

# GENTRIFICATION AS RECOLONIZATION

UNPACKING DETROIT'S REVITALIZATION NARRATIVES

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**MICHELLE RUBIN**

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*The narrative of Detroit, Michigan, has shifted from a story of municipal bankruptcy to a story of revitalization and regrowth. This paper examines the process of growth, revitalization, and gentrification through the lens of past and present social and political trends. This paper draws on analysis of local policies and societal norms to give perspective to the everyday violence that occurs in Detroit's vulnerable communities, suggesting a dire need to reframe the current revitalization narrative. A plan is outlined for alternative development and gentrification processes in order to promote positive structural change.*

**W**hen Michael Brown, a young black teenager, was fatally shot by a white police officer in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, the dialogue surrounding police brutality and the importance of black lives rightfully took center stage. As the Ferguson uprising and subsequent events unfolded, I was just settling into my new apartment on Detroit's East Side. I was preparing for my first day of work at a predominantly black high school in Detroit's Cody Rouge neighborhood, an area notorious for gang-related violence and abandoned homes. Growing up in the affluent suburbs of Detroit, I was told stories by family members and friends of the city's dangers—its violence, its poverty, and its homelessness. It was made clear to me from a young age that Detroit was no longer the world-class city it once was. So understandably, I was still somewhat shocked that I had convinced myself to move to a city that so many people close to me wrote off as a wasteland of crime and ruins.

Most importantly, I was adjusting to the social, emotional, and political implications of what it meant to be living in Detroit as a young white woman. Was I viewed as a racial, economic, and social outsider, or would I be accepted into the community? I wondered how to distance myself from my complicity of witnessing, benefitting from, and economically contributing to what I viewed as a violent process of gentrification and downtown development. I constantly asked myself if I was inherently helping or hurting the city.

As the marches and protests post-Ferguson continued around the nation, several friends, making assumptions based on Detroit's racial

makeup, asked me, "Is Detroit crazy? Are the streets packed? Is everyone angry?" Moderately sized peaceful protests were planned, "die-ins"<sup>1</sup> in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts were organized and the pain and anger of the events reverberated throughout the city in its own right. As many, myself included, wondered why Detroit protests did not resemble those of other major cities in size, scope, or power, a friend provided me with the following reasoning: "Detroit is still hurting. The 1967 race riots

*I constantly asked myself if I was inherently helping or hurting the city.*

destroyed this city, and it is still healing and rebuilding. This city can't risk ruining things again." Although my friend's reasoning does not speak for individual Detroiters' experiences nor seek to provide justification for action or inaction post-Ferguson, it helped me, as a perceived racial, social, and economic outsider, to understand the retrieval and interpretation of haunting and trauma in regards to Detroit's collective racialized history. My friend's words also spoke to the current movements to rebuild and revitalize the city by explaining the historical context of the economic, political and social implications of the process of growth on the continually marginalized populations of Detroit. How does an oppressive and fragmented history of a city manifest into lived everyday violence and unrest for some, while providing an urban space for entrepreneurship, creativity, and opportunity for others?



MICHELLE RUBIN | A HOUSE NEAR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW RED WINGS ARENA IN DETROIT

## UNDERSTANDING DETROIT ATTEMPT AT A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN A FRAGMENTED CITY

Detroit is a prime example of a post-industrial<sup>2</sup> city affected by the process of globalization.<sup>3</sup> As the auto industry that built Detroit became increasingly decentralized, massive population losses, failing city services (by way of a shrinking tax base), notably high crime rates, and economic depletion led to the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Yet the story of Detroit has recently shifted and no longer does the media paint a picture of ruin, homelessness, violent crime, and bankruptcy. Detroit is now deemed an American “comeback story” by the political and economic elite, and a blank canvas for entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, and capital investments. Billionaire businessman Dan

Gilbert, founder of Quicken Loans and a prime investor in Detroit’s revitalization, has branded this idea as “Opportunity Detroit,” putting the slogan on buses, billboards and buildings—capitalizing on the idea of opportunity as a way to entice people to move, work, and live in Detroit—but at what expense? One person’s “opportunity” is another’s eviction or displacement, both physical and cultural, from acting on that very “opportunity.” As such, there is an ongoing attempt for the collective identity of the city to be rewritten by the elite in order to alter the dominant narrative and perception of the city. Perhaps this is done to make Detroit more palatable or desirable to the general public, but it is at the expense of its vulnerable communities.

It is the Detroit community’s collective responsibility to reframe Detroit revitalization narratives without silencing the vulnerable communities and to promote consciousness

among these populations, but the problem is deeply rooted. U.S. Census data released in September 2015 show that Detroit's white population increased by 8,000 from 2014 to 2015. This is the first growth in the white population since the 1950s, and thus helps to quantify what many believe to be the revitalization of the city. Yet the situation is still bleak, as from 2012 to 2013 there was a loss of 12,784 residents overall (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This decline is mostly from Hispanic and black residents who are still moving to the suburbs in great numbers, signifying that even if white residents are moving in, the city is not fitting these residents' needs. As these wealthier (and predominately white) residents move in, the changes are palpable. Rent has increased dramatically, black businesses are being displaced from the city center, and downtown is near full residential capacity (Moskowitz, 2015).

To understand the current political, economic, and social climate of Detroit and reframe the narratives appropriately, a further examination is necessary of Detroit's shifting identity, as well as the underlying political and social forces acting upon the city and its vulnerable communities. The city should be understood in relation to the forces that have oppressed the city through time because these forces have shaped its identity (Singh, 2004). I define gentrification as the gradual process of physical and cultural displacement by way of rebuilding, revitalizing and changing the means of capital in a location. This displacement is a result of higher socioeconomic status residents moving into a geographic area that was previously inhabited by lower socioeconomic residents. Defined in this manner, gentrification takes on colonialist logic, because imperialistic and predatory manifestations of power relations

are at play. Here, colonialist logic is not used to identify the legal conquest of a country, but rather to define dominant and subordinate relationships of power, resulting in a physical and cultural invasion. Until these forces are examined, transformational change within Detroit's vulnerable communities cannot take place, and the status quo of marginalization by way of development will remain.

Gentrification is described here as recolonization rather than colonization because the oppression of these vulnerable groups has remained in varying forms throughout history. Further, gentrification is a process by which the "outside" colonizes the "inside." These locational terms can be either physical or imagined. For example, the "outside" can refer to the physical—a person from the suburbs moving into the inner city—or could refer to a social or racial outsider culturally displacing the preexisting culture (Goldberg, 1993). Gentrification can be seen as a violent process because of its social and cultural displacing, silencing and traumatic effects on vulnerable populations. These consequences can be seen as forms of indirect violence. Following this logic, gentrification is a form of violent cultural invasion that manifests in the enforcement of cultural hierarchies.

## NAMING BOUNDARIES

### RACIALIZED SPATIAL MARGINALIZATION IN DETROIT

Natural and artificial topography is often utilized to divide urban spaces and create peripheries of marginalized communities, in such "racializing" spatial differences (Goldberg, 1993). Applying this theory to Detroit helps

explain Detroit's current spatial inequalities and created physical boundaries. Eight Mile Road, which gained notoriety by way of Detroit native rapper Eminem, serves as a physical racialized boundary, dividing Detroit from the surrounding suburbs and subsequently attempting to contain its hardships and crime. Similarly, the divide between Grosse Pointe and the East Side of Detroit would take any newcomer by surprise as it rapidly shifts from a predominately white affluent suburb to some of Detroit's roughest neighborhoods. Recently installed barricades in Grosse Pointe now mark this boundary, restricting access to the suburb from certain areas of Detroit (Moskowitz, 2015). These racial barricades are physical and concrete boundaries that also create mental and perceived boundaries. They are named and created with the intent to categorize and differentiate: the city from the suburb, the poor from the wealthy, and the white from the black. These boundaries, whether real or perceived, act as an exertion of power and racial and social categorization, ascribing boundaries of belonging and non-belonging, inclusion and exclusion.

The racialization of spatial differences also explains the current structural inequalities of Detroit, wherein capital investments and businesses focus their resources into the downtown area, resulting in increased urban vitality, but arguably ignore the periphery of the city, where poverty remains at unprecedented levels. This has created what many refer to as "A Tale of Two Detroits." Developers and gentrifiers are "reclaiming" land, and inherent in conquering land remains the colonial logic of conquering people (Goldberg, 1993). Reclaiming land is not only shown in the creation of expensive lofts in the city center, but also with

the displacement of black businesses such as the Tangerine Room, a bar and restaurant formerly owned by Darnell Small.

The Tangerine Room was located in Detroit's Rivertown neighborhood until Small lost his lease due to a legal battle with Rivertown Holdings, the owners of the Tangerine Room's neighbor, Atwater Brewery (Taylor, 2015). Small claimed that Atwater wanted him out of the space in order to expand (Houck, 2015). Atwater Brewery has now expanded into the space, opening an upgraded beer garden and taphouse in November 2015 (Thibodeau, 2015). Removing black businesses in this way in order to cater to the "revitalization" of the city, and changing the labor force while doing so, suggests a clear dominant and subordinate relationship akin to colonialist power relations.

The prevailing structural inequalities prohibit access for the vulnerable communities to the emergence of what is deemed by the political and economic elite as "New Detroit" and exacerbate other inequities including access to food, medical treatment, cultural events, and education. The revitalized downtown now serves as both a physical and mental barrier to the vulnerable communities by insinuating that they are not welcome, as well as physically blocking access because the neighborhoods lie on the periphery of "New Detroit." Moreover, these sentiments are displayed by cultural events that appeal to the predominately affluent class such as the emergence of expensive retail stores and restaurants that someone with the median Detroit income of \$14,870 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) cannot afford, and the increasing security and privatization of downtown parks and public spaces.

The prevalence of “blighted” structures (as referred to by city officials and other elite individuals) doubles as both a physical and mental haunting of past and current economic and social hardships. There is power in the ability to decide what is and what is not considered “blighted.” Those in power carry out this policy procedure, but the communities told that their neighborhoods now carry the weight of the term “blight” feel its indirect consequences. At the height of the city’s abandonment, many labeled Detroit as post-apocalyptic, but what deeper purpose do burnt-out houses and broken windows symbolize? The vast numbers of dilapidated houses, factories, schools, and other buildings in Detroit serve as both a physical and mental reminder of the city’s fractured past, arguably akin to what AbdouMaliq Simone describes in “Among Ruins: On the Spirits of Commemoration as Colonial Ruins.” Not only do they serve as a reminder of what was, but also as a reminder of what could have been, perhaps if the affluent and predominately white population did not “abandon” the city.

Mayor Mike Duggan has developed task forces to remove blighted structures in large quantities, which many praise. However, this aggressive removal strategy can also be viewed as an attempt to bandage the current and past haunting of the community, acting as a suture on the identity of Detroit. While blight removal has its merits, as there is validity to improving people’s perceptions of their city, there must be an overall caution in regard to how many accolades are given to the procedure—can simply removing broken structures “heal” a community? Leveling the physical embodiments of memories cannot create a city anew. It can be argued that these

types of community revitalization efforts serve merely as justificatory practices to show a small commitment to the neighborhoods, while still not giving citizens a proper voice in the process.

## EXAMINING EMPATHY AND POSITIONALITY IN REVITALIZATION NARRATIVES

To understand gentrification in terms of Detroit’s revitalization, the complexities of empathy must be fully understood. In “Tenebrae After September 11: Art, Empathy and the Global Politics of Belonging,” Jill Bennett speaks about how idiopathic empathy (when one shares an identity with those they empathize with) can lead to the reinforcement of cultural hierarchies because the empathizer does not understand the experienced trauma as relative to the victim, but instead relates it to him or herself (Bennett, 2003). This results in the sharing of the trauma and, arguably, an attempt at sharing a collective identity between victim and non-victim. In some circumstances this could result in the non-victim or empathizer superimposing guilt, empathy, or stories onto the victims or vulnerable communities. The danger is that a secondary witness or outsider can conflate or misconstrue the trauma of a community and, in doing so, co-opt it as his or her own. This further denies a voice to the victims (Henry, 2012).

Idiopathic empathy underlies much of what is seen in Detroit gentrification and revitalization narratives; people have altruistic motives for helping a failing city. They empathize with its citizens, and in doing so co-opt the city’s story as their own. This is displayed in people’s excitement about the resurgence of the city, the relocation of suburbanites, and the surge of companies that boast that

they are “Made in Detroit.” However, painting positive new narratives about the city does not relieve vulnerable communities of the trauma, oppression, or economic depletion that they have faced. Looking past a city’s deep-rooted structural, spatial and racialized issues in hopes of a brighter future will not heal a city; it will only provide a façade of healing. These one-sided narratives leave out the everyday violence still percolating and being heightened by development in the city center. They claim collectivity of the city from the seat of the oppressor, empathizer, developer and gentrifier, while failing to give a voice to the communities being affected by the fast-paced growth. If the process of redevelopment is indirectly violent, does the end goal of economic development matter?

Wayne County’s tax foreclosure auctions of “abandoned” homes provide an example of governmental and official neglect of Detroit’s vulnerable population, as well as the impact of positionality on Detroit revitalization narratives. In 2015, 8,000 occupied homes in Detroit were sold at the Wayne County Tax Foreclosure Auction, meaning people were evicted from their homes in order for Wayne County to auction off the property (Kurth, 2015). This policy was arguably created with the intent to raise property values, reduce crime, and make neighborhoods more attractive. The *Detroit News* covered the 2015 auction by bringing notice to the looming threat of mass evictions and asking if the auction was moral on behalf of the government (Kurth, 2015). Yet, an article from the *Detroit Free Press* written in the same time period celebrates the increased home equity and property values as a result of the city’s blight removal efforts—without any mention of evictions (Gallagher, 2015). Again,

this illuminates the silence in the narrative of “opportunity” at the expense of displacement and evictions. This narrative of regrowth by way of property values glorifies gentrification and oppressive housing policies without mention of the pain caused by the process, and threatens to further polarize a city still healing from years of disruption and neglect.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### DEMOCRACY IN DETROIT?

The question of “Is Detroit a democracy?” depends on what definition of democracy is being used. If viewed as a relational term, as John Markoff suggests in “Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change,” the term ‘democracy’ does not hold the same definition throughout time or instance (Markoff, 1996). A place can be legally termed a democracy, but not be a democracy in practice because of its anti-democratic practices. Deep-rooted mistrust and factionalism in Detroit among racial and class fault lines create impediments to practicing an authentic democracy, a democracy that is not violent, and in which everyone can participate with equal power. Detroit’s history of racial tension intensifies the implications of gentrification and development. An authentic democracy must give all citizens the ability to have their voices heard and respected in their community (Hickey, 2015). Although there have been small victories in this arena, such as new streetlights being installed throughout the city and talk of a Community Benefits Ordinance in the Detroit City Council, citizens of these communities still do not have an equal say in what is happening to them or their community. So the question remains: Is this a democracy for all or for some?

Detroit can be viewed as having a suspended democracy, wherein the voices and actions of all individuals are currently not being given equal weight.

This question of what defines a democracy encompasses the dichotomy of colonialist power relationships versus sovereignty, something that is applicable to Detroit and many developed communities where racialized dominant and subordinate relationships exist—displaying itself as issues of self-governance. This notion is clearly articulated in the story of Detroit, wherein after the period of white flight and mass population loss, African Americans, who made up the majority of the city, self-governed by electing African American politicians to the mayoral seat. Yet the city fell into disrepair and was plagued by political corruption, eventually resulting in Detroit's municipal bankruptcy. The downfall of the city arguably asserts the notion that African Americans are incapable of successfully self-governing, a mindset reminiscent of colonial justifications for ruling the colonies (*New World Encyclopedia*, 2013).

In 2013, Michigan officials appointed Kevyn Orr as Detroit's emergency manager. Orr was tasked to oversee financial decisions for the city (Davey, 2013). The state's takeover of Detroit in the form of Emergency Management control, which ended in 2014, further displays a colonialist logic, and can be seen as a de-democratization of the city (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Although Orr is a black man, his position still showcased the perceived ineptitude of the city and its communities to govern itself. This notion was only reaffirmed when Mayor Mike Duggan was elected, making him the first white mayor of Detroit in 40 years. Duggan ran with the campaign slogan "Every Neighborhood has

a Future," and he is not blind to the continuing narrative of the "Tale of Two Detroits." Yet many marked his election as a turning point for the city, wherein they believed Duggan would "save," "revitalize," and "heal" the broken city because of his business strategies for economic development. Duggan's election was in some sense more symbolic than it was anything else, as the city was under state control and Duggan held little to no power upon his election (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Therefore, the question must be asked, why was Duggan chosen by the people of Detroit to symbolically lead the city into a period of revitalization and growth? Although Duggan is cognizant of the

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"us vs. them" mentality that plagues Detroit development conversations, he is still a white man governing a majority African American city, and therefore the types of questions I asked myself when I moved to Detroit are applicable to Mayor Duggan as well. Is the presence of a white mayor elected to "save" a predominately African American city after mismanagement and political corruption a manifestation of a white savior complex? Is it a form of continual oppression by way of a legal power relationship? Rather than suggesting that Duggan or other city officials are ineffective leaders, I am suggesting that to understand the effects of gentrification, development, and revitalization, there must be a larger effort to understand how those with power and privilege are viewed by the marginalized communities.



## REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE

### TACTICAL SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN A CHANGING CITY

Biologically a wound heals from the inside out, but if the wound is deep enough, the body is still left scarred, leaving the definition of a fully healed community an anomaly that the world and Detroit have yet to see. Systems of oppression are built upon each other. As has been shown throughout history, forming a new republic on the grounds of inequality, violence, and trauma will result in further fragmentation (Singh, 2004).

However, even through this fragmentation and cyclical modes of oppression, Detroit is in a unique position. It can be built from the inside out, using its communities as pillars of strength to empower populations often overlooked. However, if the city's successes continue to be framed without recognition of the systemic injustices of the city's vulnerable populations, no real progress will be made. Detroit's collective scars must be realized, discussed and acted on, or they will continue to cause fragmentation and new heightened modes of oppression.

***The gentrifier triples as oppressor, developer and beneficiary . . . There is no innocence in the indirect violence these actions cause.***

Following Jacques Derrida's claim that neutrality does not exist, I assert that neutrality in Detroit's revitalization narrative does not exist (Derrida, 1996). The application of this argument to one of my opening questions,

"Was I inherently helping or hurting the city?", facilitates the notion that a person can never be neutral when other people are being harmed, regardless of intentions or levels of action or inaction. The gentrifier triples as oppressor, developer and beneficiary. The gentrifier, although maybe not explicit in action, becomes inherently complicit in development, dislocation, silencing and fragmentation. The gentrifiers are responsible for driving up rents, affecting city culture, and altering the workforce by creating more high-skilled jobs; there is no innocence in the indirect violence these actions cause. As the gentrifier, I must understand the effect of my presence and power on others, and must question opportunities for positive action, knowing I am already complicit in an arguably violent process.

The story of Detroit and its problems are local as well as global in scope. Similar problems are present in every city undergoing growth and development. The development of Detroit's downtown and the process of gentrification was inevitable, as cities go through cycles of urban vitality, which are indirectly violent processes of redevelopment, and racial and class exploitation are present in almost all modern cities. Therefore, I do not argue that anti-development or anti-gentrification movements should be executed within Detroit communities, because these methods would be devastating to the economy without proper foundation and support (Teivainen, 2005). However, I do argue for alternative development and alternative gentrification processes. Using Randy Shaw's framework in *The Activist's Handbook*, Detroit can mitigate colonial manifestations such as displacement, lack of sovereignty, and unequal economic, political, and social power between the two perceived

factions of Detroit (Shaw, 2001). In the current process, those who are (whether knowingly or not) developers, gentrifiers, and beneficiaries should not superimpose their collective experiences onto the whole city or community. As Paulo Freire outlines in *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*, to be a democratic leader, one must allow the communities one is working with to generate their own ideas, instead of imposing ideas onto them (Freire, 1996). How are the ideas present in Detroit's revitalization being generated in the neighborhoods and then executed by local authorities? One way this is happening is through local activist groups that practice what Shaw labels as tactical activism—being proactive, rather than reactionary, and using strategies and clear objectives to achieve realistic goals (Shaw, 2001).

One Detroit-based grassroots coalition, the Detroit Eviction Defense, is an example of this type of group, using tactical activism to promote positive change against foreclosure and eviction. The group's success lies in its ability to celebrate small victories, such as successfully protesting the eviction of one family, instead of setting unrealistic goals of stopping all foreclosures in the city. Moreover, the group organizes alternative legal strategies to foreclosure in order to help vulnerable homeowners defend their homes, such as executing nonviolent protests against banks and government agencies involved in foreclosures and evictions, using the slogan "Black Homes Matter" (Parker, 2016). While other grassroots organizations like the Detroit Eviction Defense exist, Detroit needs more groups executing tactical activist strategies and these groups must band together in hopes that city officials will realize their potential effect and be willing to partake in dialogic communication.

Additionally, a Community Benefits Ordinance, which has been discussed by the Detroit City Council and advocated for by several local community groups, is a step towards having the vulnerable communities of Detroit generate individual themes (Freire, 1996). The ordinance would allow community members to voice their opinions when development projects threaten to affect their livelihoods and well-being. The ordinance would also legally obligate developers to listen to and facilitate community demands such as securing a certain number of jobs for community members from the proposed development (Hickey, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Although the ordinance, along with other suggested tactical activist strategies, will not "heal" the fragmentation present in the city, it would provide a framework for dialogue more justly as Detroit revitalization stories continue to unfold. Permanent structural change for Detroit neighborhoods will only arise from a consciousness of the vulnerable population, those acting in solidarity with them, and the powerful regarding their positions and possibilities for positive change, resulting in intentional dialogue, and the application of well-designed strategies and objectives to achieve collective goals (Singh, 2004). The first step, as suggested here, is a stronger effort to reframe the dominant revitalization narratives without silencing the violent effect of a colonial-based relationship of development and displacement on the vulnerable populations of Detroit.

Beginning to come to terms with my own complicity in this process was, and remains, a painful process. However, I believe it is this first

step of recognition that will lead to a stronger dialogue about how to strengthen Detroit, and other similar urban places, without relying on societal norms built on colonialist logic. A willingness to critically engage with a system

that I have benefited from, while simultaneously harming others, facilitates the ability to work towards a Detroit in which no one is complacent with the active and harmful role of developer, gentrifier, or oppressor. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A "die-in" is a form of protest where participants simulate being dead by lying on the ground. These forms of protests have become increasingly popular as a response to police killings, such as the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, among others (Luxen, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Post-industrial refers here to an economy that no longer depends on industry (in Detroit's case, the auto industry). It is important to note that this change has reshaped local

economies by affecting those who relied on lower-skilled factory jobs for income. Detroit serves as a microcosm for a nation that has moved to being largely post-industrial.

<sup>3</sup> I define globalization as a political and cultural process that exploits vulnerable communities for capital by connecting the processes of production, distribution, and consumption to further exploit the weak. I argue that globalization can be viewed as a manifestation of colonial tactics and values.

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