginalized cultures.

On the night of October 22nd, 2016, I attend a performance of “Beware of the Dandelions” in Detroit. Arriving at the small East Side venue Talking Dolls, I am told (along with my fellow audience members) that I will be entering a “Pod,” a site that was described by the ensemble member instructing us as storing “ancestral knowledge.” During our time experiencing this performance, we audience members use our ability spontaneously and collectively organize ourselves in order to unlock the knowledge stored in the Pod. This knowledge will be used to dismantle a system of oppression constructed and maintained by the “captains of industry.”

My fellow audience members and I walk down a dark hallway that leads to the Pod. This structure, which resembles a metallic polygon that looks not unlike a UFO, is described by Complex Movements as “a 400 square foot polyhedron dome-like” structure. The performance begins with digital video projections being splashed against the walls of the Pod. The piece’s music begins – beats created by Complex Movements’ producer Wajeed and rapping by the ensemble’s emcee Invincible sound from outside of the structure. The projections and music begin to tell the story of “the Apple Orchard.”

*Hey, have you seen the apple orchard? / Where the trees are trapped and tortured / but they keep the captors gorgeous...*

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Notes:

In the opening moments of the performance, we are told that the “townspeople” work to harvest apples and maintain the orchard to the point of exhaustion and near starvation but are denied access to the products of their labor by the Captains of Industry. Additionally, we are told that the townspeople have begun to meet in secret for the purpose of planning the overthrow of the captains of industry. My fellow audience members and I discover that we will participate in these meetings and contribute to the liberation of the townspeople.

Workers can’t afford it / if you eat one you’ll get tortured / apples marketed at high rates / Townspeople start to meet in secrecy / plan a way to overthrow the groundskeepers / Figure how to interfere with frequency / the security, surround sound speakers / send a message out / quick to be a sound vandal / crime lands on the line / proclaim “beware of the dandelions!” / make an escape with ample time²²

During the course of this performance, my fellow participants and I are presented with a number of challenges that unlock various stories from the world of the Townspeople and their experiences in the apple orchard. Completing these tasks (“hacking the pod”) often involved some form of collective choreography amongst ourselves. On several occasions, we were asked to mimic the behaviors of a collection of gas particles by executing physical movements on an individual level. Given minimal direction and guidance we were able, by taking small actions on an individual level, to create a complex and organized system of motion which all participants were part of. After completing these tasks, which were clearly designed to illustrate the power of decentralized collective action, we would experience another layer of the Townspeople’s story.

²² Ibid.
Through the stories of the Townspeople, we experience narratives of oppression and resistance that closely map onto the lived experiences of marginalized people who resist actually-existing neoliberalism. For instance, at one point we unlock the story of GG and Zakera, two Townspeople whose activities resisting the Captains of Industry have landed them in solitary confinement. Images of chains and bare walks circle around the walls of the Pod, evoking and critiquing the experience of mass incarceration that characterize both the fictional world of the apple orchard and life under contemporary neoliberalism. Additionally, we are told of a manmade drought created by the Captains of Industry to punish and control the rebellious townspeople – an allegory to contemporary artificial scarcity.

Trapped inside the cell / solitary confinement / a thousand years have passed inside my mind / how was the time spend? / Locked to an appliance / the time is used to torture me / as a way of forcing me / to pay for my defiance

In the warehouse district / packed to the brim they were cleared out this quick / … / snatched what they had and outlawed rain barrels / everyday we wear the same apparel\(^\text{23}\)

Some of the more fascinating moments in “Beware of the Dandelions” are those that depict the dissident political meetings of the Townspeople and the trials and tribulations inherent to mounting effective resistance. In the song “Factions,” which occurs around the mid-point of the performance, we hear a debate amongst the Townspeople about the most effective way to intervene into the political and spatial organization of the apple orchard. These conversations represent a constellation of competing interests and various visions for just political and spatial organization.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
Specifically, these conversations dramatize antagonisms between reformist and radical tendencies, between different priorities structured by varying subject positions, and between the desire to destroy the existing order on the one hand and wrest control of it from the Captains of Industry on the other. The ideas presented in “Factions” probe the meta-politics of movement building and offer a number of cautionary tales for social movement organizing and intervention against actually-existing neoliberalism. The lyrics of this track reveal the extent to which movement organizing and radical politics emerge from nested systems of privilege and marginalization.

> Everyone turn on your facial recognition blockers / we’re here to make a plan and can’t nobody stop us [...]  

> We need to move into the hub and join its bounty / and use its legal tools in order to hold them accountable [...]  

> We need to disband the hub and set the town free / whether we burn it down or not it’s bound to go [...]  

> The water infrastructures are contained within its system / why throw them all away when what we need to do is fix them? [...]  

> But what about the ones with the most vulnerability? / We need to get them inside the Hub’s medical facility [...]  

> Did you think about that when you were drawing up your radical deeds? / What about all of the practical needs?  

Ultimately, the Townspeople do not heed the words of those among them warning against the burning of the apple orchard. The townspeople elect to pursue a hybrid strategy – they decide to burn down a portion of the apple orchard as a diversion in order to take control of other portions of the orchard. If most art that is conceived as an

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24 Ibid.
affirmation of popular resistance is centered on calls to action and celebratory glorification of triumphant struggle, Complex Movements’ “Beware of the Dandelions” presents a more cautious and nuanced vision. While avoiding the ambivalence and cynicism that can sometimes be the product of being confronted by obstacles to resistance, Complex Movements presents a vision of intervention that is guided by principles of efficacy and effectives rather than adhering to codified forms such as marches and mass protests. “Beware of the Dandelions” is a radical, poignant piece not because it articulates a cogent vision for a just future, but because it depicts the process of speculation that is integral to critique and inventing a just future.

The aesthetics of Complex Movements’ piece frame a subversive relationship to technology as central to this process of speculating about and cultivating an alternative political imaginary. The Pod that audience/participants enter to experience the rebellion of the Townspeople was designed by the Captains of Industry as a tool for surveillance and control. Subverting the repressive potential of this technological object and unlocking its liberatory potential is at the center of the resistance project in Complex Movements’ piece. While “Beware of the Dandelions” takes place in a fictional setting, the piece nonetheless articulates a vision of actually-existing resistance premised upon subversive engagement with (rather than wholesale rejection of) technological forms that appear, on the surface, to be repressive or restrictive. This aesthetic and political position is entirely at home within hip-hop culture – founded as it was upon unorthodox and subversive relationships to technology and intellectual property. Hip-hop culture began with the transformation of turntables from devices for sonic reproduction into instruments themselves, and proliferated after DJing equipment was looted during the 1977 New
York City blackout – a rupture in the technological infrastructure of modernity. Complex Movements’ piece suggests that similar ruptures should be cultivated and exploited for liberatory purposes.

Additionally, “Beware of the Dandelions” critiques one of modernity’s founding exclusions. In this piece, “ancestral knowledge” is locked deep inside of complex technological forms, and taking subversive control of technology is premised upon an understanding of “traditional” epistemic practices. While this “ancestral knowledge” in “Beware of the Dandelions” is not given cultural specificity in the content of the piece itself, Complex Movements positions their work as emerging from indigenous American and Afro-centric cultural practices. In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Alexander G. Weheliye critiques the false opposition that has been constructed between modernity and the cultural and epistemic practices of Afro-diasporic and other marginalized subjects. Additionally, Weheliye argues that engagement with technology (and sonic technology in particular) by Afro-diasporic subjects reconstructs modernity on new premises that is oriented to speculation about emergent, future organizations of sociality. For Weheliye, Afro-diasporic engagements with sonic technology [render] futurity audible in its circumvention of strictly mimetic technes. In sonic Afro-modernity, sound, for a variety of social, ontological, historical, and aesthetic reasons… holds out more flexible and future-directed provenances of black subjects’ relation to and participation in the creation of Western modernity.²⁵

Complex Movements’ “Beware of the Dandelions” articulates a vision of modernity that is deeply entangled with Afro-diasporic and other marginalized epistemic and cultural

practices, and does so for the purposes of honing intervention tactics and enacting a more just future.

Despite taking place in a fictional setting, the politics and resistance explored in “Beware of the Dandelions” have a decidedly spatial focus. In the piece, the Townspeople seek to intervene into the totalitarian urban spatial management of the Captains of Industry, taking control of and redistributing the resources located in the space surrounding them. Henri Lefebvre has written geographical space is not politically neutral, but is socially produced and imbued with values that conform to dominant systems of social organization. This production of space occurs, for Lefebvre, in the course of interactions between spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Spatial practice refers to the sets of “spatial competencies” that define subjects’ quotidian experience of and relationship to their environment. Representations of space refer to documents depicting the physical design of space such as maps, blueprints, models, and other conceptual renderings. Representational spaces refer to the theoretical, imaginative, and ideological elements of spatial production. Representational spaces are user-generated and are the domain in which subjects critique, challenge, and intervene into dominant practices of spatial organization. Representational space “overlays physical space” – it is the purview of artists (graffiti artists in particular) musicians, and social critics.\(^{26}\)

Complex Movements’ “Beware of the Dandelions” offers a blueprint for intervention into the social production of space at each of these three points. The piece articulates possible interventions into spatial practice by centering marginalized

epistemologies ("ancestral knowledge") – which are developed in the course of the cultivation of everyday spatial competencies by marginalized subjects – in their resistance project. The Pod itself represents an intervention into representations of space and offers a conceptual blueprint for how spatial renderings might be politically produced. The Pod’s space is structured around the preservation of marginalized ways of knowing and being in the world – for the ultimate purpose of consulting (indeed foregrounding) these subversive epistemologies and ontologies during the process of designing more just social spaces. Perhaps most poignantly, “Beware of the Dandelions” is an intervention into representational space. The dystopian practices of enclosure and exploitation that characterize the fictional setting of the piece overlay the actually-existing neoliberal urban space of Detroit, revealing its logical extremes and violences.

**Conclusion**

Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project and Complex Movements’ “Beware of the Dandelions” both represent aesthetic and political interventions into urban spatial design. In different ways, each of these pieces challenge dominant relationships between power and space – the Heidelberg Project by directly transforming a “decaying” East Side neighborhood, and “Beware of the Dandelions” by embedding spatial critique and mediation into the aesthetics of a fictional work. These pieces merge the realms of aesthetics and politics at a moment when the spatial and political future of Detroit is intensely contested and uncertain. Tyree Guyton’s piece The Heidelberg Project makes its intervention into urban spatial design logic by pushing back against a gentrifying impulse that demands space be aesthetically de-coupled from its history and transformed into a frontier space in order to make way for the displacement of its long-term residents.
By structuring his piece around the idea of transforming, but not removing per se, urban blight, Guyton articulates the importance of his neighborhood’s history and refuses to make his work complicit in this practice of spatial de-historicizing. At the same time, Guyton’s aesthetic centering of blight in his piece has created a problematic relationship between his Project and the community in which he lives. The problematics of this relationship (which stem from cultural, racial, and spatial divisions) call into question the sustainability of the work he has created and the political viability of the relationship to urban space that he has outlined in nascent form.

Complex Movements’ piece “Beware of the Dandelions” intervenes into the political and social production and management of urban space on different, but no less provocative, terms. Within the context of a work of music and theatre, the artists who make up Complex Movements have centered their aesthetic practices in ways that articulate alternate political relationships to space, resources, and the management of both. Additionally, the group foregrounds marginalized cultural practices in a way that critiques the artificial opposition between “traditional” epistemologies and modernity. The aesthetics of “Beware of the Dandelions” offer not only a self-sufficient intervention into urban design but, additionally, a workshop space in which actually-existing artists and activists can think and mediate the problematics of the politics of urban space.
CHAPTER 4: “DETROIT VS. EVERYBODY” AND THE MUSIC OF DANNY BROWN: REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN SPACE

“I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from joy and grief… All this caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages.

How shall men measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lives? How many heartfulls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat? How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure, - is it the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day?

Thus sadly musing, I rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow car.”


“The panoptical viewer turns around his own ocular axis and cannot see that all he sees is what he sees. As the earliest form of mass media the panorama thus prepares the ground for a monadic consciousness that mirrors the world in the bourgeois interior and keeps it there as true and real. In short, modern worlds, be they local, regional, or global, are always image worlds taken for real.”

- Veit Erlmann, Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination

Introduction

Detroit’s decades-long decline and rapid, partial “revitalization” in the early 2010s are at once on-the-ground, political-economic realities and stories we tell ourselves in mass mediated form. The notion of an upward trajectory from Detroit’s 2013 bankruptcy filing to the present “New Detroit” has been emphasized in the mainstream press, with only secondary attention being paid to the gaps in this narrative.¹ In this tidy

¹ For examples of this, see Time Magazine’s profile of the city “Detroit: The Art of the Comeback,” from 2016. Additionally, see Ben Austen’s July 11, 2014 New York Times piece “The Post-Post-Apocalyptic Detroit.”
popular framing, Detroit is depicted as having endured a crisis caused by a constellation of foreign car imports, greedy union workers, and white flight in the aftermath of the July 1967 rebellion. In the early to mid-2010s, this consensus narrative tells us, the city is experiencing a rebirth fueled by the entrepreneurial efforts of an influx of “creatives” – who are often millennials, often from another city such as New York, and often white.

As Rebecca J. Kinney has written, media narratives of Detroit’s decline often foreground the actions of the city’s black citizens – including large events such as the 1967 uprising and the problematic political legacy of former mayor Coleman A. Young and smaller, more atomized tendencies such as the prevalence of crime and arson in some neighborhoods. Racial division and tension – the blame for which, of course, is laid upon the shoulders of marginalized black subjects – are emphasized in media tellings of Detroit’s “fall.” By contrast, as Kinney illustrates, the story of Detroit’s recent “revitalization” is told in the media largely without reference to race – we are told, instead, of the restorative actions of urban “pioneers” and “explorers” whose discursive racial neutrality is premised upon their overwhelming whiteness.

Detroit is a city that is often positioned as central to the formation and propagation of technological modernity – as the home of the mass-produced American automobile and as the supposed birthplace of the nation’s middle class. Seen in this light, the position and framing of race within media and popular narratives of the city’s political, economic, historical, and cultural trajectory is unsurprising. Paul Gilroy has

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written about the ways in which black subjects have been positioned, in dominant framings, as external to global modernity – and have created, in their cultural practices, a countercultural modernity.\textsuperscript{5} Detroit and the technological innovations produced there are a nexus for the concept of “human” progress – one of the mythological notions that partially constitutes the idea of modernity. The exclusion of black subjects from narratives of Detroit’s “progress” (“revitalization”) – and the racial segregation that characterizes the unequal sharing of the bounty of that “progress” – is entirely commensurate with the fictive exclusion of black subjects from modernity more broadly.

In his 1903 work \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, W.E.B. DuBois critiques the racial segregation of American social life, the ways in which the United States circumscribed African-American citizenship, and the discursive exclusion of black subjects from the notion of modernity more broadly. In the chapter “On the Meaning of Progress,” DuBois engages with one of modernity’s prominent, founding myths – the idea of universal, civilizational human progress on a large scale. This ethnographic chapter centers on DuBois’ experiences as a young teacher in Tennessee and his return – ten years later – to the region in which he taught. DuBois recounts his attempts to introduce formal education to a rural, post-Civil War southern black community that is structured around agriculture. Additionally, he writes his observations of the changes this community has experienced in the ten years since he left. DuBois, upon his return, finds a region largely in stasis – the area was still deeply agrarian, the economic lot of the people living there was largely unchanged and deeply impoverished, and the most salient changes to the community seem to be the incarceration of some of the author’s former students and the

untimely deaths of others. One of the prominent myths of the American liberal imagination is the notion that, since the end of the Civil War, the United States is moving inexorably – at a generational pace – towards racial equality and inclusion. By describing the structural underdevelopment and violences that enforce the stasis of this Tennessee community, DuBois undermines and critiques this narrative of steady, directional progress and improvement. He articulates the extent to which black subjects (whose physical, intellectual, and epistemic labor largely produced the notion of the modern to begin with) have been excluded from the bounty of “human” progress and development.6

Veit Erlmann’s 1999 work *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination* explores the production and circulation of global modernities via musical performance and mass mediation. Erlmann describes the ways in which different modernities (rooted in different geographic locations) are produced by the interactions of material processes of conquest and expansionist power on the one hand and mass mediated discourses and cultural forms on the other. These mass mediated, codified discourses of modernity (which are also always located within geographical and cultural particularity) have the appearance of coherence and wholeness despite their inherent partiality. Because of the nested located-ness (if not exactly bordered-ness) of mediated representations of the modern (which, as Erlmann suggests in the above excerpt, also function to reproduce dominant political subjectivities), all narratives of modernity and progress are inevitably structured around sets of cultural and political exclusions.7

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In a 2013 interview, philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek stated that he often analyzes films in his work for the purpose of “… [using them] to illustrate where we are today ideologically.” In a not-dissimilar way, musicologist Adam Krims has written that various musical and lyrical representations of urban spaces tell us something not only about the city being represented, but about the political and social imaginaries that structure the logic of urban sociality more broadly. For Krims, “… the scope of that range of representations and their possible modalities, in any given time span” forms what he calls the “urban ethos.” Further, he adds “[the] urban ethos is… not a particular representation but rather a distribution of possibilities, always having discernable limits and common practices.”

In this chapter, I will examine musical case studies that partially form the range of representations that constitute Detroit’s urban (hip-hop) ethos. I will examine various representations (in the sound, lyrics, and music videos of some of the city’s hip-hop artists) of Detroit itself and of black life in the city - from heyday to “decline” to “renewal.” I am not principally concerned with the relationship of the “represented” city in hip-hop to the “real” physically existing city, or with the tendency of popular music to reflect structural changes to urbanity and the urban experience. Instead, I will focus on the ways in which Detroit MC’s represent their home city, its struggles, and its resilience and “resurgence” in the mid-2010s. Specifically, I’d like to understand how these representations of Detroit’s urban space and sociality are informed by (or constitute) different social and political imaginaries, narratives, and mappings of the city’s space, “decline,” and “renewal.” How do Detroit hip-hop artists represent and

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make audible the precarity that has characterized (and continues to characterize, despite narratives of “progress” and “revitalization”) black life in the city? How do these artists confirm, critique, or counter the type of media representations of the city’s trajectory that Kinney has described? In what ways has Detroit hip-hop revealed itself, as Erlmann has written about music more generally, as “a medium that mediates, as it were, mediation”\textsuperscript{10}?

“Detroit vs. Everybody”

On November 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, luminary Detroit rapper Eminem released a single in collaboration with fellow Detroit emcees Danny Brown, Big Sean, Dej Loaf, Royce da 5’9”, and Trick-Trick. This “posse cut” – titled “Detroit vs. Everybody” – is named after a clothing line (founded by Detroit entrepreneur Tommey Walker) that was designed to express pride in the city at a time when it was experiencing financial difficulties and precariousness. On this track, the various emcees narrate their experiences growing up in Detroit, the struggles they experienced trying to gain recognition in the music scene, and express pride in their shared home city. Released barely a year after Detroit’s bankruptcy filing in 2013, this track and its corresponding music video represent the city and life there in ways that reflect the contradictions that characterize “New Detroit.” Images of glittering, revitalized Downtown are juxtaposed with images of abject poverty and street life, and narratives of striving and accomplishment are contrasted with stories of violence and precarity. This song and its video, released as they were between Detroit’s bankruptcy filing (and the appointment of an emergency financial manager) and the

emergence of narratives that emphasize the city’s revitalization, offer a glimpse into musical mass-mediated representations of the area at a crucial time.

The music video for “Detroit vs. Everybody” begins with a collage of rapid-fire images of the city’s downtown space. Despite the fact that these images – like much of the video – center on an area of the city (Downtown) that has been officially designated for “revitalization” and has had many resources allocated for this purpose, the video’s framing of this space exposes the gaps in this development logic. The images displayed in the opening of this video depict many of the manicured skyscrapers that characterize the commercial space of downtown Detroit. Significantly though, these images of downtown do not depict the bustle of newly-unleashed commercial activity, but rather represent the “apocalyptic emptiness” that many writers have identified as emblematic of post-industrial Detroit. By representing the skyscrapers and commercial centers in revitalized downtown as surrounded by eerie emptiness, this video highlights the extent to which the revitalization and progress experienced by the city’s business sector have not been reflected in terms of a regenerated sociality more broadly.

Additionally, the opening of this music video engages with the specifically racial exclusions inherent to neoliberal logics for urban development and progress. Immediately following the opening montage of images, the video centers on Dej Loaf – standing on a downtown roof – singing the song’s chorus.

> Tell 'em if they want it, they can come and get that (static)
> I swear I love my city, I just want a little (static)
> See me, they salute me, they ain’t ready for that (static)
> Detroit vs. Everybody¹¹

Over these lines, we see (in addition to shots of Dej Loaf performing) images of the city that dramatically contrast with the earlier images of Detroit’s manicured downtown.

During this montage we see brief images of graffiti sites, an empty parking lot outside of a seemingly abandoned business, and an aging house in one of the city’s non-downtown neighborhoods surrounded by empty lots. The song’s first rapped verse begins, with images of Royce da 5’9” performing on the same downtown rooftop from which Dej Loaf sang the chorus. Over a verse in which Royce recounts the lessons he has learned growing up in Detroit and striving to make a living as an emcee, we a shown images of a police car with its flashing lights parked at a downtown corner. Soon after, we see an image of a lone young black man wearing a hoodie – with the skyline of downtown far in the distance. The juxtaposition of these two images – the bright lights of a downtown police car and a young black man with his head turned to the area’s skyline – highlight the racial (and spatial) logics emanating from Detroit’s neoliberal urban development project. The making of downtown Detroit into a mecca for commercial activity – the manicuring of a formerly unruly “frontier” space, to echo Kinney’s framing\(^\text{12}\) – involved not only a re-design of otherwise neutral physical spaces, but also the restructuring of the sociality of those spaces more broadly.

In downtown Detroit, as in many other neoliberal urban American spaces, this has meant increased police presence and surveillance – of black subjects in particular. As George Lipsitz has written\(^\text{13}\), the racial geographic logic of neoliberalism is not merely a byproduct of late capitalist economic functioning – instead, race is always-already an

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\(^\text{13}\) George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” Landscape Journal, 26 (1).
organizing principle for urban development. Policing – and, in particular, that policing
which sees the free movement through and occupation of urban space by black subjects
as a threat to the security (and profitability) of commercial activity – is merely one way in
which this geographical organizing principle is operative. The young man in this music
video – depicted with his back turned to a far-off, distant downtown skyline – is
illustrative not only of the extent to which black subjects have been excluded from the
city’s progress and revitalization, but also the extent to which this exclusion is reinforced
by the threat of state (police) surveillance and violence.

Royce da 5’9”’s verse is followed immediately by a verse by Big Sean, an emcee
from the west side of Detroit who rose to prominence after performing for (and later
being signed to a record deal by) the luminary rapper Kanye West. Big Sean begins his
verse by articulating the central antagonism of neoliberal Detroit – entrepreneurial
striving and accumulation on the one hand juxtaposed with precarity and violence on the
other. Performing from what appears to be an abandoned former industrial factory, the
emcee raps

Boy I need no halves and halves, I want the game in
entirety
100 percent cut, no stitches required
Welcome to Detroit – where if you get that promotion
Don’t worry, man them bullets will still be at your ass
firin’

While Big Sean’s verse contains references to the precarity and violences (structural and
otherwise) that characterize black life in Detroit (“When you come up in a place where
everyone got a piece but ain’t peaceful”), the majority of his lyrics frame the urban
experience in terms not antithetical to the logic of entrepreneurial neoliberalism. The

14 “Detroit Vs. Everybody,” youtube video, 6:00, posted by EminemVEVO, January 23, 2015.
rapper’s performance here emphasizes a personal history of striving, hard work, and success – measured primarily in financial terms.

*Bitch I’m the D, can’t no offence dunk on me* [...]  
*I’m over-respected, my mama’s gated community’s overprotected* [...]  
*Tryna get paid fifty ways a day*  
*Used to put fifty on the layaway, now my closet fifty shades*  
*of grey*  
*Twenty-six and I done lived a lifetime a few times*  
*From futons to Grey Poupon*[15]

It is useful here to remember what Paul Gilroy has written about celebrations of material wealth in hip-hop culture – statements such as these are often intended to signify the growth of community wealth and well-being[16]. Seen in this light, Sean’s recounting of his origins and of his ability to lift his mother out of poverty are especially important and telling. Still – and with these cautionary notions in mind – the rapper’s juxtaposition of narratives of urban poverty with those of individual work ethic conform to a particular political imaginary. This individualistic, entrepreneurial framing of social mobility – politically wedded, as it is, to neoliberal organizations of space and urban sociality – is significant in the context of a song that intends to represent life in Detroit’s city space. It is further significant to this song’s representation of urban space that the verse is performed, in the song’s video, inside of an abandoned industrial factory – one of the prominent settings of American fables of individual hard work and self improvement.

Big Sean’s verse is followed by a starkly contrasting set of bars by Danny Brown. This verse – delivered in Brown’s distinctively shrill, nasal tone – depicts life in the city

[15] Ibid.  
he grew up in as a horrifically violent and deprived environment from which no escape route was evident.

Coming from them streets where they thirsty, starving to eat
Just a step away from felon, that’s why they call it the D
[...]
Cause I’m a Linwood n*gga, them Linwood n*ggas
They put a sack on your head, you bleed out like the reverend
If you think your hood is harder, I might break down the door

This depiction of life in Detroit is a stark departure from the striving optimism articulated by Big Sean. Interestingly, both Big Sean and Danny Brown’s verses are performed in the song’s music video from inside former industrial facilities. However, these industrial settings are transformed in vastly different ways by the lyrical content of the respective verses – if the factory that housed Big Sean’s verse represented striving and possibility in line with the rapper’s words, the factory where Brown raps represents confinement and violence. Indeed, the filming of Big Sean’s factory emphasizes that space’s spaciousness – the camera angles here are wide, and the setting is painted white and awash in light. By contrast, Danny Brown’s factory is filmed so as to emphasize it’s darkness, dinginess, and stuffiness. We see Brown from below – the camera points upwards at him and at the scene’s only source of light – which comes from outside of the factory through a window on the roof.

It is not until the end of the song that we see a crowd of people in the music video. During a verse by Trick Trick – a rapper who is about 15 years older than many of the other featured emcees – we see the rapper performing outside on a cold Detroit night, surrounded by his friends near a fire burning in an old oil cylinder. Trick Trick’s

performance is less a verse than an outro in which the rapper states his intention to pass
the track along to a younger generation of underground Detroit emcees.

*Hey Em, Let me get that instrumental, take it down to the
hood, let the little homies get this remix crackin’.* Detroit

Indeed, a remix of “Detroit vs. Everybody” would be released shortly following the
release of the initial track. This remix featured a litany of more than seventeen
underground Detroit rappers including Payroll Giovanni, Detroit Che, Black Milk, Guilty
Simpson, and Icewear Vezzo. Clocking in at just over sixteen minutes, this remix features
representations of life in Detroit that express a similar range of experiences to the ones
articulated in the initial release.

The outro by Trick Trick and the corresponding scene in the music video for
“Detroit vs. Everybody” articulate subversive relationships to urban space and the
cultural forms produced in them. The passing of an instrumental track down to lesser
known hip-hop artists as a chance for them to gain recognition and articulate their own
experiences of the city is a practice not unfamiliar in the context of hip-hop culture, but is
quite uncommon in many other genres. Because hip-hop was founded on the premise of
repurposing already-existing cultural forms (i.e. turntabling and sampling), this type of
free circulation of musical material is common and idiomatic. Similarly, the scene
represented in the song’s music video during Trick Trick’s outro represents a subversive,
communal relationship to urban space. If earlier scenes in this video emphasize the ways
in which the movements of black subjects through urban space are policed and restricted,
this final scene depicts communal black occupation of and celebration in urban space.
Interestingly, this image of resilient black sociality is not depicted as being rooted in

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18 Ibid.
individualism, consumption, and social ladder climbing – this is a representation of collective social life emerging from marginalization and precarity.

George Lipsitz has written that the “racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially-shared system of exclusion and inclusion.”¹⁹ These systems, for Lipsitz, amount to different spatial imaginaries that conform roughly to cultural background – a black spatial imaginary and a white spatial imaginary. While Lipsitz notes that the categories “whiteness” and “blackness” cannot be reduced to biological or embodied categories, he nonetheless writes that there exist in American urban life a white spatial imaginary and a black spatial imaginary. The white spatial imaginary is characterized by “exclusivity and augmented exchange value” and operates as “a central mechanism for skewing opportunities and life chances in the United States along racial lines.” By contrast, the black spatial imaginary – which Lipsitz locates in everyday black cultural practice rather than in avowedly political interventions – is characterized by “privileging use value over exchange value, sociality over selfishness, and inclusion over exclusion.”²⁰ The representations of Detroit in this song’s lyrics and music video – and Trick Trick’s scene in particular – function as both a critique of the neoliberal white spatial imaginary and an evocation of the black spatial imaginary.

It is interesting that, in a song intended to express pride in Detroit at a time when the city was experiencing financial difficulty, that this music video ends on a nostalgic note. Trick Trick is a rapper who was prominent in an earlier era, and his scene in the


²⁰ Ibid., 10.
movie does not emphasize images of Detroit’s revitalization or commercial growth. Instead, this video concludes by representing the black bodies and social life that largely built the city. By emphasizing the marginalizations, exclusions, and violences that characterize the progress that Detroit has made since its bankruptcy filing and by foregrounding black experiences of the city, “Detroit vs Everybody” and its music video counters sunny, optimistic media narratives of the city’s revitalization.

**Danny Brown**

Like fellow Detroit rapper Big Sean, Danny Brown (whose real name is Daniel Dewan Sewell) was born on the west side of the city and has been rapping for as long as he can remember. Despite becoming one of the most prominent rappers on the national level to be associated with Detroit, his career resembles in many ways a typical trajectory for an underground hip-hop artist – Brown released four volumes of his *Detroit State of Mind* mixtapes before his major label debut, *XXX*, at the age of thirty. A lifelong Detroiter of black and Filipino cultural heritage, Brown often reflects on his experiences in the city and its trajectory in both his music and in interviews. Unlike most media accounts of the city’s trajectory - which often represent the city as having a mid-century heyday, a decline, and a recent renewal – Brown’s framing is more ambivalent and is centered on the experience of Detroit’s neighborhoods rather than on downtown or the industrial and commercial sectors. In a 2012 interview with the online music zine *Complex*, Brown said

I was born and raised in Detroit. My parents had me when they were young, my pops was sixteen and my mom was eighteen. Detroit is really crazy. It was worse back then, but it’s more fucked up now, economically. When I was a kid it was lots of money floating around, so it was just a lot more contract killing. Now it’s just random, somebody
smacked somebody’s glasses and they get killed. Back then it was more disciplined.²¹

While this interview was conducted before the city’s bankruptcy filing and before media representations of the city as “revitalized” became commonplace, Brown’s representations of life “in the neighborhoods” have remained consistent through his most recent release, 2016’s *Atrocity Exhibition*. These representations, not unlike his statements in the above interview and in the rapper’s verse in “Detroit vs. Everybody” foreground experiences of poverty, violence, and precarity.

Danny Brown’s emphasis on neighborhood life and experiences in his representations of Detroit have sometimes put him at odds with other rappers from the city – most notably with Big Sean. In a 2013 interview with music magazine *The Fader* about Detroit’s bankruptcy filing, Brown highlighted the extent to which he and Big Sean articulate two very different visions and experiences of their home city.

You listen to how I talk about Detroit, and you listen to how a rapper like Big Sean talk about Detroit, and it’s like we’re talking about two different cities. Which is probably true, because Detroit is that type of city – he went to the best high school in the city … he can look at it and talk about guap [money], and we don’t have any. […] A lot of people from Detroit don’t consider him [to be from Detroit] either. They say he from L.A. now. He ain’t been to the hood in years, and I wouldn’t either if I was him, to be honest. It’s not a bad thing. I’m in the hood every day now, so I see the faces, I see the desperation.²²

Unsurprisingly, Big Sean responded and pushed back strongly against the idea that he lacked street credibility in his hometown. In a 2013 interview, Sean defended his reputation by noting his roots in Detroit’s neighborhoods, and additionally recounting his

efforts to help those still living in the “hood” – noting his donations of Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas gifts to inner-city residents. Danny Brown appeared, in an August 2013 radio interview, to laugh off Big Sean’s defense – saying “who don’t come to the hood on the holidays? Everybody come to the hood on the holidays. That don’t mean shit.”

The feud between Big Sean and Danny Brown is, on one level, typical of the antagonisms and schisms that characterize hip-hop culture. As Murray Forman has written, representations of an artist’s roots in the “hood” are often markers of authenticity and commitment to community – underground hip-hop artists often articulate skepticism about the street credibility of their more commercially-oriented peers. On other levels, though, this feud reflects more than simply a disagreement about roots and what it means to be “real” – it is indicative of different political and spatial imaginaries of urban life and social mobility, and of the complex intersections of race and class in a city that Brown rightly describes as bifurcated. These different imaginings and representations of Detroit are rooted in deeply different experiences growing up and living in the city – while Big Sean attended Cass Technical High School, Danny Brown dropped out, sold drugs, and ended up in jail. While Big Sean’s mother was a schoolteacher who moved him from Santa Monica, California to Detroit when he was three months old, Danny Brown’s parents were young, impoverished, and lacked access

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to social and geographical mobility when he was born. If Big Sean’s lyrics emphasize personal striving and accomplishment, Brown’s lyrics emphasize the violent, structural barriers than can often nullify such efforts by marginalized black subjects. When Big Sean proudly recounts the philanthropic generosity that he has been able to show his hometown, Brown frames that relationship to the neighborhoods as inauthentic and implicitly questions the transformative value of philanthropy to begin with. While Big Sean makes appearances at Detroit high schools to encourage the students there to study and improve their standardized test scores, Brown gives interviews about the slow takeover of formerly black urban spaces by white “hipsters.” If Big Sean’s work (partially) conforms to dominant, mediated framings of personal and community progress, Brown’s work – mass-mediated though it may have become – mediates and undermines these tidy narratives.

One of Danny Brown’s most poignant representations of growing up in Detroit is his song “25 Bucks” from his 2013 album Old. On this track, Brown recounts the economic precarity that characterized his youth in the city’s space and describes the social networks constructed by people in that space as an effort to mediate that precarity. In “25 Bucks,” Brown describes many of the informal commercial ventures engaged in by urban residents – some legal, some quasi-legal, and some illegal – that he witnessed as a young man in Detroit. These commercial enterprises – such as gambling, hairstyling without a license in the home, and drug dealing – never lift the people participating in them out of poverty, or even manage to change meaningfully their circumstances.

Instead, this informal economic activity merely sustains the precarity experienced by

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marginalized black urban subjects and keeps them from further deprivation. Brown describes seeing his mother braid the hair of neighborhood residents for a fee of twenty-five dollars, watching his father gamble dice in an attempt to feed the family, and engaging in small time street hustles himself. Ultimately though, the family’s extremely tenuous financial situation leads them to seek a loan from a neighborhood drug dealer, thus making them beholden to criminality and vulnerable to violences – both the violence that typically characterizes the drug trade and the state violence of incarceration.

What we gon’ do? See the local dope man
See if he can put some money in our hand
Same one jump me – the same one front me
Cause I’m tired of seein’ my family fucked up and hungry
Now I’m trapped in the trap and the devil ain’t forgettin’
Wanna see me dead or locked in a prison
In a system with division only thing that add up
Fuck up cause a n*gga tryna get a couple bucks27

While the experience of urban, post-industrial economic insecurity cuts across racial and cultural backgrounds, Brown’s awareness of the ever-present threat of arrest and incarceration speaks to a uniquely black American experience of precarity. It is interesting that Brown never mentions Detroit specifically in the lyrics to this song about his childhood. Nonetheless, this clearly autobiographical track references the ways in which Brown and other marginalized black citizens of the city have created quasi-legal commercial networks as a way of sustaining individual, family, and community life.

While Brown does not frame these networks in political terms, these acts of community self care and mediation of precarity nonetheless articulate informal, everyday solidarity28

27 “DANNY BROWN – 25 BUCKS FEAT. PURITY RING (OFFICIAL VIDEO),” Youtube video, posted by dannybrownbruhbruh, April 9, 2014.
28 Sidra Lawrence. this animal called culture: Performing Feminism and the Politics of Everyday Solidarities. Unpublished manuscript.
and additionally articulate a critique of mass incarceration and Detroit’s divestment from black residential areas. While Big Sean’s depictions of entrepreneurship affirm an individualist mode of self and community improvement, the subversive entrepreneurship described by Danny Brown (which merely sustains perpetual insecurity rather than lifting anyone out of poverty) functions as a paradoxical critique of entrepreneurship itself.

The music video for “25 Bucks” functions as a representation of Detroit’s urban space and, additionally, amplifies this critical angle. Unlike the video for “Detroit vs. Everybody,” which presents a critique of the city’s revitalization but nonetheless features many wide shots of downtown, Brown’s music video chooses to represent the city as cloistered and still – a place of confinement. Brown’s representation of Detroit centers on residential spaces and their transformation into informal commercial spaces – the viewer sees tight shots of aging homes and living rooms, small gatherings on porches, and gambling in narrow alleyways. The stillness, confinement, and lack of mobility represented in this music video are not metaphorical. During the entirety of the film, Danny Brown and featured singer Purity Ring are the only figures that move – all of the other people depicted in the neighborhood see appear to be frozen in time and space, as if the rapper pressed “pause” on everyday life so that he could perform. This aesthetic choice allows us to experience images of everyday “inner-city” life from a variety of perspectives – we see young men shooting dice in an alleyway, young women braiding hair on their porch, a young mother praying by her bedside for relief from financial stress.

The choice of portraying black urban life with partially static, frozen images combined with the lack of any specific reference to Detroit in the song’s lyrics can be
read in a number of ways. The lack of geographical specificity in the song makes Detroit explode outwards, transforming it into a global space – by de-coupling the precarity that characterizes life in Detroit from that urban space, the song becomes an evocation of social and economic stress that is typical of many spaces, black urban spaces in particular. By rejecting specificity in favor of a certain level of abstraction, Brown signifies and evokes global precarity – indeed, we are, globally, in a “Detroit moment,” (politically, economically, and spatially speaking) characterized by enclosure, privatization, and austerity. This “Detroit moment” is especially protracted in Afro-diasporic, African, and African-American cities, but has also touched European spaces such as Greece, France, and the United Kingdom.

By portraying his fellow neighborhood residents in this music video as immobile, Brown highlights the both the confinement and surveillance that typify black occupations of urban space in America and articulates a nascent critique of the politics of individual social mobility as a method of community improvement. Music (along with athletics) has long been viewed as a way for marginalized black subjects to lift themselves out of poverty – according to the logic of American work ethic and “up-by-your-bootstraps” thinking, urban and community decay can be mitigated by ambition and striving. If Big Sean articulates the power of social mobility via striving and entrepreneurship, Brown’s choice to depict his neighborhood with the most profound stasis reveals the extent to which his own access to mobility and a degree of wealth have not translated into broader improvement for the community from which he emerged. The frozen figures in Brown’s video for “25 Bucks” signify – in their fixedness – the permanence of a marginalized black subject position within the status quo of urban (and global) neoliberalism. These
figures represent the marginalization, violation, and precarity that are always – necessarily and inevitably – produced by capitalist modernity. They also, however, signify – in Brown’s depiction of the networks of informal economic solidarity that they have created - the ingenuity and resilience with which black urban subjects have produced what Paul Gilroy has described as “countercultures of modernity.” These networks of solidarity function as both a mediation of capitalist modernity on subversive and marginalized terms and as a critique of capitalist modernity as such.

**Conclusion**

Unlike the work created by artists and musicians discussed in previous chapters, the work discussed here is not framed by the artists who created it as overtly political – there is no talk, in these pieces, of political organizing, of overt resistance to neoliberalism, or of consciously forming or articulating an emergent narrative to the status quo. Still and all, the songs and music videos “Detroit vs. Everybody” and “25 Bucks” critique dominant and mass-mediated narratives of Detroit’s trajectory as a post-industrial decaying (and then “revitalized”) city. Returning to Krims’ idea of the “urban ethos,” these works illustrate a range of experiences of Detroit and life in that city’s space that speak to class divides and to racial and cultural divides with regard to experiences of the area’s “progress” and “revitalization.” I want, here, not to suggest that one representation of Detoit and life there is more accurate, or even more politically defensible, than another. Instead, it is clear that the range of representations that form Detroit’s “urban [hip-hop] ethos” articulate the realities of the uneven and combined.

development that characterize modern, capitalist “uneven and combined development” – to borrow Trotsky’s description of modernity and capitalism from more than a century ago. The range of representations discussed here includes images of revitalized downtown spaces and narratives of accumulation and striving – but also reveal the exclusions and slippages in these images and narratives as well. While no set of representations is capable of evoking a city in totality, Detroit’s hip-hop urban ethos gesture towards a mapping of the various experiences and ways of life and mediation produced in Detroit’s socially and politically constructed space.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Cultural and musical production in Detroit have always been intimately related to the city’s political history. In this thesis, I have attempted to call attention to the ways in which political and spatial antagonisms have shaped the work of contemporary hip-hop artists working in the city. Additionally, I have attempted to describe the ways in which these artists – in their musical and, sometimes, activist work – have sought to mediate the political and geographical conditions that their lives and work emerged from. The artists discussed above – whether they self-identify as doing political work or not – cut against the grain of both neoliberal city spatial and development policies and media narratives that emphasize Detroit’s recent transformation and revitalization.

The art, music, and activism discussed in the above chapters reflect, of course, only an impossibly small sample from Detroit’s deep traditions of music, culture, and political resistance. I have not, by any means, been able here to represent in totality all of the complex ways in which hip-hop cultural production and activist efforts emerge from and are embedded within the deeply contested politics of urban space. Nonetheless, during the processes of conducting my fieldwork in Detroit and writing this document, I have been able to examine many facets of the relationship between hip-hop music and the politics of urban space in Detroit, the nature of the work being done by activists and social movements in the city, and the extent to which media narratives heralding the arrival of an unproblematic “rebirth” for Detroit have been undermined and subverted by rap artists. Specifically, I have been able to examine the ways that artists and activists in Detroit have been able to interface with the politics of urban space in three ways – by using music and art to mediate spatial antagonisms, by intervening directly intospatial
design, and by representing their lives and city in ways that counter dominant media narratives.

In Chapter 1, I examined the work of Southwest Detroit’s Raiz Up collective, arguing that their work emerges from and attempts to mediate the spatial and political complexities and antagonisms experienced as part of everyday life in their community. After describing the political moment (the appointment of the city’s first emergency financial manager, the declaration of bankruptcy in July 2013) from which the collective emerged, I have described the ways in which the work of this group attempts to organize their community through participation in music and art to resist austerity and displacement. By embedding their political project within cultural and musical practices that long-time residents of the city and neighborhood would be familiar with, the Raiz Up is able to cultivate engaged citizenship among residents of Southwest Detroit. If displacement, gentrification, and uprooting are the necessary result of the development policies encouraged by city government, the Raiz Up attempts to establish their community’s roots and to prevent the loss of space, culture, and heritage.

In Chapter 2, I examined the work of the hip-hop and theatre group Complex Movements and visual artist Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project. While Chapter 1 focused on the mediation of spatial antagonisms spawned by Detroit’s neoliberal development logic, this chapter considered the myriad ways that art and music can be considered interventions into spatial design themselves. I began this chapter by describing Tyree Guyton’s process of intervening into the spatial design and logic of his own neighborhood, and I ultimately suggest that his Heidelberg Project blurs the lines between aesthetics and politics in ways that fundamentally challenge the city’s spatial
management and development logic. Still, the Project’s complex relationship to its surrounding community raises and leaves open a number of questions about what an alternative relationship to the management of urban space could look like. Discussing Complex Movements and their piece “Beware of the Dandelions,” I argue that this piece’s aesthetics offer a blueprint for intervention into and management of space and resources. Additionally, I argue that this piece challenges the conventional separation between traditional knowledge and modernity and articulates a subversive relationship to technology and technological processes.

In Chapter 3, I focused on representations of urban space and life in urban space in the song “Detroit vs. Everybody” and in the work of Danny Brown. Here, I sought to examine and critique dominant media narratives which assert that Detroit is a city “revitalized” or even “reborn.” By examining representations of the city and city life in these works, I was able to reveal the way that hip-hop artists in Detroit have called attention to the exclusions (and, especially, exclusions based upon race) and marginalizations that characterize the recent trend towards progress and development. Discussing “Detroit vs. Everybody,” I examine the portrayal of these exclusions and marginalizations in the context of a track that is ostensibly about the city’s extraordinary resilience. I argue that, despite focusing on images of downtown and on revitalized spaces, this track does so in such a way as to express the structural gaps in neoliberal development logic that effect the everyday lives of marginalized subjects as they attempt to occupy and traverse space. Examining the work of Danny Brown and, specifically, the track “25 Bucks,” I argue that Brown’s narrative of precarity and life in Detroit’s
neighborhoods counters not only dominant media narratives of the city’s trajectory, but also contrasts with political expressions of city life made by other emcees.

The case studies that I have examined in this thesis are extremely musically, culturally, politically, aesthetically, and conceptually diverse. Because of this, it is impossible to offer any easy or concrete “conclusions” about the relationship of music (or hip-hop in particular) to urban spatial politics. Instead, what I have found in the course of conducting my fieldwork (and in the course of writing this document) is that Detroit’s intensely vibrant hip-hop culture is perpetually emerging from, responding to, and negotiating the politics of urban spatial management and production in myriad ways. I hope to have framed the relationship between music, sound, and space as a reciprocal power dynamic – music and sound do not merely emerge conditioned and overdetermined by spatial politics, and similarly sound and music alone are insufficient to transform urban space. Instead, music and sound are ways in which people mediate their precarious position in the urban totality, confront their own structural marginalization, and contest imbalances of spatial power. The case studies discussed here illustrate the ways that Detroit emcees and the people in their communities use sound and music in this way. Additionally, since the austerity and privatization that characterize Detroit’s political zeitgeist are manifest nearly the world over, the city’s political situation and the ways in which residents respond (sonically and otherwise) to this situation tell us something about global privation and precarity.

My engagement here with Detroit’s culture of hip-hop and politics and with the politics of urban space and spatial design is necessarily prefatory. While I have sought to present various relationships between music, sound, politics, and space, my account has
been based on a limited number of experiences and a limited scope with regard to this
document. I hope, in the future, to continue to explore the interconnections of music,
sound, space, and politics in Detroit and in other American cities, with particular
attention paid to sonic and musical mediation of racial geographies and the racialized
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