Restructured City: Demolition and Racial Accumulations in Detroit

by

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Dissertations are simultaneously about bringing something to a close at the same time as you fling it off into new directions. I'll never be able to adequately express my gratitude to everyone who has made this possible. But I will try.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

This dissertation is a set of ethnographic and archival experiments confronting how structures of white racism that power racial capitalism refuse to be easily leveled. In particular, these experiments identify technical systems that maintain racist accumulations of land, wealth, and contamination through the physical destruction of late industrial landscapes. I bring these systems into focus by drawing upon five years of multimodal engagement with processes of vacant building removal in Detroit, Michigan. Since 1950, more than two hundred thousand empty buildings have been demolished without replacement in Detroit, including some twenty thousand between 2014 and 2019. Unused dwellings, factories, schools, and other structures materialize how the antiblack shape of Detroit's present rests upon the foundations of indigenous erasure. For some onlookers, including city residents and demolition administrators, building removals appear to quite literally clear away the legacies of white supremacy. And yet, as this dissertation approaches building removals from front porches, excavator cabs, training facilities, meeting rooms, regulatory case files, and other locations, it finds that demolitions do not tear down the systems that codify white privilege. Demolitions restructure lived environments in ways that compound the racist status quo. For instance, legal statutes codifying demolition as 'blight elimination' allow unelected, predominantly white demolition administrators to determine the spatial futures of a majority-Black city. Algorithms that select certain empty buildings for demolition are coded to explicitly channel resources toward Detroit's wealthier neighborhoods in the hopes of attracting white, upper middle-class professionals. White-owned firms who built Detroit's segregated suburbs turn dormant

excavators and precariously employed Black and Latinx men into a profitable demolition apparatus. Drafty building removal regulations transform asbestos-containing components from protective materials into airborne hazards into the breathing spaces of predominantly Black laborers. The working class Black and Latinx people who live closest to demolition sites encounter their lingering aftermaths through contaminated soils left in their wake.

By tracing how racism operates through technical systems, this dissertation elucidates how those systems structure — and restructure — racialized bodies and places. In so doing, it ultimately argues that people who benefit from the enrichment of whiteness are, willingly or not, complicit in the ongoing oppression of others. These complicities offer possibilities for eliminating structural inequities, including the intersections of racism and economic predation, through the construction of expansive systems for material repair.

Introduction
Structures

Figure 1. 12230 Arlington, before and after demolition. Photos taken by demolition contractor. Received under FOIA, Michigan Homeowner Assistance Nonprofit Housing Corporation

These photos offer a shortcut through this dissertation. It begins in places like the one shown on the left and winds toward locations like that on the right. Our points of departure and arrival are all located in the immediate vicinity of Detroit, Michigan, a place where empty buildings manifest processes of racist uneven development, especially the conjuncture of deindustrialization and population loss. This geographic scope provides us with a vantage on broader questions about the durability of structural inequities, specifically how and why our racially-unequal present is constructed from the consequences of our racially-unequal past. Demolition might appear to be an odd process for taking up these questions, because in the move from before to after — from a bungalow style dwelling into a patch of dirt covered with grass seed — the structure very much looks as if it has disappeared. But it has not. As the pages to

come contend, building removals do not remove structures from the world. Both literally and figuratively, demolitions transform the detritus of white power and antiblack oppression into engines capable of driving forward racially-differentiated outcomes. We will approach how this occurs as much through systems that articulate property and employment regimes as it does the physical compositions of heavy machineries, hazardous building materials, and soil. By using these structures to connect across time and through place, my aim in this work is both to strike at conditions that underpin racist accumulations of harm and to foreground struggles to redirect these accumulations into antiracist environments.

As a whole, this dissertation simultaneously draws inspiration from and contrast with remarks the prolific writer James Baldwin gave in 1980 at Detroit's Wayne State University. He was addressing a conference center auditorium packed with students and educators when he exclaimed, "I attest to this: The world is not white; it never was white, cannot be white. White is a metaphor for power, and that is simply a way of describing Chase Manhattan Bank"[1]. This phrase, like the rest of the talk, captured the spirit of Baldwin's broader writing by centering how the United States only exists because of the cruel fictions of white supremacy. Chief among these fictions is the very notion of whiteness itself as an undifferentiated generic, rather than a concept that has been amended and revised over time in order to maintain systems of antiblack domination[2]. In his moment, Baldwin was integral to pushing back on the assumption that the

[1] Text of address reprinted as Baldwin, James (2011) "Black English, a dishonest argument." In *The Cross of Redemption*. Pp 154-160. New York: Pantheon.

[2] Baldwin (1985) describes the loss of ethnic identities and related forms of racialization — Scottish, Polish, Italian, Slav, Roma, and the like — as part of the "price of the ticket" that European immigrants to the United States and their descendants paid to benefit from white privilege. As anthropologists have noted, whiteness is purpose-built as a flexible category that routinely bolsters the dominance of European and Christian ideals, even as it is deployed to include people who depart from these geographic and religious origins (Brodkin 2004; Shryock 2008). Of course, white privilege is undercut by classed and gendered marginalization (J. Jr. Hartigan 2005; Levine-Rasky 2016). But, as Baldwin notes, while white racial privilege agglomerated a wide subset of its previous outcasts, it was fundamentally closed to African and African-descended people. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) helpfully terms

United States somehow existed as a whitened plane into which Black people had only recently entered. Rather, his writings illustrate how the nation-state was cast through the symbolic and physical violence of efforts to distance white people and spaces from others[3]. Whether historically or at present, to question how whiteness operates as "a metaphor for power" entails bringing into view how the symbolic and physical violence that substantiate that metaphor are the same as those that guide the operations of capitalist political economy.

The pages to come work to bring on board Baldwin's commitments to holding a microscope to the antiblack underpinnings of the United States. They proceed purposefully from a commitment to the destabilization of racist hierarchies that structure antiblackness and white privilege. I do so by attending to the processes that produce empty buildings and transform them into racially-differentiated ecologies of land, wealth, and toxic burden. Nevertheless, the racist environments that produce empty buildings and exist after demolitions also trouble Baldwin's contention that antiblackness is most powerfully driven by the metaphorical conceit of whiteness. Baldwin is not alone in this view, with anthropological and social scientific approaches to racism firmly grounded in efforts to disturb its metaphorical and rhetorical dimensions[4]. Yet analyzing demolition as a process reveals how racism is not maintained simply due to ideological aberrations that hinge on the power of race as an illusion or metaphor. Racist

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how this occurs through "whiteness as property" in which Black and African-descended people, rather than others, are reified as the antithesis of whiteness.

[3] In particular, consider *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which reflects on how the emancipation of enslaved people was recast into Jim Crow segregation.

[4] Social scientists, including anthropologists, have worked to trouble what Karen and Barbara Fields (2014) define as "racecraft" and Jane Hill (2008) as "the everyday language of white racism" in which antiblackness and prowhiteness are laminated in taken-for-granted binaries (Black/white, non/citizen, destruction/safety, etc). As these binaries persist, they offer alibis for the persistence of white privilege, allowing whiteness to remain the unquestioned zenith of racial hierarchies, including but limited to those in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Omi and Winant 2014). For instance, geographer Oren Yiftachel (2009) notes how the division between white and Black space as one between order and disorder is not limited to the United States, but extends from North America to inflect planning and governance in globalized geographies.

technologies churn onward independent of individual, or even collective, recognition[5]. Demolitions demand we take seriously how racism, especially as white supremacy and antiblackness, are physically made and restructured. As this happens, they shape the conditions under which we all exist, including where we live, the work we do, the air we breathe, the grounds upon which we stand, who profits, and who pays. Across this dissertation, my goal is to show us the technical architectures that maintain racially-differentiated outcomes through transformations in structural conditions.

This said, the "we" and "us" of my work also rest at common purposes with Baldwin's project. He challenged white-identifying Americans, especially those of the professional middle classes, to reckon with our own complicities in systems borne upon centuries of racist exploitation. Critically, however, as Baldwin approached this effort as a Black man raised in New York City, I do so as a white one raised in a shifting cast of Detroit's suburbs. If Baldwin's vantage on antiblackness and white power was grounded in his experiences of interpersonal, institutional, and structural oppression, mine is grounded in experiences of interpersonal, institutional, and structural privilege. For the most part, my life has been lived in places that form the soft power of white supremacy. They are places where white neighbors may not have burned crosses in the yards of their Black, Latinx, Asian, and South Asian neighbors, but they certainly murmured about 'the new element' and their imagined effects on property values[6]. Moreover, the

[5] Sociologist of technology Ruha Benjamin (2019) and information theorist Safiya Noble (2018) have examined how antiblackness and intersecting modes of oppression become intentionally and unintentionally embedded in the construction of technical systems, including surveillance and search engines. For Benjamin and Noble, these systems offer handholds for recognizing how the growing dominance of information technology in American life is predicated on exacerbating longstanding racism. While this dissertation also turns to the technical architectures that produce racist outcomes, it decenters the devices and procedures of information science in order to gain vantage on the ways racism is cast through bodies and place.

[6] This logic is notably flawed. Property values actually increase when neighborhoods become racially integrated, only falling when they become resegregated through white flight. Detroit and its suburbs have been used as exemplars of the ways that 'property value' is a coded alibi used to justify white racist fears of non-white people, especially Black people (Freund 2007; Sugrue 2005).

places in which I have lived have been systematically buoyed from the creeping fallout of environmental toxicity and economic precarity, including by zoning codes, union contracts, and other routines[7]. I embody how privilege is structured through the interface of technologies and landscapes that direct harm and violence upon others. Despite evidence to the contrary, some hold out hope that structural inequities like these will be leveled by simply exposing privileged subjects to the struggles of oppressed people[8]. By contrast, as this dissertation attends to the what and how of racism, rather than just its who and whom, it finds that producing equitable worlds demands reconfiguring the bodies and environments in which materially unequal lives are made.

Attempts to study structures. Or, methods

Restructured City meditates on structures in moments where their polysemous meanings come together, including as buildings, sociotechnical routines, and pervasive inequities. It is, quite literally, an ethnography of structures that focuses on the ways racist outcomes accrue through (and are sometimes undercut by) the operations of technological systems. To make this account possible, I grasp hold both of the people and things that make demolitions possible, as well as those that come into place in their aftermath. In doing so, I synthesize phenomenological experiences of sites we travel through with examinations of their political economic and technological environments[9]. Identifiable human beings, their experiences, stories, and

[7] Historian Scott Kurashige (2017) considers how unemployment, toxic waste sites, defunded public education, and eviscerated municipal services have accumulated in Detroit for decades through processes that have directed the brunt of these harms away from majority-white suburbs like the ones in which I was raised.

[8] Recent ethnographic work has specialized in offering "unforgettable scenes" (Desmond 2016) of antiblack poverty and brutality for typically wealthy audiences. Such efforts reproduce the ideas of Scottish enlightenment philosopher, David Hume (1983), who suggests the dispensation of justice is based in sentimental cultivation of privileged people. Anthropologist Cassie Fennel (2015) reflects upon the ways that Humian sentimental politics enabled public housing demolitions in Chicago. These demolitions served to displace Black communities under the guise of producing an integrated civic commons.

[9] Phenomenological approaches to place (Basso 1996; de Certeau 2011) are sometimes read as epiphenomenal to the Lefebvrian (2011) 'production of space'. Rather than take these two as oppositional, I follow anthropologists and

descriptions — all of which are hallmarks of ethnographic accounts — are present in the pages to come. But more often than not we come to them by way of things that are best identified as events, landscapes, and technical processes. In part, I have organized the work in this way because it best reflects the research that made this dissertation possible. My empirical efforts always focused on charting the causes and consequences of demolitions. I approached demolitions from the standpoint of, among others, people looking on from front porches, administrators seeking to control Detroit's topography from windowless office buildings, workers operating heavy machinery, speculative developers aiming to capitalize on the aftermaths of removals, and regulators tasked with understanding their fallout. Sometimes, our encounters were ethnographic. At others, they were mediated by archives of various sorts. It was only in bridging these constituencies that I was able to gain vantage on the extents to which demolitions cohere the way persistent logics of racial capitalism mutate through the physical intersections of bodies and spaces.

Like anything, this work was a product of iterative experimentation. But I am told that something feels novel about the remit of *Restructured City*. Put simply, I began at demolition sites and attempted to move from them in as many dimensions as I could. This led me into front porches, training facilities, bars (lots of bars), meeting rooms, public documents, truck cabs, conventional archives, regulatory hearings, and other locations. Some of these were dead ends and garden paths. But most could be jig sawed together as part of the trajectory of demolition. Moving between these pieces allowed me to grapple with the historical conditions that bring empty buildings into being alongside what happened to those buildings in the contemporary moment, including as workers used heavy equipment to collapse and transfer them to landfills. In

historians who have worked to understand how geographies are made at the interfaces between embodied and spatial production (Mueggler 2011; Oppenheim 2008).

so doing, I took seriously what anthropologist Joe Dumit (2014), following historian of science Donna Haraway, calls "writing the implosion" as an exercise of understanding how objects contain multitudes of histories. A single t-shirt in California, for example, is an artifact that implodes ethnographically and archivally into globe-spanning stories about the uneven configuration of labor, capital, pesticides, industry, (de)regulation, comfort, and harm. Likewise, a single building in Detroit analytically (and sometimes literally) implodes into working conditions, questions of governance, bricks, construction equipment, profit, hazardous materials, and the physical stuff of territory. If *Restructured City* makes a methodological intervention, it is in bringing together methods developed for "global ethnography" with questions of racism, which is always a local matter[10]. The resulting work strives to make interventions that are intellectually and politically omnivorous without losing sight of geographic specificities.

But what did this look like in practical terms? The research for this project was realized in stages between 2010 and 2020. Across this decade — one bookended by global recessions, with Detroit's municipal bankruptcy sandwiched in the middle — I spent almost five years living in the city. This included two and a half continuous years of research between 2016 and 2019, as well as shorter stints in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2015. Throughout, I focused on understanding the collections of people, histories, institutions, machineries, political economic rationalities, and material legacies that are simultaneously gathered together and dispersed from demolition sites. These sites, 433 of them to be exact, were a central nexus of sorts from which I pushed in as many directions as I could. While upwards of forty thousand building removals occurred over the decade in question, their proceedings were not always easy to physically locate.

[10] Geographer Clyde Woods (1998; 2017) poetically makes this point in his examinations of how the imperial plantation system of the Mississippi Delta set in motion particular foundations of white power, antiblackness and resistance that reverberate through to the contemporary uneven development of New Orleans.

Representatives of government agencies and non-governmental entities that managed removals were skeptical (and sometimes forbidden) to open their organizations to the prying eyes of a researcher. By contrast, workers from companies that profited from demolitions welcomed me into their midst. This was especially so for twelve people I met during a training course for demolition and asbestos abatement laborers, in addition to the six contractors who answered my cold calls. In total, thirty-five people would regularly text me the addresses of their demolition or abatement worksites. Without such generosity, this project would not have taken the shape it did.

Though I learned to operate an excavator and other skills necessary to demolish buildings, I never personally labored doing the work I talk about. Doing so would have taken away paying jobs from people who needed them. Instead, I spent most of my days watching others work. I would make runs for coffee and fast food lunches, as well as join in on afternoon trips to the bar, but for the most part I just watched as buildings were broken down. Sometimes I looked on from the sidewalk or the hood of my car, which allowed me to chat with waste haulers as they idled waiting for their next load. On the rare occasions when one of the few state regulatory officers visited, they often joined in our chats. More often than not, I was invited to watch from the front porches of people who lived across the street or next door to buildings being demolished. I spoke to 367 people in this way, with our initial conversations centering on demolitions, neighborhood life, and family histories. Demographically, 252 identified as Black (of whom four were Afro-Latinx), forty-five as Latinx only, fifty as white (of whom three were Latinx), five as South Asian, and fifteen as multiracial. Most were working class. Sometimes our interactions were brief, limited to an hour or two. In a few dozen cases, they grew into years-long relationships, a handful of which have continued even as my life has taken me away from Detroit. Through these sustained modes of engagement, I was invited to family cookouts, block

parties, neighborhood clean-ups, birthday parties, religious services, and other events that allowed me to understand how vacated lots are used (and not used) following demolitions. It was through several of these people that I first encountered how leaded soils become problematic after they are tamped down by building removal.

The institutions that managed demolitions never opened to me as sites for sustained participant observation; however, I found other vantages for distilling the managerial logics of building removal. In particular, non-profit public authorities that selected buildings for removal and funded demolitions were required by law to host and advertise regular public meetings, and I attended 127 such events between 2014 and 2020. Many of these were venues where Detroit residents turned out to express anxieties about empty buildings in their neighborhoods. At times, they were joined by people who expressed alarm about unsafe demolition practices. Some meetings were tailored to real estate development in which development firms sent representatives to learn about methods of acquiring property after buildings had been removed. Equally useful were the conferences, workshops, and trainings I attended where demolition administrators from Detroit gathered with their counterparts from elsewhere to compare the details of their operations. Though these events were brief, they were opportunities to glimpse the organization of the "demolition pipeline" in which some empty buildings are left in place while others are torn down.

Archival research has proven a steadfast method for anthropologists confronted with the limited temporal scope of ethnography. Indeed, the Detroit Public Library's municipal records division and Burton Historical Collection, as well as the collections of Wayne State University and the University of Michigan offered robust materials for situating the genealogy of building removal as a longstanding intervention in Detroit's built environment. I made use of these

archives alongside other less formal ones, especially the land records maintained by the Wayne County Register of Deeds and the Wayne County Clerk. Others came through public records requests to municipal agencies and public authorities. Such requests, made under state statutes detailed for me by environmental justice activists attempting to understand whether demolitions spread asbestos, lead, and other contaminants, were essential for understanding structures of regulatory oversight. They also allowed me to explore land sales and hazardous materials testing.

The empirical material that resulted from this examination is vast (or at least it feels so to me). My chapters are arranged it to focus on instances in which the stuff of racially-unequal histories become the stuff of racially-unequal presents. To do so, I have attended to particular circumstances, whether living or archival, rather than others. There are no composite characters or situations here. At times, my selections were made explicitly to offer a representative instance. In others, I explicitly attend to the ways disjunctures shed light on prevailing hierarchies. The resulting patchwork of locations, processes, moments, and circumstances of building demolitions offer a view on the expansive malleability of antiblack structures. With notable exceptions, these structures construct white privilege through the uneven physicalities of bodies, property, and profit.

To be sure, the fifty or so mile expressway sprint between my institution and Detroit enabled different modes of research when compared to colleagues whose efforts to maintain contact with people on other continents were constrained by shaky videochat connections and expensive plane tickets. And yet, physical proximity does not level the power dynamics upon which the enterprise of anthropology is predicated (Fabian 2002). For many of my interlocutors, especially those typically working class, Black people who have lived most of their lives in Detroit, my disappearance was anticipated. I was a white person with relative means who had

retrieved what they needed from the majority-black city and retreated back to a majority-white institution. I was told by a few people, though, that my departure cut deeper. Unlike researchers who departed for New York, Cambridge (both of them), Berkeley, and other academic metropoles, however, there was an expectation that I could have stayed. Indeed, many people do complete the trek between Detroit and Ann Arbor on a daily basis, many of them to work at the University of Michigan. I did make this commute work for six months in 2018-2019, but the constraints of my meagre graduate student salary, teaching schedule, and aging car eventually made it untenable. It was only in 2020, just as I was leaving Michigan entirely, that commuter bus services were implemented between the two cities. As such, this work does not aim to somehow resolve the extractive dynamics of academic work by orienting itself to processes occurring closer to home. Like any research, it is freighted by missed connections, loose ends, and built-in hierarchies that cut through any anthropological endeavor.

Figure 2 A typical demolition site with excavated basement in front of an excavator and waste hauler. Photo by author.

Structural Transformations

To excavate the many layers of demolitions, this dissertation attends as much to the composition of stories, feelings, and modes of production as it does things like buildings, soil,

machines, and lungs. The structures in which we will be embedded include those of physical space, of political institutions, of financial expectations, of labor, of hazardous materials, and of urban ecology. All of these have received substantial attention from anthropologists and allied scholars, especially as they enable unequal life chances[11]. These chances are constructed as much through the matter of political concepts and social circumstances as they are technical and environmental systems[12]. Demolition allows us to look across these domains; to see how they coincide and become durable. As such, the aims of *Restructured City* are "interscalar" (Hecht 2018), though not in terms of hemispheric or planetary geographies. Instead, we hover much closer to the ground, staking out building removal in order to understand the synthetic means through which structural inequities are made and transformed. One by one, the chapters to come take hold of a building, a legal concept, an algorithm, an excavator, an asbestos fiber, and some dirt in order to consider their implications in the construction and maintenance of racist orders. These materials open up archives for understanding how structural conditions are preserved, even as the physical landscapes in which they are embedded are razed to the ground. They also offer the grounds for considering how structures that maintain inequity might be shifted to other ends.

By thinking across conceptual and spatial scales, this dissertation also aims to use building removals to puncture the conceptual silos that tend to contain ethnographic scholarship

[11] Recent examples include: on physical space (Hommels 2005; Summers 2019), on political institutions (Feldman 2008; Murphy 2017), on labor (Besky 2013; Pine 2019), on hazardous materials (Petryna 2002; Voyles 2015), on urban ecologies (Nading 2014; Newman 2015).

[12] Some anthropologists have accused Science and Technology Studies of obscuring political questions by engaging with non-human beings and things (H. White 2013). Their criticisms are not entirely unfounded, especially in light of scholarship that attends to processes like continental blackouts as composed from the networked agency of transformers, overhead wires, and current differentials in ways that subtend the profit motives of utility executives (Bennett 2010). Such accounts notwithstanding, this dissertation takes its cue from ethnographies and histories of technology that analyze how the design and operation of technical systems is always a political question (Hecht 2009; D. F. Noble 1984; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019). Artifacts always have politics (Winner 1986). In particular, systems that shape physical space are powerful motors for the production of discriminatory effects (Hamraie 2017).

on the United States, especially its cities. The empirical situations we journey through may never stray far from one city in the United States, but my hope is for the grist I develop here to be legible beyond the confines of these geographies. Detroit, a city that was for a time, the literal home of Fordist capitalism, is also the poster child for the strategic collapse of that project. Shareholders and certain industrial workers have been kept whole, even as the implicit and explicit social contracts have been shredded. Empty buildings are testaments to disappeared jobs, people, and possibilities, as well as the racist bents that such disappearances can take. As I write this at the dawn of the third decade of the twenty-first century, nearly forty percent of the majority-black city lives in poverty. Meanwhile, the rate is less than ten percent for the majority-white region in which Detroit sits. The cumulative toll of eliminated safety nets leads some to question whether Detroit is, in fact, "the other Global South" (Meyers and Hunt 2014), an upside-down world in which the uneven crush of disinvestment from collective infrastructures has been baked in by design. To be sure, as my interlocutors encounter temporary jobs, eviscerated municipal services, and contaminated atmospheres, their conditions resemble those observed in places like Dakar or Rio di Janeiro (Fredericks 2018; Alves 2018). But they also resemble those of people elsewhere in North America, including in New Orleans, Baltimore, and Indian Country (Adams 2013; Ahmann 2018; Kosek 2006). Taken together, these similarities underscore how Detroit is not some aberration within binary global geographies. Its landscape offers points of departure from which to engage in globe-spanning discussions about the sedimentation of unequal distributions of power and resources.

In particular, Detroit's demolitions are a poignant opportunity to consider the destructive logics upon which capitalism is predicated. Demolition is equated with progress to the extent that it makes way for the construction of something new (Ammon 2016). This occurs in Ho Chi Minh

City, in Chicago, on the fringe of suburban sprawl, and elsewhere (Fennell 2015; Harms 2017; K. T. Jackson 1987). Economist Joseph Schumpeter (1950) suggests that capital demands a process of "creative destruction [that] incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one" (82-83). Here, Schumpeter is riffing on Marx's (2017) observation that capitalism is predicated "On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones" (7). Thus, when luxury complexes replace collective housing plots or suburban office parks replace forests and farmland, they materialize processes through which certain landscapes and the people who make them are devalued so that they may be replaced by those imagined to produce higher returns (Easterling 2005). Throughout the twentieth century, Detroit was a place where working class Black neighborhoods were routinely uprooted to make way for factory expansions and housing projects targeted at wealthier, white families. The historical patterns of demolition and construction track how uneven development is always racist (J. M. Thomas 2013; J. M. Thomas and Hill 1990). From this vantage, it appears as if the key to stopping the sorts of destructive accumulation by dispossession upon which capital relies rests in preventing bulldozers and excavators from clearing ground for something new.

But the demolitions to come also demand that we unwind our conceptual couplings that understand destruction as merely a stepping stone to new construction. Since 1950, some 250,000 buildings have been demolished without replacement in Detroit. Like the building pictured above, the majority of these structures were empty, and removing them only cleared way for patches of grass. In the absence of human caregivers (and sometimes because of them) buildings rot, collapse, and catch fire. They are difficult and dangerous to live with, especially for immediate neighbors. Within such a context, excavators tend not to be experienced as an

infringement upon the future of neighborhoods, but as technologies of care that clear away the detritus left behind by the evacuation of people and industry (Caverly 2019). The routinized removal of buildings from Detroit's landscape is a project of mass disposal. Like other projects of waste management, it reveals how elimination produces expectations of value — whether as capital or other experiences of desire (Chalfin 2014; Millar 2018). As such, this dissertation approaches building removals as ends in and of themselves, rather than as a holding pattern for the construction of new buildings. By slowing down to examine the workers, neighbors, excavators, administrators, algorithms, and toxins that gather and spin off from demolition sites, it identifies how destruction transforms racially unequal structures into emergent distributions of people, matter, and profit. While cleared ground and green grass made by building removals may suggest otherwise, these distributions settle into alignments that can be just as uneven as those they replaced.

Racial Accumulations

Those of us in the Atlantic world all live, as literary theorist Christina Sharpe (2016) describes, "in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8). Thinking from this wake demands considering the ways that antiblackness forms what Sharpe refers to as a "total climate" (21) where the premature death of Black people is the authorizing logic of social life. This climate is based on what philosopher Charles Mills (1997) defines as a "racial contract" in which only whiteness is equivalent to the status of full personhood. Antiblackness suffuses talk, geography, political economy, and imagination, but as Sharpe notes, this does not happen absolutely. Black and African-descended people make ways of refusing and strategizing escapes from the clutches of systems predicated upon their

domination (D. A. Thomas 2019). Sometimes these refusals and escapes are made in concert with other non-white people (T. L. King 2019). From my position, however, I will never be able to grasp antiblackness as a form of oppression or Black life as a means of resistance. These experiences are not mine to hold beyond the words that certain of my interlocutors have given me (J. L. Jr. Jackson 2013; cf. Goffman 2014). But I am intimately aware of how the privileges of whiteness that sediment into bodies and places, including my own, are the product of antiblack systems, practices, and institutions. Through demolitions, I identify technological artifacts that enable privilege to accrue at the expense of oppression, especially as those accumulations serve to reinforce already racist distributions of opportunity and wellbeing.

The intellectual arsenal animating this project diverges significantly from the genealogy of scholarship that might be called the 'anthropology of race.' Race was the authorizing remit of anthropology, first as the discipline that made scientific racism and then as the one that sought to undermine it (L. Baker 1998). In the early twentieth century, Zora Neale Hurston (1938), Saint Clair Drake (2015), and other Black anthropologists captured how racist systems shaped the lives of Black people. And yet, these ancestors tend to be popularly overshadowed by their white colleagues — notably Franz Boas and Margaret Mead — who insisted on theorizing race as social identity (M. Anderson 2019). The result has been a discipline preoccupied by race as one format of human experience among many, and blind to the structural forces that produce the differential treatment of racialized people (Mullings 2005). Anthropologists seeking to bend our discipline back towards examinations of racism do so by linking arms with colleagues in Geography, Black, and Indigenous Studies (Shange 2019; Simpson 2014). Scholars in those fields have maintained racism as a serious topic of study (Kelley 1996; McKittrick 2006; Woods 2017). This includes political theorist Cedric Robinson's (2005) insights that racism is integral to

capitalism itself, with antiblackness and white supremacy being only our prevailing historical conjuncture. Likewise, geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) call to attend to racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (28) cuts across disciplinary fault lines. As such, I do not see this dissertation as reclaiming studies of racism for anthropology. Rather, it contributes to refocusing ethnographic efforts on the material experiences of racism in order to imagine what Faye Harrison (2011) calls "anthropology for liberation" (10).

The pathways that produce Detroit's empty buildings and transform them into cleared land, contaminated air, toxic dirt, and other things are robust terrains to think from in this regard. With limited exceptions, building removals produce profit for those who already have it, territory for those who already own it, power for those who already control it, precarious work for those who already know its struggles, and hazardous circumstances for those already enmeshed in them. Those whose lives are enriched by this process are almost exclusively wealthy and tend to be white, whereas those experiencing its burdens are always poor, usually Black or Latinx and sometimes both[13]. The disproportionate harms borne by poor and non-white people is unsurprising given the wealth of writing on the racialization of environmental and economic disparities in the United States (Checker 2005; D.-A. Davis 2019; Spears 2014). However, the fallout from demolition does elucidate how racist settlements are not confined to spatial, or legal, or political economic, or institutional, or technological, or environmental domains — they occur through all of these and others at the same time. This dissertation tracks where and how structural inequities, including but never limited to racism, come together. It follows the ways inequities condense through time property portfolios, institutional categorizations, bank

[13] I use people's self-identified racial categories

accounts, corporeal bodies, and physical territory. These locations distill modes of sorting, valuation, attention, and disregard through which privilege — especially white racial privilege — accretes through the routinized exploitation of the already oppressed.

You will find that this dissertation is not invested in debates about whether racism stems more from processes of supporting life in privileged populations or exposing oppressed ones to death (cf. Foucault 2003; Mbembe 2003). Biopolitics and necropolitics work hand in glove (Cacho 2012). Instead, I am concerned with understanding and representing how racism works as a pervasive and all-encompassing phenomenon. By way of empty buildings, demolitions, and their fallouts, I consider how the conditions of "structural violence" (Galtung 1969; see also: Gupta 2012; Nixon 2011) — those harms that do not extend discretely from individual decisions, but are meted out through the uneven constitution of everyday life — are imbricated in the production and maintenance of structural privilege. In so doing, I do not offer racism, white power, or antiblackness as explanations, but as processes in which we are all implicated, albeit to different effects. To find these implications, *Restructured City* follows out places, matters, and technologies that construct human bodies and the environments in which they live.

Figure 3 Demolition in progress. Image from City of Detroit digital archive

Dark Ethnography and the Possibilities of Repair

Unapologetically, this is a work of what anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2016) defines as one of 'dark ethnography.' For her, this is scholarship "that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical forces that produce them" (49). It should be of no surprise that such emphases have captured ethnographic and theoretical imaginations. On a planetary scale, the late industrial moments we are attempting to make sense of are characterized by the of uneven erosion of life prospects alongside the growth of slag heaps, waste dumps, creeping fascism, and other concerns (Agard-Jones 2014; Fortun 2015; Walley 2013). This dark side of scholarship has been questioned by those who argue for "an anthropology of the good […] focused on such topics as value, morality, well-being, imagination, care, the gift, hope, time, and change" (Robbins 2013, 448). Proponents of the anthropology of the good argue that centering these topics, rather than the experience of suffering, can offer guides for subsisting through difficulty (Fisher 2014). *Restructured City* does not deny the possibility of enjoyable, meaningful lives, but it also recognizes how the value and well-being that accrue through demolition occur in relation to and because of suffering that occurs elsewhere. In this way, it navigates the stakes of representing the darker side of human experience by examining how conditions of oppression form the enabling work of privilege.

We proceed through the clusters of people, machines, and matter that make demolitions possible in order to locate complicity in racist oppression within discrete bodies and places. It would be convenient to suggest that inequities endure through a grand design strategized by a few nefarious individuals, but more often than not, such individuals do not exist. Racism is a

structural concern[14]. It is operates like the guidewires of collective life that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) describes as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (53). Of course, Bourdieu and others following his lead tend to concern themselves with taken-for-granted dispositions through which people are stratified[15]. We will encounter how the racially-disparate outcomes of demolitions are sometimes shaped by the unacknowledged habitus of white supremacy; however, more often than not, unequal consequences are driven into racialized bodies and place through the shape of parcel outlines, institutions, computational architectures, heavy machinery, and paradigms of hazardous material regulation. The racist outcomes of demolitions are a "technopolitics" in which people exist alongside technical and material structures in the constitution of unequal systems (Hecht 2009, 2012; Mitchell 2002, 2011)[16]. Attending to inequity by way of these other than human interlocutors does not obscure injustice (cf. Noys 2016; White 2013). On the contrary, it is the technical routines of building removal that maintain accretions of racial privilege and oppression. They show how poverty, precarity, and exposure that occurs in predominantly Black locations is the source of wealth, property, and protection elsewhere. Parsing these routines demonstrates how the typically white people, places, and entities that benefit from antiblackness may not intend to do so, but they do nonetheless.

[14] By this point, it is widely accepted that racial disparities are not always maintained by the actions of deliberately racist people. In American law and jurisprudence, however, people seeking compensation for the burdens of inequitable circumstances, including environmental racism and gendered pay gaps, must prove both that a disparity exists and that it was intentional. This makes discrimination impossible to prove in the absence of explicit evidence of intent (Mercat-Bruns 2016). As such, the very routinized character of structural inequities, including but not limited to racism, is simultaneously a method for identifying injustice and a means by which people and collectives who benefit from inequities can deny their complicity in them (Jain 2006). The limited exception to this is in housing discrimination, in which the US Fair Housing Law only requires evidence of 'disparate impact' without intent, though even legal claims under this law are illusory (O. C. A. Johnson 2014).

[15] Anthropological examinations of class politics are useful illustrations of this, especially Rachel Heiman's (2015) ethnography of middle-class identities in the United States and Leela Fernandes (2006) in South Asia. In both, they consider how classed habits orient people to others through physical space.

[16] While scholars have offered slightly distinct formulations of the technopolitical, they coalesce around an understanding that political decisions are embedded in technologies such that technical actions are political actions.

Building removals may literally toss the spatial, political economic, infrastructural, and material contents of unequal landscapes into the air, but they also bring them back to earth in conditions that are often just as unequal as those that preceded them, sometimes more so. As this happens, it raises questions about why inequities persist at the fault lines of race and other characteristics of human being, as well as what might be done to interrupt their reproduction. These are perennial questions for the social sciences and humanities. For some, addressing them is both as simple and devilishly complex as ushering in an anticapitalist vanguard (Dean 2019). While such possibilities for justice and equity may exist in latent ways, they tend not to be scaled up for wide distribution (Gibson-Graham 2006). I am sympathetic to and supportive of this politics; however, it approaches the problematic of racism and, with it, capitalism from the wrong direction. Capital accumulation is programmed by racist circuitry, in which it can only exist through the dispossession of racialized subjects (Robinson 2005)[17]. Not the other way around (Hankins 2014; Tsing 2004). Racism always coincides with other inequities, including class hierarchy and patriarchy, but it does so as the foundation from which all from which other forms of privilege and oppression extend[18]. The procedures and aftermath of building removal place on show means through which the status quo of privilege is preserved, even as its material structures are broken apart and reassembled.

As hauling structures from their foundations compounds existing inequities, it clarifies how antiracism is not a straightforward process of subtraction. By thinking alongside people and

[17] For more detail, see Cedric Robinson's (2005) inversion Marx's notion that capitalism occurred through the wholesale refutation of feudalism in Europe. He shows how the advent of capital was predicated upon feudal designations of racial difference, especially of Jews, Irish, Roma, Gypsies, and Slavs, that allowed for their enclosure and dispossession. Such racial differences are the forms of distinction upon which worker and capitalist are predicated.

[18] Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989; 2019) concept of "intersectionality" has been essential in foregrounding the centrality of racism as it is compounded by other forms of oppression. Likewise, feminist theorist Kyla Schuller (2018) shows how racism, not sexism, is the foundation biopolitical constructs of oppression .

places who are intimately acquainted with the ways racist outcomes are written their lives and worlds, I aim to join them in imagining possibilities for making things otherwise[19]. Anthropologist Savannah Shange (2019) analyzes how even the most sincere efforts at antiracist consciousness building tend to preserve racist outcomes because they do not eliminate the categories on which discriminatory outcomes are predicated. She argues that the abolition of antiblackness requires the cultivation of new political grammars that replace double-binds imposed by multiracial liberalism[20]. *Restructured City* positions itself alongside Shange and others in considering the exigencies of not simply unsettling the histories and concepts that naturalize white power, but of constructing new ones in their stead. However, I do so while noting how conceptual possibilities never stand on their own; equity only becomes reality to the extent that it can be emplaced through physical infrastructures and landscapes (Hamraie 2017; von Schnitzler 2016). From amidst the flux of demolitions, we will encounter struggles to rearrange property lines to subvert the ownership claims of absentee, white speculators, as well as those to shunt hazardous materials away from communities of color and towards predominantly white people and places. These struggles are shaky, sometimes only serving to upset the antiblack scales of white privilege in provisional ways. Nevertheless, they identify how abolition is as much a project of recasting conceptual hierarchies as it is one of reconfiguring the actually existing places of human existence.

[19] Chloe Ahmann (2019) describes these sorts of imaginations as articulating a "subjunctive politics […] an operational horizon marked by neither despair nor unbridled possibility" (330). Such politics are considered to be actually possible, in contrast to Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) "future anterior" in which resolution is only ever a distant speculation.

[20] Among others, consider how white supremacists have successfully undermined efforts to center the brutality of settler-colonization, chattel slavery, and mass incarceration on the grounds that they are 'excluded' from them. The 'color blind' settlement of liberalism bolsters racism on the grounds of making 'all lives matter.' See also: Fanon 1965; D. A. Thomas 2019.

No matter if they are actualized or speculative, these possibilities for evening out bodies and landscapes have bearing for intellectual and political considerations of antiracist repair. In the United States, discussions of reparations tend to center on the institution of chattel slavery for African and African-descended people, but repair is a project that has broad purchase for constructing accountable ways of living in the aftermath of racist and racializing duress (D. A. Thomas 2019). From the US context, legal scholar Katherine Franke (2019) chronicles projects that redistributed land and wealth from white, former slaveowners to the formerly enslaved following the nineteenth-century abolition of slavery. These attempts to make people whole by returning the inherited fortunes that had been stolen from them. These efforts fell victim to the postbellum retrenchment of white power as a nationwide project of Jim Crow segregation, highlighting how state power easily guarantees privilege, not equity (Du Bois 2007[1935]). In the absence of abolition, white wealth continues to accrue through the devastation of Black communities (Franke 2019; Taylor 2019). Such devastation showcases how antiracism is not merely the future-oriented absence of racially hostile acts, but a condition that will be foreclosed unless and until the debts upon which racial privilege is predicated have been repaid.

Demolitions dredge up the cumulative effects of empire, enslavement, and discrimination, often making "the case for reparations" (Coates 2014) crystal clear. But they also demonstrate the need to expand the material scope of repair from narrow considerations of capital, even with interest (cf. Franke 2019). To be sure, the empty buildings targeted for elimination are often the very instruments that enabled racial wealth disparities. Demolition labor regimes are also opportunities for white-owned contracting firms to earn outsized profits through the precarious employment of Black men. Yet building removals also route asbestos-laden plumes into the lungs of these same laborers. They also till lead, PCBs, and other matter in the

ground of the very same majority-Black and Latinx neighborhoods from which empty buildings are being removed. Attending to the movement of these materials confirms how repairing these harms requires more than routing land and wealth to those from whom they have been stolen. Indeed, as Detroiters who watch from the sidelines of demolitions suggest, to imagine equitable worlds and possibilities for antiracism as a systemic project is to take seriously the imperative to remove harmful legacies embedded in oppressed bodies and places. From there, they might be redistributed to those typically white bodies, places, and stakeholders who have thus far avoided their settlement.

Plan

This work is imperfect and incomplete. But as a whole, it uses the structures of demolitions — buildings, administrative institutions, computational assessments, excavators, hazardous construction materials, and dirt, among other things — to examine the materialities of racial capitalism, especially as they accumulate in and through racialized bodies and places. It does so to grapple with the enabling harms of racial privilege, especially as they become embedded in technical architectures that shape the uneven topographies of daily lives. I encourage you to read the chapters to come in the order in which they appear, since they follow the progression through which empty buildings are made and rendered into empty lots and other things. But if you prefer to jump around, here is an idea of what is in store.

In Part One, I sketch how demolitions are organized to eliminate "Problem Spaces." We begin Chapter One with an examination of the ways that "Abandoned Buildings" are the product of geographies of racist plunder. Evacuated dwellings, factories, and other buildings that litter Detroit's landscape, materialize how emergent practices of tax foreclosure layer alongside the

earlier extractions of white flight and settler-colonization. The landscapes they make possible include financial transactions that extract wealth from Detroit's majority-Black residents in ways that bolster white families and opaque holding companies. Chapter Two considers the "Fractured Sovereignties" that arise as empty buildings are classified as 'blight,' a paradigm of urban governance developed to manage overcrowded housing conditions in the early-twentieth century. Contemporary demolitions are predicated on the same conceptual architectures that enabled the targeted displacement of Black Detroiters through decades of urban renewal projects. Responsibility for blight removal does not cohere solely Detroit's municipal government, but in a constellation of private efforts and non-profit authorities. As Detroiters seek to have buildings classified and removed as blight, their circuitous routes clarify how the fractured landscapes of neoliberal governance repurpose already existing foundations of antiblack procedures.

Part Two, "Urban Recovery" considers how people leverage building removal processes as fulcrums for shifting political economies of housing and employment. Chapter Three, "Neighborhood Stabilization" takes up the modalities of algorithmic triage that are used to select buildings for demolition. In particular, it analyzes how data analysts construct computational tools to locate removals on the margins of Detroit's wealthiest neighborhoods as part of efforts to stabilize property values and ensure access to renovation mortgages. While these interventions achieve their ends, they leave Detroiters outside targeted geographies to contend with the persistence of empty buildings. Cut off from mortgage financing, they stabilize sagging joists using savings and high-interest credit cards. As algorithmic selections perpetuate classed expectations of dwellings as financial instruments, they also reveal how increasing financial value is coded as a proxy for whiteness. Chapter Four, "Decline Economies" centers the technical machineries that make demolitions possible, especially grapple-bucket excavators, in

order to discern how racist relations of work and profit are maintained in transitions from industrial growth to postindustrial decline. Many of the private contractors who profit from building removals are white-owned construction firms who convert equipment from means of production to means of destruction. Their sustained revenue streams often rely on people of color, principally Black men, who are trained as precarious demolition laborers as part of their release from incarceration. Even as implements of Fordist production are turned to alternate ends, the process of doing so not only conserves uneven distributions of profit and security, but the antiblack, often misogynist, coordination of working bodies that drove industrial growth.

Finally, Part Three considers the long pathway to arrive "After Demolition." Chapter Five highlights practices of removing the "Tiny Threads" of asbestos prior to building removal. In the United States, demolitions are largely exempt from environmental regulations, with the sole exception being enforcement targeted at asbestos-containing materials, including fireproof insulations, siding, and other building components. While these materials once kept people safe from harm, removing them tends to produce bursts of aerosolized carcinogens that are channeled into the breathing spaces of typically Black asbestos-abatement workers. By following how workers, regulators, and administrators experience the targeted dispersal of asbestos, this chapter examines how the uneven geographies of environmental contamination are not epiphenomenal to privilege and oppression, but a means through which racist hierarchies are physically embodied. Demolitions also kick up other toxins, including lead and PCBs that settle into the "Empty Lots" produced through building removal. Chapter Six traces what happens to these empty lots, including how the persistence of parcel outlines, contaminated soils, and buried foundations shapes conflicts over the speculative use of vacated land. Wealthy developers harness these features in order to demand public subsidies for projects targeting wealthy, typically white

demographics. At the same time, working class people of color also rely on these landscape architectures to legally undermine the speculative possessions of absentee owners. By considering how people organize struggles over land through the fungible endurance past use, this chapter opens a discussion on the expansive forms of redistribution necessary to ameliorate racist environmental conditions.

Part 1
Problem Spaces

The demolition of empty buildings is a routine part of social and political life in Detroit. The process of removal is often a celebratory moment, with neighbors gathering in the street as excavator operators claw into structures that have sometimes been without human occupants for years. In mid-2016, the Detroit Land Bank Authority, a public authority tasked with managing building removals in the city, organized a press conference to celebrate its 10,000th and 10,001st demolitions. The event echoed one from a few years before, when the authority's leadership had gathered to commemorate one of its first demolitions. That gathering had included federal officials who had provided an infusion of $52 million to fund empty building removals in Detroit. Between 2014 and 2020, public demolition expenditures would grow to more than $500 million, with some 21,000 buildings torn from their foundations. Only 1,200 new structures were built in this period. Their numbers are only a fraction of the 250,000 structures demolished without replacement in Detroit since 1950. And yet, special arrangements were made for the 10,000th and 10,001st demolitions occurring under DLBA control. The buildings were a pair of craftsman-style houses on the city's west side. One was brown and white, the other a pale grey. Each had been specially marked for the occasion, with 10,000 and 10,001 painted in four-foot tall letters on their sides and front.

Before excavator operators could climb into their cabs and bring the machines clattering to life, they stood in the background as demolition administrators, contractors, and several people who lived in the vicinity took to a podium to welcome the work that was about to happen. The

crowd of several dozen onlookers who faced them included nearby residents, DLBA employees, public officials, and members of the local media. A Black man in his fifties whose home was across the street detailed how the buildings to be demolished that day had been empty for decades and that he was excited to see them gone from his neighborhood. In his words, "These places have been a problem so long. They are scary. I'm excited that our kids and grandkids no longer have to be around them. You know? It's so nice to see them come down." Administrators expressed similar excitement and a hope that in a few years' time, some 30,000 more buildings would be torn down. Applause rolled through the gathering at this prospect. The press conference concluded with an invocation from the minister at a an AME church around the corner. As he said, "We thank you, God, for the women and men who take the lead in removing this blight, this structural refuse from our city. God, we take this time to pray peace into the world. For, Lord God, what is being done here is peace-giving work." When the invocation ended, a laborer began to spray the 10,000th building with water while an operator turned over the excavator and proceeded to reduce the structure to rubble. Cheers rang out as the house collapsed in on itself.

Figure 4 Detroit Land Bank Authority, 10,000th demolition celebration July 19, 2016. Screen capture from Detroit Mayor's Office Facebook Live, downloaded September 15, 2016

Soon after the brown and white house had tumbled over, the crowd followed the excavator down the block where the grey one met a similar fate. As the throng of people craned to see this demolition, I could hear someone utter, "Now this is progress. Getting these problems down." These two chapters consider what is necessary to make scenes like this one come into being. The first takes seriously how Detroit's populace tend to encounter empty buildings as a problem space of "structural refuse" to be removed from their immediate environments. This is refuse that was produced as the historical marker of property relations slanted in favor of white families and investment firms from the moment of imperial contact. As buildings go empty, these entities transfer wealth from Detroit to its suburbs. Demolitions are "peace-giving work" to the extent that they remove emptied built environments from the everyday experiences of those Black and Latinx people who currently make up the overwhelming majority of the city's inhabitants. In Chapter Two, we follow how empty buildings are rendered into an administrative problem space, specifically as they are constructed within legal definitions of "blight" that date to the progressive era. While these definitions allow administrators from the DLBA to mobilize excavators and level empty buildings, they also enable territory and buildings to be placed beyond the reach of municipal governance. As this happens, Detroit's residents find themselves confronting an opaque system of fractured sovereignties, none of which are accountable to them.

Chapter 1
Abandoned Buildings

Figure 5 A beige and green bungalow with plywood covering its windows and doors. Photo by author.

Look at the photo above. What do you see? A house framed by grass, trees, a sidewalk, and a roadway? Yes. A bungalow? It looks like it. One that appears to be of a craftsman-style constructed in the early-twentieth century. Probably the 1920s or 30s if I had to guess. No doubt the beige and green paint scheme and vinyl siding planks were added sometime later. Does anyone live there? I doubt it. At least not humans. Although the chair and an old coffee turned ash tray suggests the porch was used sometime recently, and the upstairs window could have been open for ventilation on what was an unseasonably warm September afternoon, the plywood nailed over the downstairs doors and windows is fastened down tight. You cannot see it from here, but there was a notice affixed to one plank stating the boards had been placed there at the direction of municipal employees. According to the few paragraphs of city code cited on the sign, the structure was considered to be "abandoned." It was not alone. All manner of structures

are deemed ‘abandoned’ in Detroit. They include factories, schools, department stores, movie palaces, churches, apartment buildings, and more. But mostly houses. Tens of thousands of houses. You may have seen some of them in one of the slickly bound coffee table books or gallery installations that turn abandonment into an artistic goldmine[21].

Some first principles to start, though. What does it mean for a building to be abandoned? In the United States, researchers from the federal census bureau and other offices enumerate “vacant” buildings, with real estate economists suggesting that a vacancy rate of three to four percent in any given building use — think housing, commercial, office, industrial, and so on — is necessary to support a ‘healthy market’[22]. In the absence of ‘empty’ places for people and enterprises to ‘expand’ into, econometric models project the suffocation of capitalist growth machines. Such logics resonate with those of conquest that enabled spatially-distributed empires (Mueggler 2011; Mundy 2000). And yet, for people who construct property markets, vacancy is not the same as abandonment. While any building might be vacant for a period of time during a changeover of occupants, the statistical presentations of property development understand abandonment as a terminal separation from human use. Real estate listing services estimate the numbers of empty buildings within particular geographies but leave ‘abandoned’ ones unaccounted for. Within market-oriented statistics, they are neither occupied nor empty, but non-entities altogether.

Though buildings termed ‘abandoned’ may disappear from optics of economic abstraction, as physical places they do anything but. Flip back to that photo and you will see evidence of this. Notice how the steps up to the front porch are missing? They were pulled down

[21] Some prime examples include Yves Marchand and Roman Meffre’s (2013) *The Ruins of Detroit* and Julia Reyes Taubman’s (2011) *Detroit, 138 Square Miles*.
[22] Allan Mallach’s (2018) prescriptions for “poverty and prosperity in urban America” distill this suggestion.

by neighbors who grew tired of the regular stream of cars passing by to buy illicit substances — whether those substances were weed, heroin, pills, sex, or something else was not always specified. When calls to the police proved fruitless, this physical intervention made the spot difficult enough to access, and its users moved elsewhere. Left behind is the armchair in which a salesman would wait for clients. Also, there are the framed pieces of a screened porch. Were you to go inside, you would find curtains and other trappings of an inhabited home, including an old sofa, a few mattresses, and a table still set with plates. Everything would look more than a little worse for wear. Unseen are other-than-human beings — mice, rats, insects, cats, dogs, and others — who share space with people, but also continue to make lives after human beings have passed on. Their presence is indicative of how the distinction between inhabitation and abandonment is premised on recognizing only certain forms of life.

I would like to give you a precise number of how many 'abandoned' buildings there are in Detroit. Chapter Two will delve fully into the administrative reasons that is so difficult. But estimates in 2018 range from twenty-five to seventy-five thousand empty buildings out of the 263,569 buildings logged in the municipal register. In the middle of the twentieth century, Detroit's 138 square miles contained more than five hundred thousand structures. My use of buildings is a slight departure from metrics through which abandonment is typically told. Usually, Detroit's 'abandonment' is narrated through the parabolic arc of the city's population in recent decades. That is, the number of people who live there. I will bring those numbers to the fore in a few paragraphs time. But I have pushed them off because my purpose is not to suggest that abandonment is a discrete feature of population decline. Doing so reifies 'abandoned buildings' as an outgrowth of reduced demand and diminishing profit[23]. On the contrary, as this

[23] Historian Greg Grandin (2013) reads Detroit's empty buildings as manifesting the same disconnections from people and capital that anthropologist Ann Stoler (2013) finds in postcolonial landscapes. I do not dispute

chapter ultimately contends, abandonment materializes high demand and escalating profit.

I approach this argument by attending to how Detroit's abandoned buildings physically manifest histories. They are akin to the agglomerations of "rubble" Gaston Gordillo (2014) locates in the Argentine Gran Chaco, or the "patina" of objects Shannon Lee Dawdy (2016) excavates in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's path through New Orleans, or the "ruderal ecologies" Bettina Stoetzer (2018) finds emergent from "people, plants, and objects left behind" in postwar Berlin. Pushing on the material histories of Detroit's construction testifies to the sort of "urban palimpsest" that Will Glover (2007) identifies in Lahore. However, rather than an elaboration of sixteenth-century Mughal design through nineteenth and twentieth-century British empire, this chapter parses Detroit's empty buildings to explore an expansive repetition of spatial expropriation from eighteenth-century French imperial projects through to the present. Our exploration over the next few pages will be bundled around one building in particular, the bungalow pictured above[24]. This is not because this building and the east side neighborhoods around it are highly particular in some way. Instead, it is because they are exemplary of the means in which past violences are hinged into present experience.

The archives available for this task are fragmented. Contemporary landscapes contain referents to sedimented pasts that can be teased out with a little nudge. This chapter works to do so by spinning together ethnographic considerations with oral histories and archival records. We will sit with how street signs and road layouts give a vantage on how the foundations of empire set durable horizons for the regional uneven development. By reading the present in light of past

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symmetries between the postcolony and former capitalist metropoles like Detroit. However, the hollowed out buildings that exist in these places do not index the evacuation of capital, but its ongoing production (Caverly Under Review).

[24] My method here is similar to sociologist Mary Pattillo (2008), where she traces the history of one house in order to position dwellings within the social politics of race and class in Chicago. However, unlike Patillo, I do not rest with the racial and financial dimensions of home as a social construct. Instead, I am concerned with how buildings and the land upon which they are built compose uneven materialities of occupation.

moments, we will take in how the construction of places like that beige and green bungalow, bind together indigenous dispossession, single-family obsolescence, suburban sprawl, and antiblack imagination. From them, we encounter how the material construction of abandonment is not isomorphic from one moment to the next; it iterates (Biehl 2005; Povinelli 2011). This chapter tracks how these iterations are made and experienced as racializing environments. Approaching Detroit from this vantage makes apparent how the city's populace navigates relationships with a built landscape that materializes cumulative histories of racial plunder.

Municipal Borderlands

The bungalow we are following through this chapter no longer stands. We will get to the conditions of its demolition in time. If you wanted to find the patch of grass marking its presence, you could travel east on Jefferson Avenue, away from the huddle of skyscrapers that signify 'Downtown.' Jefferson is one of the five radial boulevards that spoke outward from city's central business district. From east to west, they are Jefferson, Gratiot, Woodward, Grand River, Michigan Avenue, and then Jefferson once again. These trunk lines were laid out in 1805 when Detroit was first coming under the administration of the United States government, and shortly after the colonial settlement that had been built there burned to the ground. You can read Detroit's interpolation in this history in those street signs. Woodward was named for August Woodward, appointed as first governor of the 'Michigan Territory' by then President Thomas Jefferson, who also got himself a road. Gratiot still runs to a park that marks where an American military stockade, Fort Gratiot (that's pronounced grah-shut), kept a watchful eye on British-occupied Canada. Michigan Avenue was first termed Chicago Road, signaling how this region was positioned within the hinterlands of that metropolis (Cronon 1991). Detroit was, even then,

an intermediary between places, and Grand River cut northwest toward Lake Michigan, following a riverine pathway that was a long-trafficked route for indigenous trade.

Today, if you continue 'out' Jefferson, you will pass imposing, glassy residential towers that offer panoramic river views to those with the ability to pay. You will pass strip malls filled with budget shopping staples. DMV outposts, grocery stores, Foot Locker, and the like. You will pass an office where Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers cage separated families. You will pass churches where open-air roofs betray how it has been years since people worshipped within them. Large, grassy patches signal where storefronts have been removed from what is zoned as a commercial thoroughfare. Peer up and down the cross streets and you will also find houses, apartment buildings, schools, and a power plant that have met a similar fate. You will pass a few factories where automobiles roll off the lines. Look close enough and you will see how one of them has been built around the collapsed remains of an early twentieth-century smokestack emblazoned with "Continental Motor." The scene confirms how capital does not consume its ruins, so much as attempt to ignore their wreckage.

From here, you pass into neighborhoods in which census administrators counted forty-two thousand people in 2017, whereas fifty-eight thousand were counted in the same area in 2000, seventy-nine thousand in 1980, 111,575 in 1960, and 124,525 in 1950. These proportions are representative of citywide figures: 675 thousand people lived in Detroit in 2017. Compare that to 951 thousand in 2000, 1.2 million in 1980, 1.6 million in 1960, and 1.8 million in 1950. Buildings show this slide. Without human intervention, paint will fade, concrete will crack, wood will rot, and brick foundations will subside. Detroit is not alone in experiencing 'abandonment,' with locations like Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany and Camden, New Jersey experiencing greater magnitudes of population loss (Pallagst 2013). But it is Detroit that holds

the reputation for being the global capital of abandoned buildings[25]. Unlike places characterized by attached buildings, apartment blocks, and office towers that can conceal vacant units among walls, windows, and floors, Detroit's built environment is predominated by detached structures that succumb easily to freeze-thaw cycles. Thus, the absence of human presence is not only felt in statistical metrics, but also in darkened windows, collapsing rooflines, and other transformations of physical structures[26].

To drive through Detroit is to observe the uneven extent of this process. In some locations, you would find blocks of dwellings interspersed with multi-story schools and commercial strips that resemble archival photographs from when the buildings were constructed in the 1940s and 50s. Only occasionally would you come across a gap indicating a departed building and departed people. In some places, new dwellings and commercial spaces have been built. Their design and facades typically reflect late 1990s and early 2000s suburban aesthetics. In other locations, most buildings have long since been demolished and only replaced by grass. It was in a place like this, on a street near Chalmers Road, that I stood to photograph the beige and green bungalow you saw above. Out of the frame, but in my view, inhabited dwellings, gridded roads, sidewalks, street signs, and views of downtown skyscrapers betrayed how the surrounding grassy expanse was not a rural prairie.

If you return to your eastern course on Jefferson, the landscape will soon turn on a dime. The tree cover is consistent, with towering oaks, maples, and a few pines providing shade. Nevertheless, while one side of an intersection appears largely cleared of structures, the other is

[25] In 2018, one of Detroit's daily papers questioned whether tens of thousands of demolitions in recent years had successfully taken Detroit out of contention for this title. Their optimism was reinforced by a German tourist who "came to Detroit specifically for the ruins" but was disappointed by their absence. Reindl, JC (2018) How Detroit lost its title as 'ruin porn' capital. *Detroit Free Press.* August 16: Digital.
[26] I have written about this elsewhere. See: Caverly 2019.

anything but. There are no empty buildings or markers of demolition on these blocks. Buildings sit side-by-side, many of them as they have since their construction in the early to mid-twentieth century. Four-squares and bungalows built in the first decades of the twentieth century give way to larger brick ranches and two-story colonials constructed in subsequent years. Weave up and down enough streets and you might find at least three bungalows identical to the beige and green one. As I knew them, two were painted grey and one was blue. All were inhabited. Moving toward the water would bring you to mansions, some of them bearing the same family names as those of cars that once rolled off nearby assembly lines. While mostly residential, there are pockets of commercial strips, schools, churches, and other structures sewn in. If you caught the roadway that differentiated this scene from the one of abandonment, you would see its name offers a cue for this moment: Alter Road.

Those familiar with Detroit's landscape know that Alter Road marks the line where the City of Detroit meets up with Grosse Pointe Park, one of the five cities identified as the Grosse Pointes. The changes in scenery observed there cut specifically at Detroit's edges as a municipality, and the poetics of this street name were not lost on those who inhabited its vicinity. Walt, a greying man in his fifties, had lived near Mack Avenue and Alter Road since the 1980s. The house he and his wife Kenyetta owned was a few blocks over from one we are following through this chapter. I would give Walt a lift to his job as a maintenance technician at a small hospital, a journey that required traversing Alter. On one of our early rides together, I asked him what he made of the crossing. Walt gave a low chuckle before exclaiming, "Look kid, nothing stops abandonment like Alter Road!" Some speculated that Alter must have been so named because it marked the transit between Detroit and another jurisdiction.

For those who are not attuned to their construction, it can be easy to forget that the

territory claimed by the present-day City of Detroit and its suburbs forms what cultural theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) refers to as "borderlands." Though American popular views of 'the border' may center on the southern boundary between the United States of America and Mexico, the Great Lakes cultivates its own "thin edge of barbed wire" (Anzaldúa 1987:3) in which tension is the unsettled status quo of daily life (R. White 2010). Since before the fifteenth-century arrival of French, English, and other settlers, the lands and waters of the region currently occupied by Metro Detroit have been home to Anishinaabek Three Fires People, including the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, and other nations. Alter Road marks how municipal borders intermingle with those of earlier periods of conquest. From Jefferson Avenue south, the road parallels the final run of the Fox Creek, with a historical marker near its entrance into the Detroit River offering a sanitized history of the site:

> Encouraged by a potential alliance with the English, the Fox Indians besieged Fort Pontchartrain, Detroit, in 1712. Repulsed by the French and their Huron and Ottawa Indian allies, the Fox retreated and entrenched themselves in this area known as Presque Isle. The French pursued and defeated the Fox in the only battle fought in the Grosse Pointes. More than a thousand Fox Indians were killed in a fierce five-day struggle. Soon afterward French settlers began to develop the Grosse Pointes.

In the space of a few sentences, this placard places the eradication of indigenous people as the necessary predicate for imperial development. A selective settler memory occludes how, despite the grinding efforts of extended empires — French, British, Canadian, and American — indigenous sovereignties remain alive in the region[27].

Shortly after the massacre of Fox nation members, the French commander of Fort Ponchartrain du Détroit divided the swampy lands in the vicinity into narrow concessions that measured no more than a few hundred yards wide along the riverbank, but ran deep inland,

[27] Anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014), for instance, discusses how Detroit is part of the extended circuits of Mohawk Nation efforts to interrupt the borders of American and Canadian settler states.

sometimes for several miles. Earlier commanders had already divided the lands closer to the fort into these so-called 'ribbon farms'[28]. Each concession was time-limited, and came with obligations to keep the French imperial state stocked with resources, including a regular supply of timber, food, and other provisions. Historian Tiya Miles (2017) details how these supply chains relied on unfree Black and indigenous labor, but their positioning at the interstices of multiple indigenous and imperial sovereignties made it impossible to establish chattel slavery. In particular, property regimes — whether over land or human beings — purposefully shifted as nominal jurisdiction over Detroit's fort passed to British control in 1760 and then the United States in 1795. Survey maps show new settler families receiving claims to ribbon farm strips with each administrative hand-off.

Figure 6 Contemporary plat maps of Detroit and the Grosse Pointes. Showing ribbon farm claims, the British-initiated ten-thousand acre tract (center rectangle), and US Land Survey System grid. Map compiled by Lars Gräbner as part of "Mapping the archipelago" 2015.

It was in the early nineteenth century that American administrators formalized ribbon

[28] For a map of the full extent of ribbon farms as codified through US Public Land Management, see Greeley, Aaron (1810) "Plan of Private Claims in Michigan Territory" Detroit Historical Society, 1950.164.028. https://tinyurl.com/ycfq3za9

farm concessions as private property. This happened when surveyors fanned out across the annexed lands of the newly codified settler nation — including those referred to as 'Michigan Territory' — to make it knowable, and thereby ownable (Dunnigan 2015). This included mapping sections of one square mile units oriented along the east-west 'baseline' that is now Eight Mile Road, Detroit's northern municipal border (Fishman 2015). This grid, sold off for a minimum price of two dollars per acre beginning in 1818, is still visible today in the matrix of streets that continue to be pushed outward, mile-by-mile to the horizon of the metropolitan region. By my last count, the predictable path of roads runs north to Thirty-Seven Mile Road, but it stops a mile or so short of the Detroit River. Rather than wipe away the traces of former settlers, the prerogative of American surveyors was to codify them, and enumerate ribbon farms as 'private claims' that broke from the imposition of a gridded terrain. Many of those settlers claiming ribbon farms had done so by way of roads that delimited their borders. You can see them today, including Beaubien, Dequindre, Joseph Campau, Saint Aubin, and Field. Follow their course, and you will notice a slight curve at the point where roads organized by private claim meet up with those written into the cadastral grid. It was in the latter half of the nineteenth century — sometime between 1855 and 1879 — that the path extending out from the mouth of the Fox Creek, running roughly between private claim 570 on the east and 126 on the west, was broadened and named for the owner of 570: J.J. Alter[29].

My interest in following how Detroit's roadways were set in motion several hundred years ago is not to offer you the false sense that their origins are the sole, definitive beginning of the action that will play out in pages to come. Such a beginning would require a much deeper exploration of the ways in which indigenous sovereignties were not simply bowled over by the

[29] Michigan Private Claim Maps, 1855, 1870. Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs.

fictions of maps and asserted property claims (Marrero 2019). It also would, likely, allude to the particular glacial movements that made a geologic chokehold of waterway, that could be strategically organized to collect rents from geopolitical and political economic activity (Woodford 2001). By contrast, my purpose in taking you on this excursion through the historicity of roads seeks other ground. Doing so reveals how the everyday effort of finding even a single location on Detroit's map is an exercise in encountering the borderlands cast by the extension of imperial power. These borders are not always excavated to the point of conscious memory, the obscurity of Alter Road as an index of private claimholders that became a municipal boundary being only one example. Nevertheless, even when their precise origins are not fully reckoned, streets, like empire, lay out directions that inhabit our present.

Single-Family Homes

Standing at the corner of Mack Avenue and Manistique, the intersection closest to where the beige and green bungalow once stood, was not possible at the turn of the twentieth century. Mack Avenue was there, it had been tamped down in 1855 for John M. Mack, an "old settler" who owned land in the area[30]. Manistique, however, was not. The spot would have likely been in the middle of a grassy field. Many of the private claims in this area were held in trusts that excelled at clear-cutting northern Michigan for lumber that built out urbanizing centers across the Midwest[31]. Train your ear, and you could probably hear the zing of the interurban streetcar whose rails rose out of the mucky bed of Jefferson Avenue. Head east, and you could see what the future held for this particular stretch of land. Private claim holders had begun to divide their

[30] Farmer, Silas (1884) History of Detroit and Michigan. Detroit: Farmer and Co. p.944. University of Michigan Libraries.
[31] Moore, Charles (1915) "John C. Lodge" History of Michigan. Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company. Pp. 1025-1050. University of Michigan Libraries.

territories into thousands of lots thirty feet wide by one-hundred feet deep. On many of these, the footings of single-family homes had already been laid. Names for these speculative holdings, including Point View, Trombly Estates, and Rose Park, would not have been out of place in contemporary suburban landscapes. Most of these dwellings were built without garages for personal automobiles and advertised their proximity to streetcar lines[32].

At once, this scene cuts through the common explanation given for the overwhelming preponderance of single-family dwellings in Detroit — that they were a byproduct of automotive capitalism that took off during the first decades of the twentieth century. On the contrary, Detroit's concentration of single-family dwellings both preceded the moment when automobiles were constructed in the city and endured until long after most factories had been shuttered. In 2014, 167,100 of the 258,048 buildings standing within the city limits were classified as freestanding single-family dwellings. Otherwise put, almost sixty-five percent of structures in the city were single-family homes. Compare this to less than thirty percent in Chicago, thirty-eight percent in Los Angeles, fifty-three percent in Cleveland, ten percent in Philadelphia, and sixty percent nationwide. From the air, say on descent into the airport on the metropolitan fringe, it is notable how only a few buildings rise over five-stories. In the final moments before touchdown you can trace how the railroad tracks interlace with a checkerboard of roads and expressways to connect industrial sites — some operational, many defunct — scattered around the region. The space between appears as a blanket of single-family dwellings with their supporting cast of office parks and commercial strip malls.

In 1900, some 285 thousand people lived in a city known for building stoves, ships, and other products that could be loaded out from its inland port. By 1910, their numbers had swelled

[32] "Point View Subdivision 1912," "Trombly Estates Subdivision 1913," "Rose Park Subdivision 1918" Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Archive.

to 465,766, with census enumerators numbering 993,678 people in 1920. Raymond Williams (1975) famously observes that cities grow in symbolic importance as they funnel people, goods, and capital from rural hinterlands. Detroit is no different (Zunz 1982). Yet Detroit also grew through the literal agglomeration of space. In the late nineteenth century, Detroit's boundaries corresponded roughly to the fifteen square miles encircled by Grand Boulevard. Incrementally, the municipal leadership had lobbied state legislators to expand the scope of their jurisdiction. Their arguments would be familiar to those who have experienced urban 'growth coalitions' (Brash 2011; Molotch 1976): in order to provide for a robust economy, the city needed to expand its boundaries in order to control land that could be used for housing and industrial activity. Legislators agglomerated existing townships, villages, and neighborhoods into Detroit at increments ranging from 0.33 to 26.5 square miles at a time until 1926 when the city reached 138 square miles in size[33].

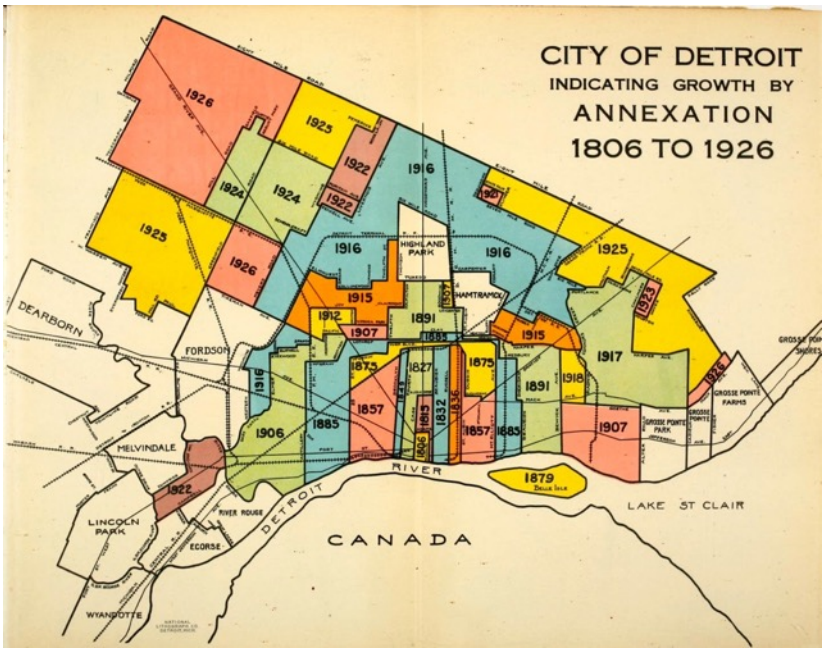

Figure 7 City of Detroit growth by annexation. From "Manual, County of Wayne, 1926" Detroit Public Library.

[33] This process came to an end when legislators bowed to pressure from industrial magnates and real estate speculators seeking to shelter their property from Detroit's municipal taxation.

The east side tracts we are sitting with help to illustrate this process. In 1904, State of Michigan paperwork incorporated the Village of Fairview. At the time, Bewick had recently become Detroit's easternmost limit, and Fairview's ten square miles were bounded by Bewick to the West, Cadieux to the East, the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair to the south, and to the north, a survey line running about six-hundred feet south of Mack Avenue. While large parts of Fairview were farms and scrubby fields, it was also home to horse racing tracks, privately-operated streetcar depots, industrial sites, lakefront estates, and growing of residential subdivisions. City of Detroit politicians made it clear that they intended to capture the taxable potential of these activities, as well as the undeveloped lakefront further afield. Fairview's incorporation was a purposeful roadblock to this plan. Nevertheless, as developers subdivided the area into buildable lots, the sewer lines they installed routed household and industrial wastes into the Detroit River via Fox and Conner Creek. These points were upriver from the City of Detroit's main intake point for drinking water, and the city's health inspectors noted how this configuration could serve as a vector for ongoing cases of typhoid.[34] Over the objections of Fairview's boosters, the village was split in two. East of Alter, it was incorporated as Grosse Pointe Park, with water and sewerage provisioned by Grosse Pointe Farms. West of Alter, Fairview became part of the City of Detroit's burgeoning infrastructural zone[35].

Divisions along Alter scarcely mattered for developers. The lot on which the beige and green bungalow was built became a recorded unit of land in 1915 when documents were filed to divide "that part of PC 120 lying between the n'ly line of Kercheval Ave and the center line of

[34] Vaughan, Henry (1916) "Observations on Typhoid in Detroit Region" University of Michigan Library.
[35] Here I borrow and slightly rearrange geographer, Andrew Barry's (2006) formulation of transnational "technological zones" that allow economic and political life to bleed over assumed boundaries of nation-states.

Mack Ave, City of Detroit and Township of Grosse Pointe" into 536 residential lots[36]. Some of those lots, each measuring thirty feet wide, were placed squarely across the border between the two polities. To this day, at several junctures the cadastral boundaries between Detroit and various Grosse Pointes run clean through buildings and yards on either side, with jurisdictions determined by the location of the front door of any particular structure.

Much of Detroit's east side land was subdivided from the estate of white industrialist, Joseph H. Berry, who at his death in 1907 was the largest landowner in Detroit and the county surrounding it. Berry had acquired this land using the same family wealth necessary to start a paint and varnish company shortly after moving to Detroit in 1855 at the age of sixteen[37]. In time, Berry became deeply invested in lumber and mineral extraction, with his acquisition of many of the private claims extending along Detroit's east side helping him to corner local trade in processed timber. Yet, copper and iron mining extended Berry's holdings into northern Michigan, from which companies controlled by his family trust would ship materials to Detroit to be manufactured into paint, chemicals, steel, paper, charcoal, and other goods[38]. In time, logging operations began to travel those routes as well.

For locals, as much as for scholars, Detroit's sheer volume of single-family dwellings when compared to other structures has been read as one birthed by mass-produced automobiles that demanded an ecology suited to personal automobility (Kinney 2015). On the contrary, the fate of Berry's private claims is indicative of how the suburban automobility that Henry Ford and other industrialists established during the first years of the twentieth century was merely an amplification of single-family constructions that was already in place. Upon Berry's death,

[36] "C.B. Sherrard Subdivision Plat Map." (1915) Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Archive.
[37] Burton, Clarence (1923) *The City of Detroit Michigan, 1701-1922, Volume 3*. Pp 16.
[38] Ibid. Pp. 18.

control of the trust moved to his son-in-law, Edwin Lodge, brother of the mayor for whom Detroit's Lodge Freeway is named[39]. Lodge furthered Berry's existing plans to capitalize on the estimated forty thousand people moving to Detroit each year by chopping what was then mostly unused land into tens of thousands of individual parcels to be sold at prices between $700 and $1500[40]. While it would have been possible to file subdivision requests in bulk, they were done incrementally. Adding only a few hundred or so additional lots at a time ensured that decades of advertisements for new inventory that compelled readers to, "Grab these quick," as they were certainly the last places that would ever be available on the city's east side[41]. As standard lot sizes expanded to forty, fifty, and sixty feet, readers were further implored to visit neighborhoods "within walking distance of the factories, but nicely beyond 'shacktown,' 'smoketown,' and '30-ft-lot-town'"[42]. In some cases, the same developers had advertised places in what became 'shacktown,' 'smoketown,' and '30-ft-lot-town' only a year or two before.

Advertisements like these feel familiar to me, and perhaps they do to you as well. Similar requests still call out from the pages of print and digital media. In the past century, suburban developments have incrementally encroached further into hinterlands, although the spread of their foundations was often speculated decades in advance (M. Davis 1998). Some of the same firms who got their starts subdividing land into single-family plots in Detroit now specialize in doing so on a continental scale. To travel the thoroughfares at the capillary extremes of Metropolitan Detroit is to encounter the curl of subdivisions cutting into farmland. Billboards pointing to model homes beckon, "Why rent when you can own?" "Get more space for your $$$,

[39] Ibid. Pp. 468.
[40] For context, adjusted for inflation to 2019, the revenue on the 586 lots of which the beige and green bungalow is a part would equal approximately $14.9 million.
[41] Classified advertisement (1917) *Detroit Free Press.* March 4:A15.
[42] Classified advertisement (1920) *Detroit Free Press*. May 16:C9.

stop in today!" Similar signs also sit within Detroit's city limits. Beginning in the 1980s, Detroit's economic development officials have staked their efforts to attract new residents to the city on emulating suburban housing. Just around the corner from the beige and green bungalow, the landscape of closely-spaced Cape Cods and other twentieth-century styles opens up into one of early 2000s suburbia, with beige and white colonials set on 120 and 150-foot-wide lots. In contrast to other places designated as 'central cities,' and conceptually associated with density, Detroit's zoning codes often demand lot sizes and setbacks common in suburban housing developments[43].

Departures

For architectural historians and those working in their tradition, neighborhoods of single-family homes have been essential guides for situating the construction of white, middle-class lifeways in United States during the post-war period (D. Suzette. Harris 2013; Heiman 2015). It was in this period that dwellings of this type became emblematic of the transition of suburban living from the preserve of a wealthy few to an unevenly achievable aspiration on a national and international scale (Fehérváry 2011; Hayden 2003; K. T. Jackson 1987). In Detroit, we can push back the origin of this temporal envelope. Architect Mick McCullough (2015), for instance, details how industrialists in the 1910s monitored European immigrants as they settled into single-family dwellings as part of an effort to habituate them as whitened, Americanized laborers. A century or so onward from the project, the emptiness of buildings where incoming

[43] Urban geographer James Macmillen (2018) describes Detroit's Planning and Development Department's attempts to overhaul the city's zoning code to allow denser buildings and reduce the number of single-family dwellings were thwarted by predominantly Black existing residents who experience density as an imposition of wealthier, white newcomers. While single-family homes may have been iconic of white supremacy in the mid-twentieth century, at present, they have taken on other meanings (cf. Harris 2013).

immigrants were dwelt gestures to the literal and conceptual reterritorialization of this project within metropolitan space.

To understand this, we might turn to Kenyetta and Walt, who we met earlier when Walt commented on the status of Alter Road as a barrier to abandonment. Their two-story arts and crafts home stood a few blocks from the beige and green bungalow. When I met them, they had just finished tuckpointing the brownish red brick, and we spent several following weekends balanced on wobbly ladders painting the trim in a crisp off-white. As we sat on the wide front porch admiring our handiwork, Walt recalled how this was the third time he and Kenyetta had undertaken these tasks since buying the house in 1985. Kenyetta smiled as Walt finished describing for me how he had taught their daughter and two sons to mix mortar when they were in preschool. To this, she added, "But you know, this house wasn't built for us. Wasn't meant for us." She then disappeared inside, returning with a massive scrapbook that creaked open to reveal a yellowed, full-page newspaper advertisement dated in 1915, the year their home was first built. "Don't miss the last chance to buy at initial prices within the city limits," it cooed, "Easy terms. City Improvements. Sewer, Water and Sidewalks. Restrictions." Decades of reading American urban history had primed me for that final word: restrictions (Freund 2007; Sugrue 2005). But I kept silent as Walt explained it in his typical drawl. "You know what that means, restrictions?" The words chugged with gusts of breath. Reee-strict-shuns. "Whites only," he concluded.

Together, Walt and Kenyetta embody Detroit's centrality in the "Great Migration" of Black Americans from the rural south to cities in the Northeast, West, and Midwest. Walt was born in Cleveland, and attributed his drawl to a childhood of summers spent with mother's family in Tupelo, Mississippi. Walt's parents had split up when he was three, and Walt had moved to Detroit with his father in 1964. They arrived in the city just as manufacturers were

accelerating plans to relocate production lines from the city to suburban municipalities. Walt's summertime visits to "my people in Mississippi" are a pilgrimage that some still engage in and others discuss with fond remembrance. By contrast, Kenyetta's family had arrived decades before, with all four of her grandparents had traveling to Detroit in the first decade of the century. They found each other in the city after journeying there from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Like millions of others, their movements spanned most of the twentieth century[44]. For some, journeys of thousands of miles offered a reprieve from Jim Crow segregation, yet for many it was a dispiriting reminder that racist exploitation is constitutive of the United States, regardless of region[45].

The experiences of Black Americans moving to Detroit over this period contrasts sharply with European migrants, including Maltese, Irish, Italian, Polish, German, and, in time, Jewish people, who could pay what writer James Baldwin (1985) calls "the price of the ticket." Substituting ethnic identities with an undifferentiated whiteness allowed access to neighborhoods and municipalities that remained closed to Black folks for decades to come (Brodkin 1998; Cosseboom 1972). Walt crystalized this for me when he ruminated on his own journey to Detroit as a final destination, whereas for many it was a waystation on the way to other places. We were passing the beige and green bungalow, the windows open as dusk fell on a cool evening, and Walt waved his hand out while drawling, "The trouble is that all these people came to Detroit, lived here, left and didn't take their stuff with them." At the time, weeds and long grasses reached to the midpoint of the dwelling's first-floor windows.

I experienced the coded violence of this departure process one day when I bounded down

[44] Anthropologist Aimee Cox (2015) offers a detailed view of how this migration continues to meaningfully ripple in the early twenty-first century.
[45] Historian Kathleen Miller (2015) suggests that Detroit is emblematic of how northern cities replicated segregation in everything but name.

the front steps of Walt and Kenyetta's house. As I strode down the block toward my car, a large, black Cadillac that had been idling a few houses down pulled alongside me. I was a bit nervous as the deeply tinted driver's window rolled down. When it did, a meticulously curled head of silver hair leaned out to ask, "Are you here taking back the old neighborhood?" When I did not reply immediately, my interrogator introduced herself as Maddie and explained that she had recently flown in from Florida and was on her way to visit a sister near Port Huron. The Cadillac, it turned out, was a rental. She returned to the earlier question, "You look like one of those kids Pattie [the sister] tells me about. The ones who are taking back Detroit. Your house is beautiful." After I explained that, no, the squat house with its plantings of impatiens and yellow roses belonged to some friends, Maddie suggested she drive me around the neighborhood, "to let you know how nice it was in my day." I accepted many rides from near strangers over the course of fieldwork, but this was the one I was most nervous about. Maddie's gaze barely cleared the steering wheel and I could not help but wonder whether this eighty-five-year-old wisp of a white lady could be trusted to safely operate a motor vehicle. Yet I climbed in and we motored off.

My worries about Maddie's driving were misplaced. Though she jerked from side to side to view the passing scenery, her cruising speed never exceeded ten miles per hour. For more than an hour we rolled up and down and across the grid of the far east side. An empty lot was a soda shop where she gossiped with best friends Lizzie and June. Another gap is the lighting workshop where her brother had his first job. Some public park bleachers were a story about a kiss from middle-school crush Harold. A church — once Catholic, now Baptist — is where her parents had marched her and five siblings every Sunday. Maddie's tendency to animate the past within architectures of the present was not exceptional, but typical of walks and drives I went on with others. Place is, after all, the lodestone of memory (Basso 1996). It was as we took a turn and

came to face the grass-obscured house that Maddie's tone shifted markedly. No longer happy to reminisce, it soured as she sighed, "Oh dear. Oh dear what have they done here? It's a wreck. What will I tell Pattie?"

Since the moment Maddie had picked me up, "they" had remained unidentified. Ever present in our conversation, but never specified. Jamming the shifter into park in front of Walt and Kenyetta's house, she confirmed my expectations. "The house back there is our house. It is where I grew up. And look what they've done to it. I knew we had to get out when we did. You just can't trust them with anything. It's abandoned! You can't trust [Black people] with anything." From the moment Maddie mistook the brickwork Walt tuck-points, the trim he and Kenyetta touch up with meticulous precision, and the flowers they dote over for mine, she assumed we shared the stereotyped belief that non-white people, specifically Black folks, are constitutionally unable to maintain things in working order. This track continued, with Maddie recounting how her father — a German immigrant who arrived in Detroit around the same time as Kenyetta's grandparents — had "worked hard" in road construction to scrape together the funds to buy a lot and build the bungalow just after she was born. When things began to "get crazy" in the 1940s, the family had decamped for suburban St. Clair Shores. As I stepped out of the Cadillac, Maddie wished me, "Good luck rebuilding the city," and drove away.

Unlike the other locations we visited, in which Maddie used the past tense to discuss what happened there, "The house back there *is* our house." Her presentist possession of the structure is tinged with what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) defines as "imperialist nostalgia" where beneficiaries of historical oppression render themselves as "an innocent bystander" to its fallout (108). Cultural historian, Rebecca Kinney (2016), traces Rosaldo's concept through online forums where the history of Detroit is "rewritten" by presumably white

contributors discussing the condition of their childhood neighborhoods (7). Efforts to situate empty and demolished buildings within the trajectory of white supremacy are dutifully moderated out (24-25). Left unsaid are the details of white Detroiters who assaulted Black families as they moved into their recently acquired dwellings (Boyle 2005). Also absent is any discussion of how, until the 1960s, federal housing policies allowed white families to cordon themselves off from others (Rothstein 2017). When allowed in at all, discussions of race are used to buttress feelings that the childhood landscapes remembered by people like Maddie were destroyed by racial others' audacity to move into the neighborhood (17-23). My brief conversation with Maddie reinforces how such sentiments are not limited to digital confines, but freely shared with those assumed to be similarly aggrieved.

Boundary Policing

Maddie is not an isolated case. In 2014, L. Brooks Patterson, the elected executive of Oakland County, which sits just north of Eight Mile Road from Detroit, grabbed headlines during an interview discussing the growing number of empty buildings in Detroit by comparison to the new housing being built for people relocating to his jurisdiction. Patterson had won elections for decades by deliberately cultivating white flight and, in time, the dislocation of wealthy non-white people from Detroit. In one interview, however, he augmented his usual rhetoric with a quip, "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn'" (P. Williams 2014). Patterson's remarks drew an explicit parallel between the genocides visited upon indigenous North Americans and the structural violence of disinvestment experienced by Detroiters. Though

Patterson was widely condemned following the interview, including from many of the corporate boardrooms and editorial pages that would celebrate his reelection win a few years later. While some may have claimed Patterson's remarks were 'surprising' and 'disappointing,' they were consistent with the actions of an official who had broken into the regional political scene in the early 1970s with his successful defense of racially-segregated schools.

Urban geographies have been essential optics for understanding the spatiality of racism, whether in the United States or elsewhere (Alves 2018; Massey and Denton 1998; Sugrue 2005). The contours of blocks, neighborhoods, and municipal boundaries organize racial belonging and exclusion as motors for the production of space (Fennell 2015; Safransky 2014). Sociologist Dana Kornberg (2016) reads Detroit's municipal boundaries as ones of "territorial stigma" in which the city and its majority-Black residents have been marginalized within regional politics and infrastructures. She details how since the 1950s, white Detroiters and white suburbanites have responded to Black neighbors and elected officials by not only disinvesting from Detroit, but by actively working to undermine the city as an entity. For instance, even as the emptying out of buildings in Detroit is the direct product of antiblack suburban and industrial development, majority-white suburbanites tend to mobilize the existence of empty buildings as evidence that Black Detroiters have destroyed built environments (Galster 2012, 276). In 2013, Michigan's governor held Detroit in 'emergency management,' stripping all power from the city's elected mayor and city councilors for more. At the time, suburban commentators echoed L. Brooks Patterson in citing the 75,000 empty buildings estimated to stand in the city as evidence for the dysfunction of Black political leadership[46]. Put simply, Detroit's geographic boundaries offer a physical and imaginative coupling in which those who benefit from the spatial consequences of

[46] Finley, Nolan (2013) "Can Detroiters govern their own city?" *Detroit News*. August 13.

white racism pass them off as others' work.

Yet, in elaborating upon Detroit as a location of territorial stigma, my intent is not to duplicate the social scientific tendency to locate non-white people and collectives as fundamentally abject[47]. As many Detroiters were keen to tell me, despite the city's persistently declining population and the dour portrayals that circulate of the city, people do live there by choice. Take Walt and Kenyetta. Kenyetta had taken an early retirement buyout from her position in the county clerk's office and Walt worked fulltime in hospital maintenance. While not wealthy, they were comfortable enough to afford a regular vacation to visit their daughter in coastal Georgia or Walt's extended family in Mississippi. Theoretically, they could have moved out of Detroit, though Kenyetta confided in me that doing so would have been personally and financially painful. Moving would have meant leaving the house where they raised their children. Further, the arts and crafts two-story they had purchased for $38,500 in 1985 was valued at $19,000 in 2019. But the pair were not leaving. Over dinner, Kenyetta explained, "It will be feet first for both of us out of this place." Walt added, "Why would we move? To go to some suburb? Why would we do that when we have a Black community here. That's maybe not something you'd understand, but it means something to us." Like many Black Detroiters I spoke with, Walt identified the city as a desirable place to live specifically because of its positioning as a space of Black life written against the backdrop of white suburbs.

In explaining his commitment to living in Detroit when it might have been possible to move to a suburban municipality with more robust municipal services and without empty buildings, Walt called attention to my racial positionality as potentially occluding my ability to understand his desires. He, Kenyetta, and others elaborated on the difficulty for me, a white man,

[47] Here, I follow geographer Clyde Woods' (2002) on push to consider the spatial production of Black life rather than just the routinization of death under white supremacy.

to grasp how living, shopping, worshipping among mostly Black people offered a sense of minor liberation from the overt and covert hostilities common in majority-white places. Indeed, as part of their efforts to reimagine American racial cartographies, sociologists Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria Robinson (2018) examine how Detroit exists within a constellation of predominantly Black cities and neighborhoods in which Black people have carved out creative respite within a broader national politics of white supremacy. Making such collective, antiracist care possible is sometimes dependent on obscuring its existence from white view (T. L. King 2016). To this end, my effort here is not to excavate and make legible the ways in which Black Detroiters cultivate and reinforce Black spaces. Others are better equipped for that task (Partridge Under Review). Instead, I seek merely to note that understandings of majority blackness as dysfunction and liability emanates from standpoints steeped in white supremacy. Despite the real difficulties of life in a place that has been marginalized for the simple fact of being home to Black people, for Walt, Kenyetta, and others, Detroit's blackness offered possibilities for existence that were foreclosed elsewhere.

In part, the possibilities of Detroit's majority-Black character emerge as its geography marks white-presenting bodies. Anthropologist, John Hartigan (1999), found as much in his examination of how white, working class Detroiters navigate the intersections of race and class that make them 'out of place' both in the majority-Black, working class city they call home and in wealthier, if majority-white suburbs. As he suggests, "race functions as a local matter [in which] racial identities are constitutive of place" (13-14). And yet, local racial geographies have shifted in the decades since Hartigan's study. I was on a bus rolling down Woodward towards the central business district when two young Black women in the uniforms of a local high school struck up a conversation across from me. We were passing an early twentieth-century midrise

office building that had been vacant for years, but was in the process of being converted into residential apartments. One girl marveled at workers hoisting marble slabs through the windows, asking, "When did downtown get so nice?" Her seatmate responded "Girl, you mean when did downtown get so white?" The question elicited chuckles from most in earshot, all of whom, with my exception, were Black. It conveyed the public secret that resources — especially in the form of public expenditures to prop up private real estate investments — were being funneled into specific neighborhoods and not others (Doucet and Smit 2016). Indeed, developers only targeted large-scale installations of marble countertops to the thin band of neighborhoods within which they aimed to house predominantly white members of the so-called 'creative class'[48].

For those steeped in Detroit's particular spatialities of race, recent years have felt like the tectonic plates grinding toward a new status quo. Depending on who you talk to, this grinding might have begun anywhere between 2000 and 2020. As elsewhere in the United States, suburban neighborhoods are increasingly diverse rather than all-white. At the same time, administrative plans aiming to bend Detroit's decades-long population chute are predicated on attracting tens of thousands of new residents to the city from suburban places[49]. The distinct racial slant of this effort was put literally on display when a property developer plastered their downtown apartment buildings with billboards inviting the viewer to "See Detroit Like We Do." The billboards featured recent photographs of Detroit's streets in which the overwhelming majority of people in the frame appeared to be white. The images offering a whitewashed provocation for Detroit were quickly removed following protests, with the development

[48] Developers were known to manipulate statistical geographies in order to shuffle from local, state, and federal for housing impoverished people into projects marketed at some of the region's wealthiest residents (Ernsthausen and Elliott 2019).
[49] "15x15: A Talent Strategy for Detroit" (2013) Hudson-Webber Foundation; "7.2 Sqare Miles: A Report on Greater Downtown" (2015) Hudson-Webber Foundation

company issuing a statement that read, “Although not intended to create the kind of feelings it did, the slogan/statement we used on these graphics was tone deaf, in poor taste, and does not reflect a single value or philosophy of our company.” This rhetoric quieted public outrage, but it did nothing of cover up the reality portrayed by the chosen images: following a decade or so of deliberate efforts to attract new residents to Detroit, Black people were almost invisible in the city’s central business district.

The “See Detroit Like We Do” billboards cut against the message of “inclusive recovery” advanced by Detroit’s municipal planning and development team since the city was released from federal bankruptcy oversight in 2014. Tara, a member of this team, described for me how she understood Detroit’s geography to offer “a unique opportunity to do development without displacement.” In her words, “Unlike other cities, where improvements in services are displacing people, in Detroit, we have the benefit of empty space and empty buildings. Abandonment. We have the space to build a city that works for everybody. To do development without displacement. New and old Detroiters alike.” Here, Tara echoed sentiments articulated by many planners, architects, and development officers who worked in concert in Detroit, despite their distribution through various municipal, non-profit, and private offices. For them, the “empty space and empty buildings” produced through racist disinvestment offered a buffer against the dispossessions that are paradigmatic of speculative development in cities around the globe[50].

Of course, to do “development without displacement,” as Tara suggests, so-called ‘new Detroiters’ would have to be routed into places where ‘old Detroiters’ did not already live. This did not occur. By contrast, my time in Detroit coincided with the high-profile evictions of mostly Black senior citizens and disabled people from downtown apartment buildings. Upon doing so,

[50] For accounts of this displacement, see Finkelstein 2019; Harms 2017; Susser 2012.

the owners of these buildings received public tax subsidies to renovate buildings deemed 'obsolete.' The resulting luxury dwellings and commercial spaces were marketed at typically white newcomers to the city. These instances occurred alongside others that did not break into public consciousness, as it became routine for existing residents and businesses who held space within Detroit's central neighborhoods to be forced out by rent and tax increases. More often than not, those displaced were Black and those who replaced them were white. Writer Marsha Music (2015) reflected on those practicalities in a poem that situates them within the racialization of regional spatial economies. Her words are worth reading at length:

> Black Folks (Whites, too) whom I've long known, who've lived here for a lifetime,
> discuss Newcomers frequently — Midtown, Downtown and 'round town —
> who move to 'hoods as more each day they're priced out of the core
> but bring excited spirits to the corners of Detroit
> We have to tell the difference from among those who are new
> The ones sincere and earnest and respect both me and you
> For most of those who're coming here, they love this city, too
> But we all know there're those who just have dollars in their view
>
> […]
>
> But yes, there's gentrifying norm, folks old and frail with bodies worn
> or recovering from drink or drugs; grateful, proud of old, quiet rooms,
> in big apartments in Downtown, on "ghost town" streets, they lived in peace,
> grateful in their sober lives, a place to rest from dark to dawn
> or kids who made the DJ sounds, the techno parties, drew the crowds
> Downtown when it wasn't cool, kept the buildings from emptying out
> Landlords got their Section 8, win-win in Downtown Detroit's Dark days
> Now realtors come to speculate, announce that they will renovate
> Open back at "market rates" — time to shop for another place
>
> […]
>
> You see, we live on many blocks that seem unaltered by the clock
> With neighborhoods of much good care, of lovely lawns and kept-up yards
> and look, with just a camera's twist, it seems as if we don't exist
> But now Newcomers have arrived, our neighborhoods get newly eyed
> and even so, for sure we know, how hard we fought to keep our homes
> and though we know we were ignored, our labor was its own reward
> for our beloved city rests, on many shoulders that were blessed
> We had no time to feel bereft, we carried on when others left

Music disrupts proclamations that Detroit's historical circumstances — its abandonment —

immunize it against displacements associated with capitalized urban development. She also calls into question canonical readings of uneven development that prioritize the disuse of urban spaces as constitutive of new frontiers for capital accumulation (Hackworth 2006; Smith 2005). Rather, it is the ongoing inhabitation of places by Black folks, poor folks, artists, the formerly homeless, and that make them prime for investment (Starecheski 2016). Even though Music sketches how racially integrated spaces can emerge within this dynamic, she also notes the fragility of their construction in the face of profit motives.

Some might quibble that the racial identifiers described here tend to cleave a binary between Blackness and whiteness. I have described spaces — be they homes, neighborhoods, municipalities, or something else — as being Black, white, or in some stage of tentative integration. In part, this is reflective of self-reported census data. More importantly, though, it is indicative of how Detroit is embroiled within an American racial project. This is a project in which the seventeenth-century codification of racial whiteness in has enabled the categorical capture of African-descended people (W. Johnson 1999; LeFlouria 2016). Since then, whiteness and Blackness have been defined by opposition, with other identities splayed and often subsumed between them. The ongoing effect of this in Detroit was made clear to me by, Adam, a self-identified "white-passing Latino" who taught grade three at a suburban elementary school. He described a lesson that tasked children in his class with mapping their hometown. As Adam demonstrated the assignment by drawing the neighborhood where he was raised in Detroit, one child blurted out, "But you're not Black." Another chimed in, "He's not white." This reported interaction is suggestive of how Latinx, Indigenous, Arab, South Asian, and other groups whose identities and politics have complicated dichotomous racial formations in Detroit since the colonial period (Abdulrahim 2008; Shryock 2008; Vargas 1993). And yet, in the formative

experience of many, the boundaries of regional geographies are cast in Black and white.

Laundered Property

Adam was part of the rotation of people who gave Walt a lift to and from his hospital maintenance job. He lived with his girlfriend, Tanya and their toddler son Tristan in a two-bedroom apartment just south of Mack Avenue in Grosse Pointe Park. The monthly rent, $850, was equivalent to what they would pay in Detroit. But, as Tanya pointed out to me, living in Grosse Pointe brought access to a highly-resourced public school district. The offerings of swimming, sailing, computer science, and intensive language courses far outmatched options at chronically underfunded schools in Detroit. Enrolling Tristan in a Grosse Pointe Public Schools kindergarten program, had required submitting four proof of address documents, including a notarized lease. This process of "residency verification" was rolled out district-wide in the 1990s when the number of children of color enrolled in the district began to climb. A call to the district's anonymous enrollment tip line suggested Tristan did not reside in the district. Keeping him enrolled required Tanya and Adam showing a district 'investigator' around their home. This was a routine visit for the investigator, who noted how the district received hundreds of anonymous complaints each year and had "excluded" a handful of students from the district. Meanwhile, Adam and Tanya's landlord, a white man in his forties, graduated from Grosse Pointe schools as a youth after his parents substituted "Grosse Pointe" for "Detroit" in the address field of enrollment forms.

The central claim of the complaint made about Tristan was that he actually lived with his grandmother, Mel, few blocks north of Mack Avenue in Detroit in a 'family home' inherited by her now deceased husband. Mel's former husband was a cousin of Walt's, and she lived just a

couple blocks over from him and Kenyetta. Other members of the extended family stayed within walking distance. Their presence was indicative of how many working-class neighborhoods are made through kin who provide help with child care, leaky faucets, job leads, car repairs, and gentle reminders of upcoming church services (Walley 2013; Wolcott 2001). As Mel pointed out to the investigator, school programming ended in the early afternoon, and neither Tanya nor Adam could retrieve their son at that time due to work schedules. "It's only natural that I'd pick him up and bring him home," she recalled stating. And yet, this common-sense reliance of family to balance employment expectations and raising a family produced an investigation that could have seen a kindergartener expelled from school. No doubt, in a school district where 90% of students identified as white in 2018, a multiracial child, his Latino father, Black mother, and Black grandmother were easy targets for distributed surveillance from parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Adam and Tanya had not initially wanted to move to Grosse Pointe. Their initial plan when Tristan approached school age was to enroll him in the charter school where Adam worked. At the time, the family was living in Mel's house and having a difficult time locating rental housing in the proximity. Of the few places available, none seemed suitable for a young child. I went with Tanya to see one possibility, a squat three-bedroom whose owner, a limited license corporation with an address in Delaware, was asking $900 per month. The real estate agent who showed us the house promised, "The landlord is really excited for you to move in and will get a new hot water heater and furnace for the place before you move in." Indeed, the dwelling lacked both of these essential systems. It also had a trace of mold growing along the bathroom wall and a series of holes under the eaves that betrayed where some animals had taken up residence. We left quickly after Tanya spotted what looked like mouse droppings in a hall

closet.

The walls, ceilings, and floors of this brick ranch betrayed a common characteristic of ostensibly 'abandoned' buildings. Often, when places lack human occupants, they are teaming with other forms of life (Apel 2015; Edensor 2005). Adam and Tanya knew this well. Mel's house backed up to the same beige and green bungalow pictured at the start of this chapter, the one that Maddie grew up in. Phyllis, a friend of Mel's since childhood, lived in her own bungalow directly across the street from the beige and green one. The quickest route between Mel's place and hers was to cut through a gap in a thicket of bushes and emerge facing the now boarded-up backdoor of the empty house. Tanya recalled running along this route when growing up. The bungalow was, at that point in the 1990s, home to Shonda Washington, a nurse who Tanya dutifully referred to as Ms. Washington. The blocks were full of people at that point, and making the trip to Phyllis' required Tanya to scoot between houses inhabited by people she knew as "Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson" and "the Bakers." In my time, we rarely walked this route. The building and long grasses around it were home to a set of competing rat and cat colonies who vied for space alongside human commerce in a variety of substances, including weed, crack, heroin, and sex. To avoid this ecology, Mel, Tanya, Adam, and Phyllis insisted on walking down and around the block.

This practice of avoiding the shortest passage between Mel and Phyllis' homes reflected what I frequently encountered among people who lived in proximity to empty buildings. One man whose home sat across the street from an empty school building described the need to move quickly between his driveway and front door after a pack of racoons took up residence in the school. At dusk, they would venture out the school and follow him to his front door. Once, they made off with packages of hamburgers that were jostled out of a shopping bag and onto the lawn.

In his words, “They’re coming for my groceries, so I’ve gotta be on guard like it is ghosts in that school.” While it may be comical to imagine a group of marauding racoons, take note of how this man is not merely concerned about being haunted, but the possibility of losing regular sustenance. Likewise, Mel and her family were less concerned with the sorts of moral hazards implied by legal actions against long grass, wild animals, drug use, and sexual economy (Valverde 2012). Rather, than the ‘look’ of the rat house, they were disturbed by the known possibilities that rats, cats, dirty syringes, and angry pimps or johns might pose corporeal harm, especially to a child of Tristan’s age.

Adam and others from the neighborhood took steps to evict drug sales and sex work from the rat house by barricading its entrances with plywood and removing the front stairs, a process that geographer, Kim Kinder (2014) describes as “guerilla-style defensive architecture.” The rats and cats proved more difficult. It took several months of trapping the animals and ferrying them to a park several miles away before Adam considered it safe to show Tristan the shortcut to and from Phyllis’ home. Over this period, Adam would regularly remove plywood coverings from the home and walk around inside. He described imagining it as a place where he and Tanya could raise a family. Once, as we baited several live cat traps with tuna, Adam peeled back the linoleum covering the kitchen floor and pointed, “Look at that, real wood floors! With a little love this place could be something.” In cities like Detroit, with large numbers of empty buildings, it is common for people to subvert documented property ownership by moving into places without permission, and these practices are variably sanctioned by neighbors and municipal authorities (Herbert 2018). Adam and Tanya briefly considered doing this, and had even picked a date when they would start work on making the bathroom functional. But the thought of an absentee owner coming to evict them stalled the effort. Instead, Adam resolved to

convince the existing owner to sell.

Property ownership records for the City of Detroit are held in a nondescript downtown office building. One summer, Adam and I spent a day waiting in line in that building to use a creaking PC that offered public access to the archive. After several hours, we identified the current owner: ESV LLC, a corporate entity whose 'registered agent' was an attorney with an address in Oakland County. In the process of finding this, we paged through records that offered the various claims to ownership made on the beige and green bungalow since the land it stood on was purchased in 1928 by Albert and Lidia Novak, presumably Maddie's parents. In 1947, the Novak's listed the property and potential rental income from it as collateral for a builder's loan on a new home in St. Clair Shores. When they sold the bungalow in 1965, it was to Kelvin and Gloria Washington, who neighbors recall as a machine press operator and nurse's aide with two daughters. Albert and Lidia directed the $28,333 they made in the sale toward paying off a loan on their hunting cabin in northern Michigan. In 1988, Kelvin and Gloria Washington retired to Florida and transferred ownership of the property to their daughter Shonda. When Shonda passed away in 1998, the house was purchased at an estate sale for $22,500 by Westside LLC. Mel and Phyllis recall a series of tenants renting the home. One family, the Crain's, stayed for five years from 1998 through 2003, when ownership passed from Westside LLC to King Props LLC.

Westside did not sell the bungalow to King Props. In 2003, Wayne County, the state administrative division that includes Detroit, foreclosed on the bungalow for a past due tax balance of $3,400. King Props won the county-sponsored action intended to recoup the tax debt with a high bid of $7,500. In the fifteen years after tax foreclosure was first mandated by state law in 2002, Wayne County foreclosed on one out of four properties in Detroit, some of them more than once. Each year, auction listings included empty lots, houses, churches, factories, and

other buildings, with the regular churn proving of great concern to housing scholars and activists who contend it is a motor for evictions (Akers and Seymour 2018; Atuahene and Hodge 2018). Landlords became quickly adept at acquiring property at low prices and turning a profit before even handing over the keys, with the beige and green bungalow demonstrating how the three year statutory timeline for tax delinquency is baked into a business model. In 2008, Wayne County foreclosed on King Props for nonpayment of taxes, and Exit Strategy May 6 LLC purchased ownership for $1100. In 2011, Pax Investments received a title to the bungalow for the minimum bid of $500. In 2015, ESV LLC took ownership for $1500. As I observed in other buildings, each time the beige and green bungalow passed through a cycle of tax foreclosure, someone claiming to be the new owner would knock on the door and inform the existing occupants of the need to pony up a fresh security deposit or vacate immediately.

Shortly after ESV LLC bought the bungalow, the man who had been living in it and keeping up the lawn moved out. Nobody moved in for a year, with the subsequent occupants specializing in a range of illicit substances. It was with the arrival of these newcomers that Mel and Phyllis started walking around the block rather than through it in order to visit each other. In a further dip into public records, Adam found that ESV and other LLCs with the same registered agent had purchased a number of properties in the neighborhood, including the grassy lots to either side of the bungalow, an empty diner on Warren Avenue, a former bank, an unused church, and a half dozen single-family dwellings. All sat empty, only some were boarded up. The church showed evidence of a fire that had burned through the main worship space. After we drove around to each address, Adam reported back to Tanya and Mel, “All ESV owns is abandoned buildings.”

Figure 8 Bungalow with ownership information. Transfer data from Wayne County Register of Deeds. Photo by author

Registered agents know the human people for whom LLCs stand in. When several messages to the office of ESV LLC's agent went unreturned, Adam and I drove to a sprawling contemporary home on a small lake in a wealthy Oakland County suburb, which was publicly listed as the attorney's home address. Adam had brought with him a cashier's check for $1000 that he planned to offer the attorney in exchange for a quitclaim deed. The grey-haired, white man who answered the door in a monogramed, checker-print shirt claimed to have no idea about ESV LLC or any buildings in Detroit. He insisted that Adam and I leave immediately. Were we to return, he smiled, "I'll prosecute for trespassing." Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the beige and green bungalow was demolished shortly after this encounter. Unlike most of the building removals that happen in Detroit, which are paid for by public funds, this was a 'private demolition' paid for by ESV LLC.

Adam pored over a flurry of prices, transfers, profits, and losses in his search to identify a person who could sell him the beige and green bungalow. Taken together, these names and figures illuminate how, far from being an 'externality' of racial capitalist property markets, abandonment is actively produced by them (cf. Dewar and Thomas 2012; Ryan 2012). We might consider how the abandonment is not simply embedded in the sorts of white flights taken by

Albert and Lidia Novak during the mid-twentieth century, but also amplified by technical procedures like tax foreclosure that only took shape decades later. Reading across these moments, we can glimpse the various forms of extraction this structure made possible. As collateral, the bungalow quite literally enabled Maddie's family to put down roots elsewhere. Kelvin and Gloria Washington never saw such returns, but they were able to transmit the structure as an inheritance to Shonda. From there, if census figures are a guide, it was Black families who paid rents on time as corporate beings purposefully shuffled the building in and out of tax foreclosure[51]. Adam and Tanya imagined a future in which the bungalow was their home rather than one for rats, cats, and illicit trade. This was an imagination that collapsed with the wrecking crew that rendered the beige and green bungalow into scraps.

Plunder

During the summer of 2017, Detroit-centered news media, blogs, and twitter streams were electrified by a talk the city's mayor, Mike Duggan, had given to an auditorium of business executives, state legislators, philanthropy directors, and others at an exclusive island resort in the northern reaches of Lake Huron. This collection of elites was organized as part of the Mackinac Policy Conference, an annual gathering convened by Detroit's Regional Chamber of Commerce. As part of his keynote address, Duggan flipped through a slideshow that featured closeup images of empty buildings and aerial views of the cityscape. At each turn, archival photographs gave texture to present-day shots. As he clicked, the mayor laid out "I've heard the stories for years, right? Detroit's decline, the violence of 1967, Mayor Coleman Young, that's what drove

[51] In the expected route of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2005a), financial interests extract wealth by forcing marginalized people out of their homes (See also: Stout 2019). By contrast, tax foreclosure harnesses dispossession into capital accumulation by holding marginalized people within exploitative rental markets (Caverly Under Review).

everybody out." On the contrary, as Duggan argued, "You want to say, 'How did all those homes in Detroit deteriorate over all those years?' There was a conscious federal policy that discarded what was left behind and subsidized the move to the suburbs. That's how." The mayor continued his dissection, graphing how Detroit's population began to decline in 1955, long before uprisings against antiblack police brutality in 1967 or the election of the first Black mayor in 1973. In wrapping up, he turned to recent demolitions, noting "The feds made the mess, but the local government, we're going to clean up the fed's mess." With Duggan concluded, the hall exploded with applause.

None of what Duggan proclaimed in the auditorium of the state's wealthiest and most politically connected residents was particularly novel. Many images the mayor used to illustrate his points were drawn explicitly from Thomas Sugrue's (2005) *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*. Sugrue and others have repeatedly used Detroit as a guide for understanding how antiblackness was institutionalized in segregated urban development paradigms across the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. Detroit-based activists and politicians have leveraged the same statistics for decades, often in appeals for assistance with demolitions in much the same way Duggan had. Yet, their efforts to direct resources to city residents were often met with reproach from corporate and political actors from other parts of the metropolitan area. By contrast, Duggan was heralded for finally airing out the region's dirty laundry. As many commented at the time, such a response from the state's overwhelmingly white elite could not be separated from Duggan's own whiteness, whereas most who came before him in drawing political attention to the realities of Detroit's uneven development were Black.

Yet my interest in calling attention to the remarks one elite gave to others is not merely to highlight the weight of racial privilege when calling attention to structural inequity. Rather, I also

want to explicitly trouble the singular joint around which Duggan and, by extension, his supportive audience, cast the existence of empty buildings. Without a doubt, federal housing policies have contributed to population loss and abandonment as it is materialized in Detroit's built environment. Purposefully or not, however, to center specific policies as the sole reason for which the city has been emptied of people, is to occlude how buildings have continued to go vacant in the decades after the 1965 Civil Rights Act ended legal segregation. Antiblack housing policies remain structured into the operations banking and real estate (Taylor 2019). Nevertheless, Duggan's explanation, which became a standard talking point for demolition administrators, has the convenience of acknowledging that racism is imprinted in Detroit's landscape while also temporally pinning the production of racism in the past. Within their optic, because the federal policies in question no longer exist, the only thing necessary for racial uplift is for demolitions that come in and "clean up the fed's mess." Beyond the removal of empty buildings, this optic provides for no other means of addressing the structural imbalances of power and capital baked into regional geographies.

This aphasiac approach to contemporary landscapes is not limited to program administrators and the political actors who direct them. Consider urban planner, George Galster (2012), whose phrase "disassembly line" poetically links the demolition of housing, offices, and shopping centers in Detroit to the construction of new housing, office parks, and shopping centers on the metropolitan fringe. Even though Galster historicizes this process within intersecting regional tensions over race and capital, he ultimately situates blame across all. As he writes, "excessively powerful whites' racist abuses from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century engendered virulent identity politics emphasizing Black power and pride above everything else in reaction. Whites, in turn, responded by willfully boycotting the central city,

moving farther away from it" (277-278). Such a formulation is equivalent to contending that there were "Good people on all sides" [52]. It alibis the perpetuation of antiblackness as a proportionate response to antiracism.

This chapter offers a counterpoint. In schematic fashion we have examined some of the historical developments that occurred in and around one particular bit of land on Detroit's east side, spinning at turns across moments from the eighteenth century through the present. My efforts in doing so have not been to offer a comprehensive history of Detroit. For that, I have built upon the contributions of others. Instead, these past few pages have articulated past with present in order to reveal an overriding imperial logic that has perpetually configured Detroit as a location from which value may be evacuated. Our clues to this evacuation have come in the form of lost buildings and, in certain instances, lost people. Scholars and activists of contemporary American cities have likened early twenty-first century processes of urban development as akin to settler colonization because they displace the working class, the non-white, and others who do not fit within aspirational frameworks of white middle-class belonging (Smith 2006; Kinney 2016). Rather than attempt to simply hold together a neat analogy of these two processes, this chapter has pushed upon the messy material accumulations of Detroit's landscape in order to offer evidence for their mutual constitution. Contemporary logics spatial racism, including municipal boundaries, neighborhood footprints, housing construction, and profit motives are conducted from the footprints of empire. Put in Galster's terms, the abandonment of Detroit's landscape does not simply a product of recent tensions between racialized people. Instead, these landscapes orient us to how the plunders of white racism run all the way through to the ground.

[52] This is the phrase the US president used in an attempt to excuse white supremacists who killed Heather Heyer during a 2017 protest in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Chapter 2
Fractured Sovereignties

"Did you just blight my house? Tell me you didn't just blight my house!" This interrogation and plea came from a Black woman in her fifties or sixties who was knocking on the passenger window of our four-door sedan. She was wheezing, having pursued our car halfway down the snow-covered block on Detroit's west side. A waft of icy air pierced the stifling heat of the cabin as I rolled down the window and asked for her address, adding that I did not think so. She gave a street number just a few houses back. The one with Christmas garlands twisting in the breeze, and the piece plywood fitted over a window where her grandson had struck it during a snowball fight. Behind me, Claude, another passenger, was using a tablet computer to photograph each building as we drove by and describe its condition according to a standardized survey. He keyed in the address. In the moment it took Claude to do so, the woman described how her grandparents talked of being evicted from their home in the 1940s or 50s when it was "blighted" to build what is now the Chrysler Freeway

[1]. Likewise, she recalled another eviction in her youth when her family was "blighted" out of an apartment building on the near west side to make way for a university expansion project. In both cases, municipal inspectors had photographed the neighborhoods before ordering them flattened. Surely, we were from city hall and had come to do the same. Our car, after all, had a flashing orange beacon on top and side placards reading "MOTOR CITY MAPPING OFFICIAL BUSINESS."

[1] Photos taken by city surveyors were preserved in the special collections of the Detroit Public Library. They were not opened for public view until 2017. https://www.blackbottomstreetview.com

Claude slid over in the backseat and motioned the woman inside. She introduced herself as Dorothy, and Claude walked her through his description of her home. The address and a photo were followed by selections from a standard survey:

Structure:	**Yes** / No
Occupied:	**Occupied** / Unoccupied / Partial Occupied / Possibly Unoccupied
Use:	**Residential** / Commercial / Mixed / Industrial / Institutional / Parking Lot / Park / Garden / Unknown
Units:	Garage or shed / **Single-Family** / Multifamily / Apartments
Condition:	Good / **Fair** / Poor / Suggest Demolition
Fire Damage:	Yes / **No**
Dumping:	Yes / **No**

In a textbox Claude had added a note about the snowball fight. Upon reading it, Dorothy asked, "So you didn't blight it?" Claude, a Black man not much younger than Dorothy, gave an emphatic "No ma'am," before explained how his grandparents too had been "blighted" from a home in Cincinnati in the 1940s. That's what had brought them to Detroit. Dorothy smiled at this, opening the door to exit the vehicle, but shut it quickly in order to list off several buildings nearby. A brick house around the corner, the dollar store on a major intersection, and a former elementary school. All were, to her knowledge, empty. "Could you please make sure those get blighted so the city can come tear them down?" she requested before stepping out into the chill.

Had Dorothy stayed longer, I would have liked to explain to her how we did not work for the municipal government, as she seemed to assume. To be sure, the placards intoning 'Motor City Mapping' and 'Official Business,' gave the veneer of municipal action. So too did the name of the organization coordinating hundreds of people to fan out across Detroit and document each of its 377,602 parcels: The Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce. Within this taskforce, the 'City of Detroit' as a public government was only one of fifteen members of a 'partnership' spearheaded by the chief executives of local companies and philanthropies. Our driver that day Andy, was employed by a Detroit-headquartered financial services firm whose director had 'volunteered'

his staff to ferry surveyors like Claude, Detroit residents employed on temporary, hourly contracts, around Detroit. I was not affiliated with the project, but thanks to Andy, along for the ride. The street-by-street view of Detroit would be accessible to municipal offices, but maintained by private industry. The taskforce's final report suggested that this institutional division was necessary if there was to be hope for demolishing the 84,641 instances it identified as "blighted" and "in need of intervention"[2].

This chapter details how 'blight removal' has operated as a shifting paradigm of urban management since the early twentieth century. Consider the resonance between the 2014 Blight Removal Taskforce Final Report and a pamphlet printed by the Detroit Health and Housing Commissions in 1910. In 2014, "Blight is a cancer. Blight sucks the soul out of anyone who gets near it […]. Blight is radioactive. It is contagious"[3]. Meanwhile, the 1910 pamphlet warned of "The blight conditions fast approaching our city" in the form of multiple families packed into the same dwelling, often without heat and plumbing. It continues, "We boast that the number of homes is fast increasing. But the number of unwholesome habitations is increasing faster. The youth is growing, but the cancer is spreading. […] The germs are here, and alive, and making rapid growth"[4]. Over one hundred years apart, these two descriptions link disparate conditions — empty buildings in the first and overly full ones in the second — by way of the cancerous, viral, and ominous condition of 'blight.' More importantly, perhaps, the statutes that allowed the Blight Removal Taskforce to contemplate the speedy elimination of tens of thousands of vacant structures take their basis in early twentieth-century legal maneuvers to alleviate crowded housing conditions.

[2] Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce (2014) "Every Neighborhood Has a Future and It Doesn't Include Blight"
[3] Ibid. Pp.2-4.
[4] Excerpted in Hasencamp, Oscar (1912) *Ohio's Health*. 26-28.

Blight is a shifting signifier of spatial hazard. This is evident given the almost total inversion of the concept since its introduction in the progressive period. Yet, in the chapter that follows, I am less concerned with the fact that what blight is changes from place to place, moment to moment, and person to person. Such differences are to be expected, since that is how concepts work (Hacking 1999). Instead, I analyze practices of identifying 'blighted properties' in Detroit's built environment in order to situate the institutional landscapes and legal architectures through which large-scale building removal has been organized. Sketching these landscapes and architectures does not cohere a discrete unit or department of government, municipal or otherwise, but reveals jumbles of municipal employees, private contractors, non-profit workers, citizens, statutes, and assessment tools that endeavor to know what blight is and where it exists. These jumbles scaffold embodied judgments, such as those Claude made of Dorothy's house, into administrative decisions about the suitability of relations between people, buildings, and neighborhoods. Even though this chapter lacks the overt motion of political struggle, by following where the power delineate blight accumulates, it considers how sociolegal concepts enable moralized logics of sovereign control[5].

Within urban studies, municipal governments have been theorized as privileged locations for governing urban territory and citizens (Duneier 2001; Ghertner 2015). The ability of sites of highly local administration to discipline the conduct of individual and collective lives is not merely a salient feature of life in one place or another, but is the foundation of state governance more broadly (Foucault 2003; Osborne 1996; Scott 2018). 'The city,' in this way, is idealized as a unit of territory and population with coterminous administrative institutions (Ben-Joseph 2005). In recent decades, scholars have noted how neoliberal interventions designed to extract

[5] For contrast, see Choy 2011; Hall 2002

profit from public goods rely on "splintering" this conceptual whole (Graham and Marvin 2002). Since the 1970s, the liberalization of urban governance in cities across the Global North and South has been characterized by the austerity-driven elimination of services (Fairbanks 2009; Fennell 2015; von Schnitzler 2016). With regularity, projects that once defined unified state citizenship are the purview of an array of specialized, non-government entities (Geissler 2015; Ong 2006; N. Rose 1996). Cleaving functions away from public governance in this way is understood as synonymous with the retrenchment of state power since the closing decades of the twentieth century[6].

Despite recent efforts that stripped control of empty buildings and publicly-owned land, away from the City of Detroit as a public government, Dorothy and most other Detroiters still understood the municipality to be uniquely responsible for addressing 'blight.' This chapter follows how attempts to pin down 'the city' as a set of purpose-built actors for identifying and addressing blight forces Detroiters to venture outside of city hall and through non-governmental organizations, technical experts, private firms, and quasi-public entities. These thickets of people and institutions reinforce how municipal governments are only one of many agents of urban state power. Further, pressing on the history of blight elimination reveals how forms of 'private-public partnership' are not simply neoliberal inventions at the turn of the twenty-first century, but characteristic of urban development paradigms the precede moments of austerity. For much of the twentieth century, it was non-municipal jurisdictions that 'blighted' the neighborhoods of

[6] The specter of austerity-driven governance that shrinks the scope of public government is typically glossed as 'neoliberalism,' especially as it eliminates social welfare programs and progressive taxation schemes (Harvey 2005; Kapferer 2005; cf. Collier 2011). Scholars focused on cities in the United States and Europe have been contended these moves are symptomatic of post-Fordist metropolitan life (Adams 2012; Brenner and Theodore 2003; Maskovsky and Susser 2015). And yet, the corporate-state collaborations and service eliminations carried out in the name of 'reform' are consonant with the logics of colonial governance (Mains 2012; von Schnitzler 2016). As a result, I do not take neoliberalism to be a temporal hinge point that operates only in specific geographies, but a rationality of rule that is imposed to shift state power out of discernable institutions of public government.

Black Detroiters and targeted them for clearance. Meanwhile, the homes of white Detroiters in similar physical states were largely left undisturbed. As this chapter examines the technical coordination of blight elimination, it asserts the fractured sovereignties and partial citizenships that orient neoliberal austerity are improvised from already existing administrative architectures of antiblackness.

Perilous Environments

What is blight? I asked this question throughout my fieldwork. Often, the responses I received were commentary on the surrounding landscape. That factory with no windows and trees growing through the roof? Blight. The fire-damaged house around the corner? Blight. Construction debris and other waste piled in an empty lot? Blight. There were quite evidently some limited cases. Dorothy would not have pursued Claude, Andy, and I through the snow had there not been some shred of possibility that we might have classified the boarded-over window on her house as blight. Yet, you may recall that Claude was not tasked with distinguishing whether or not the addresses we passed were 'blighted' or not. The photos and descriptions he made were routed to a group of data analysts and programmers who ultimately labeled some 'blight' and others not. Alicia, a Black woman in her thirties, was one of those analysts, and her résumé noted a specialization in "blight elimination program evaluation." When I asked her to define blight, she replied, "Blight is the environmental conditions that prevent wellbeing." Abstracted away from particular instances, Alicia's definition is suggestive of the multiplicity of this term — blight *is* the environmental conditions. Tracing the development of these compound meanings reveals a flexible conceptual architecture that maintains administrative control of urban space as a frontline for population management.

Historian of technology Jennifer Light (2014) examines how the concept of blight entered the lexicon of urban planning at the beginning of the twentieth century, borrowed from the name for a class of then unexplained plant diseases. The appropriation came alongside efforts to manage urban space as a mode of shaping the identities and activities of people who encounter them[7]. This understanding comes with a built-in tension. For reformers in the model of progressive social welfare, projects of 'neighborhood conservation' and 'rehabilitation' presented opportunities to cultivate urban and national citizenship through public programs guaranteeing safe and clean housing[8]. It was in this same moment that arguments about the spread of contagion through built environments first enabled programs to militarize policing in nonwhite neighborhoods on the mistaken assumption that physical disorder was a pathology of Black and Latinx people, rather than a marker of oppressive living conditions (Ansfield 2020). While so-called 'broken windows theories' have been repeatedly debunked, guarding against blight remains a persuasive political argument for stepped up police surveillance of urban space[9].

In Detroit, efforts to use municipal governance to refashion the living situations of people inhabiting blighted conditions began in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was in 1910 that Detroit's Health Commission issued a report describing "foul air, windowless rooms, filthy alleys, unsanitary and overcrowded homes, tenements and lodging houses" as "[The] curse of every city where it exists. It disheartens the poor, preys upon the immigrant, corrupts politics,

[7] Many of these projects were rehearsed in imperial contexts. See architectural historian, Gwendolyn Wright's (1991) examination of this through French colonial urbanism.

[8] Walker, Mabel (1938) *Urban Blight and Slums*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Wood, Edith Elmer (1935) "Slums and Blight in the United States." Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. *Housing Division Bulletin 1*.

[9] During my time in Detroit, the mayor's office pushed for the implementation of a citywide surveillance network that could use facial recognition to capture criminal activity. In part, the idea for this network came from the efforts to track down suburban construction contractors who frequently dumped their materials in Detroit's empty building and lots. The police department rolled out this network and operated it for years without seeking approval from the civilian-oversight panel responsible for preventing civil liberties infractions. When the surveillance net was made public, a spokesperson told the board, "We were just trying to protect the citizens of Detroit from blight."

tramples virtue, destroys property […] packs it with hungry humanity and then raises the rent upon it"[10]. Suggested treatment for this curse entailed providing accommodations separated from the extractive, already oversaturated private rental markets. The pamphlet contributed to a groundswell of support for the City of Detroit's construction of public housing in advance of state or federal subsidies for this activity[11].

There is a long history in American politics of suggesting that deteriorated built environments result from the inferiority or defects of their inhabitants (Lepselter 2014). Similar concerns animate the logics of imperial planning (Searle 2016; Wright 1991). While the concept of blight lends itself to such suggestions, it has also been used to armor against them. Take the 1936 radio address given by then president of Detroit's city council, John W. Smith. In the grips of the Great Depression, evidence of financial distress was visible in daily life[12]. Smith took to the airwaves to describe how sociologists from Wayne State University and staff of the Detroit Housing Commission had established "definite relationships between blighted areas and social conditions." Within areas with crowded housing conditions, "it was found that crime was 7.4 times; juvenile delinquency 10.4 times; tuberculosis 6.5 times and pneumonia eight times the average for the city as a whole." Smith went to great lengths to impress upon his listeners that these social conditions were correlated with "dwelling units unfit for habitation," by which he meant homes without indoor plumbing and structures in danger of collapse. Indeed, he pointed out how, across racial and ethnic identities that characterized Detroit's residents, those living in newly opened public housing complexes maintained clean homes in surroundings that remained

[10] Excerpted in Hasencamp, Oscar. 1912. *Ohio's Health*. 26-28.
[11] Josephine Fellows Gomon, Detroit's first housing secretary from 1933 to 1938, was instrumental in lobbying for the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934 and the Housing Act of 1937. The latter authorized federal funds for public housing. As part of Gomon's lobbying, she hosted Eleanor Roosevelt at the 1935 groundbreaking for the Brewster-Douglass Apartments, Detroit's first public housing project. Josephine Fellows Gomon Papers, Bentley Historical Library. Oversize Volumes 1 and 2.
[12] The work of Walker Evans and James Agee (2001) is one instance of this visibility.

lower in crime and disease prevalence. Smith used these instances to argue that transitioning people from "blighted areas" into sanitary living spaces at affordable rents was a core function of Detroit's municipal government[13].

The coherence of blight as a condition of unsafe, but inhabited, dwelling began to unravel in the decades after Smith made his address. In 1940, then mayor Edward Jeffries convened a "Blight Committee" of banking and insurance executives, leadership from skilled trades unions, and property developers[14]. The goal of this committee was to define a "a method of replanning residential areas for the prevention and correction of blight." While the problem of 'blight' that motivated committee members included "obsolete, dilapidated, and inadequate housing," they were principally concerned with "decreasing assessed values and tax revenues"[15]. In line with federal urban development programs, members of the Blight Committee noted how wealthier, (and while they may not have said it, white) city residents were increasingly moving to dwellings on the outskirts of Detroit rather than established neighborhoods near the city center[16]. Luxury dwellings were typically sold to new owners who converted them into smaller apartments with lower taxable values despite their exorbitant rents. The committee suggested these departures and conversions were primarily aesthetic problems resulting from the proximity of residential buildings to non-residential land uses[17]. When the committee released their "Program for Blight Elimination" in 1947, they noted how "the Detroit proposal is not in its essential a housing

[13] John W Smith, "Menace of the city slum." October 11, 1936. WWJ. Transcript in MS/Mayor's Papers. 1936:6.
[14] Mayor's Blight Committee and Executive Blight Committee. MS/Mayor's Papers, 1940 1:Blight
[15] Geo. F. Emery to Mayor's Replanning Committee Regarding Rehabilitation of Blighted Areas. November 12, 1940. MS/Mayor's Papers, 1940 1:Blight.
[16] Joseph Dodge to Edward Jeffries on "neighborhood conservation." January 6, 1941; Federal Housing Administration. 1940. "Requisites for Rehabilitation Projects for Mortgage Insurance." MS/Mayor 1940 1:Blight.
[17] Geo. F. Emery to Mayor's Replanning Committee Regarding Rehabilitation of Blighted Areas. November 12, 1940. MS/Mayor's Papers, 1940 1:Blight.

plan"[18]. Rather, their proposition was a zoning plan that would separate residential, commercial, and industrial activities with parks and large boulevards. In addition to dividing the functions of urban existence, this plan also sought to codify racial segregation by preventing Black Detroiters from living in newly constructed buildings.

In the postwar period, Detroit's city planners took note of how their repeated efforts to address blight, including "spot-treatments" that trained individual Detroiters in property maintenance techniques, as well as "renewal" programs that bulldozed entire neighborhoods, did not seem to be effective[19]. A 1962 report expressed concern that the municipality would be increasingly responsible for the demolition of empty buildings once absentee landlords stopped renting them to others. Elsewhere, I have shown how this concern has been realized (Caverly 2019). As one daily newspaper reported at the time, "The report, a three-year $60,000 study of the City's anatomy, shows that blight is eating away at Detroit faster than efforts to control it"[20]. Predictions were made that, in the absence of an all-out "war on blight," at least one-quarter of Detroit would be vacated by 1990 and the city's tax revenues would be entirely sapped. Indeed, subsequent decades saw demolition positioned as the sole possibility for arresting empty buildings and, with them, the threat of population loss and fiscal insolvency[21]. A 1989 report that listed 15,215 empty buildings in the city described itself as a "census of blight"[22]. The director of

[18] "The Detroit Plan: A Program for Blight Elimination" 1947. MS/Citizen's Housing and Planning Council of Detroit. 1947:5, "Detroit Plan."
[19] "Study of Urban Blight and Redevelopment in Detroit" (1955) Detroit City Plan Commission; "Detroit: The New City, Summary Report of the Community Renewal Program" (1966). Mayor's Committee for Community Renewal; "Residential Blight Survey, Technical Report 12" (1965), Community Renewal Program; "Commercial Blight Survey, Technical Report 10" (1965). WSU Purdy-Kresge Libraries.
[20] "Map War on Blight, City Urged." (1962) *Detroit Free Press*. July 8:3A.
[21] A Blight Prevention Strategy for Mack Avenue. (1980) Gerald Luedtke and Associates. University of Michigan Libraries; "Cause and Cure of City Blight" Ratliff, Rick (1980) "Dead end ahead for Mack Ave. blight?" *Detroit Free Press.* January 4: 4C.
[22] Reckless Abandonment: Census of Blight (1989) *Detroit Free Press.* July 9: 1A-9A, Interview with Conley Abrams (1989) *Detroit Free Press.* July 9:11A

Detroit's public works unit responded with plans that would "clean up the blight of vacant buildings" by demolishing 3,000 structures per year.

Despite hundreds of thousands of building demolitions in Detroit since the 1950s, empty buildings and allegations as to their blighted condition have been pervasive features of Detroit's physical and political landscapes. In their block-by-block survey of Detroit in 2014, Claude and a hundred other workers on temporary contracts identified seventy-eight thousand buildings as "Unoccupied" of "Possibly Unoccupied" in addition to six thousand lots covered with trash. It was these structures that the Blight Removal Taskforce Report identified as "blight." While the taskforce positioned these threats as fundamentally emergent — akin to a cancer, radioactive materials, and infectious disease — their proclamation was only the most recent iteration of an ongoing presentation of blight as a threat to the existence of Detroit's residents as individuals and to the populace on a municipal scale. The taskforce's report linked the presence of 'blighted conditions,' whether as empty buildings or the accumulations of illicitly disposed waste that sometimes appear on vacated land, to elevated rates of crime, mental health problems, asthma, arson, tax delinquency, and other concerns[23]. While such correlations are reflective of those made by urban planners and public health researchers, the taskforce and its boosters gave correlations causal power with suggestions that demolitions would reverse statistical trendlines[24]. They did not[25]. The stubborn persistence of poverty and racialized health disparities following

[23] Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce (2014) "Every Neighborhood Has a Future and It Doesn't Include Blight"
[24] Reports commissioned by private companies that funded the Blight Removal Taskforce include "Every Neighborhood Has a Future," and "Estimating Home Equity Impacts from Rapid, Targeted Residential Demolition in Detroit, MI" (2015) Dynamo Metrics. These reports were released with press releases noting how "Blight Elimination preserved over $400,000,000 of housing value in Detroit that otherwise would have been lost." Meanwhile, academic analyses were often much more tempered, and noted how demolitions sometimes had negative impacts (Hackworth 2016).
[25] Demolition proponents contracted researchers from Michigan State University's Land Policy Institute "about the economic and social impacts of the Blight Elimination". While researchers found that demolitions reduced property crimes like burglary and arson, this was commonsense because demolitions eliminated the physical buildings necessary for property crimes to exist. Demolitions were not linked to increased property values or health outcomes

demolitions was a testament to the impossibility of addressing social inequity by only removing the physical structures that manifest it.

My intent in identifying how recent efforts at 'blight elimination' fail to achieve their stated ends is not to question the underlying logic that boundaries between people, buildings, and processes are necessarily porous. People who live adjacent to empty buildings experience them as bodily impositions through smells, fires, and other sensory distress (Caverly 2019). But my goal here has been to show how allegations that empty buildings are dangerous manifestations of 'blight' invert an administrative concept designed to capture the dangers posed by inhabited built environments. Even when turned inside out, though, conditions identified as blight remain contagious. An essential part of blight's assumed danger is its capacity to infect the people and buildings with which it comes into contact. As such, present-day proposals for "blight elimination" through vacant building removal bear little resemblance to early twentieth-century efforts to address "blighted areas" by shifting their inhabitants into other living arrangements. Across these moments, however, administrators justified strategies for reconfiguring urban space by positioning social conditions as immanent from the built environment.

Service Provision

As part of the City of Detroit's entrance into municipal bankruptcy proceedings in 2013, the state-appointed 'emergency financial manager' declared the city was experiencing a "blight emergency"[26]. The order estimated Detroit was the location of 80,000 vacant buildings exclaiming, "This blight is an ongoing health and safety risk to every resident." The proposed

among surrounding residents. This study was never released, allegedly because its results did not meet the expectations of those who paid for it.

[26] Emergency Manager Order 15: Order Suspending Certain City Wrecking Requirements to Address Blight. August 29, 2013.

means of alleviating this risk was to suspend oversight of demolition by municipal regulators and delegate their responsibilities to state offices. Funds allocated toward blight elimination were also a thorny concern throughout the city's bankruptcy proceedings. The judicial "plan of adjustment" that released the municipality from court supervision made good on promised payments to secured creditors, including outstanding bills for demolitions, by slashing public employee salaries, pensions, and benefits. This plan also devoted increasing portions of the municipal budget to demolition funding rather than other city services, including police, fire, and public health[27]. Those who crafted the plan of adjustment asserted that the effects of "blight elimination" on the lived environments of Detroit residents would offset any reductions in other areas of municipal care[28].

For onlookers, including Detroit's emergency manager, the $18 billion in liabilities that Detroit brought into bankruptcy represented a failure of elected officials to make 'tough decisions' when managing municipal purse strings[29]. For those who lived in Detroit, however, the effects of scarce resources had been a fact of life for decades. The municipality has operated austerity budgets for more than half a century, and the first round of across the board reductions in the municipal workforce began in 1973. By 2012, this included the complete closure of the municipal health department. Audits of city agencies regularly found they lacked adequate numbers to complete annual building inspections or updates to property tax assessments required by law[30]. Deferred maintenance on publicly held roads, parks, and other collective infrastructures became evident in yawning potholes and broken playground equipment. Road resurfacing, street

[27] Detroit Four Year Financial Plans, 2014-2019, 2019-2022.
[28] Expert Report of Martha EM Kopacz Regarding the Feasibility of the Detroit Plan of Adjustment. *In re: City of Detroit, Michigan, Debtor*. (Bankr.E.D.Mich (2013)).
[29] Nolan Finley, a conservative commentator at *The Detroit News*, did so in praising Orr's declaration of the 'blight emergency.'
[30] Office of the Auditor General, Performance Audit of the Finance Department Assessments Division. July 2008-June 2011.

cleaning, and park upkeep occurred in select neighborhoods and during election years. These were forms of spatial and temporal triage that my interlocutors recalled as happening for several decades.

In conditions of financial distress, public services are often distributed on the basis of entrepreneurial, rather than universal citizenship (Kinder 2016). For instance, after years of deferred maintenance, by the early 2000s, many of Detroit's streetlights were inoperable. Blown bulbs, corroded lampposts, and copper wiring that made for quick profits at scrap metal yards ensured some sectors of the city were pitch black at night. The project to replace all of the city's lighting with lower cost LEDs also reduced the number of lights in service. In the years after bankruptcy, some blocks experienced a shift from three or four lights to a single lamp whose pale oval glow barely reached ten feet in either direction. When residents complained, they were informed that crews would be dispatched to install additional lamps if neighbors would pay the installation costs. Alternatively, complainants were pointed to projects where Detroiters lined sidewalks with solar-powered yard lamps to compensate for inadequate municipal provisions. While non-profits celebrated people who took service provisions into their own hands as "Tapping into Detroit's Do-It-Yourself Spirit!" not everyone shared their enthusiasm, especially middle-class residents[31].

Infrastructural retrenchments like the reconfiguration of Detroit's streetlighting characterize contemporary urban policies in which cost reductions can entail eliminating even those services that are most necessary to supporting human life, including water, housing, and waste disposal (Anand 2012; Fennell 2011; Gille 2007). Arguments to fund demolition rather

[31] Sociologist Jackson Bartlett (2017) has written extensively on ethics of resisting municipal austerity among Detroit's Black middle-class residents.

than other services assert that eliminating empty buildings will be a panacea to other problems[32]. They echo a 1970 description of the municipal demolition program. As an assistant to then mayor Roman Gribbs wrote, "In the hands of those who administer [demolition] at present, it performs an important social services function"[33]. Since this period, the identification and demolition of 'blighted buildings' has been billed as an essential municipal service[34]. Throughout, the sustained presence of tens of thousands of structures in the demolition queue belied rosy proclamations from politicians and program administrators that the total elimination of empty buildings was only a few years away. As one long-serving city councilor told me, "Citizens want us to take down the blight. We at the city certainly want to take it down. But there just isn't the money. Never the money to do it." Even though demolition efforts siphoned off resources that might have gone to other services, the ongoing production of empty buildings ensured that demand for building removals always outstripped abilities to provide them.

Mavis, a Black woman in her sixties, captures the negotiations for municipal services demanded by scarce resources. When I met her, she had recently retired from her position as a human resources specialist at a metal stamping plant in the nearby suburbs, and declared the fenced in rear yard of her home in the east side Morningside neighborhood, "The only retirement getaway I'm going to get." Her immediate block was densely inhabited, with each of the brick and siding clad bungalows sporting neatly manicured lawns. In a sight that typified Detroit's uneven geographies of inhabitation, however, the blocks abutting theirs bore signs of departed residents. The open windows of two apparently empty houses peered into Mavis' yard from over

[32] Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce (2014) "Every Neighborhood Has a Future and It Doesn't Include Blight"; Expert Report of Martha EM Kopacz Regarding the Feasibility of the Detroit Plan of Adjustment. *In re: City of Detroit, Michigan, Debtor*. (Bankr.E.D.Mich (2013))
[33] Joseph Vitt to George Romney (1970) "Status of the Dangerous Buildings Program." MS/Gribbs, 1970: Blight,
[34] Dixon, Jennifer and McConnell, Darci (1997) "HUD hands Detroit a $160 Million Gift Days Before Election" *Detroit Free Press;* Bing, David (2010) State of the City Address.

the top of the wood slats of the privacy fence her sons had installed the previous summer. Just after they completed the installation, one of the houses had caught fire, scorching the fence. The smell of burned wood and melted plastic overpowered that of the roses planted in that corner of the yard.

When demolition crews arrived, Mavis excitedly called to invite me over to observe the proceedings. We watched as an excavator operator made quick work of the timber frame structures. Within a matter of hours, the basement cavities had been scooped clean. However, the removals revealed the burned-out wreckage of yet another empty building across the street. As the team of workers began to load their excavator up onto a flatbed, Mavis darted out her rear gate to ask if they would mind tearing down the pile of charred plastic siding as well. After the workers explained to Mavis and I that they only had instructions to knock down the two structures, she returned to the porch and stated sternly, "Now, you've got to use your connections to fight that blight for me. Go tell the folks down at the city that they missed one." I regularly received requests like this, as my interlocutors were certain that I, a white researcher affiliated with a major university, should be able to apply pressure to the municipality, non-profits, and other institutions in ways they, typically working and middle-class folks of color, could not. Much to Mavis and others' disappointment, my efforts to generate enough bureaucratic motion to bring a demolition crew were as unsuccessful as their own calls to city councilors and building inspectors. We all received boilerplate responses about limited funds.

Mavis and her neighbors did ultimately succeed in getting the dwelling leveled after they contacted reporters from local television stations, whose evening news broadcasts regularly carried stories about the "danger" and "menace" that "blight" and "blighted property" posed to

neighbors[35]. The soundbite from Mavis that played as a camera panned over the blistered siding of the house in question is representative of what tends to be said in these bulletins. Editors sutured Mavis' discussion of how a neighborhood child had fallen through a loose floorboard while playing in the house together with her final statement, "I am just here calling on the mayor as a citizen, taxpayer, and Detroit resident. This blight menaces our neighborhoods. It is a threat to our children. It needs to come down." Shortly after a reporter interviewed Mavis, spokespeople from several city departments gave their own interviews stating that the building in question had not been demolished due to a "contractor error." When a contractor came to tear it down the following week, a representative from the mayor's office even knocked on Mavis' door, thanking her "for being a champion in the important fight to rid Detroit of blight, once and for all."

It is worth noting how Mavis did not merely prevail upon Detroit's mayor as a 'citizen,' or 'resident,' but also as a 'taxpayer' in the city he was elected to govern. She was not alone in this formulation, and identifying as a 'taxpayer' featured in many complaints I heard about municipal services and their absence, even from the poorest of Detroit's residents. As many pointed out, they contributed to collective revenues whenever they earned wages, purchased groceries, or paid rent. This is distinct from typical claimants of the 'right to the city' which rely on bodily presence within a jurisdiction, whether as citizenship or residency, as the vehicle for rights (Harvey 2012; Kanna 2010; McFarlane 2008). The addition of 'taxpayer' is partly notable because of the legacy in American politics, and those of the Global North in general, of categories of 'taxpayers' and 'citizens' being mobilized to cast out non-white people (Clarke

[35] See: Dahl, Ronnie. 2016. 86-year old-old Detroit woman living between two vacant houses worried for her safety. August 16. Detroit: WXYZ. https://tinyurl.com/yyh3akly; Colthorp, Jason. 2017. Homeowner surrounded by blight on Detroit's east side. September 25. Detroit: WDIV. https://tinyurl.com/yxe2p6su

2013; Ong 2003). In the United States, recent decades have seen 'respect' for these identities fuel cuts to social spending that harm already vulnerable people in conjunction with increases in state support to the already wealthy (Adams 2012; Blyth 2013; Peck 2014). So, when Mavis and others make demands of the municipal state on the basis of economic constituency, they inhabit subject positions that have, at other conjunctures, been leveraged to erode the political imagination for public services.

Local Controls

Spectacular demands made through mass media may have brought momentary action from Detroit's municipal government, but they produced little in the way of durable attention. A few weeks after Mavis was spotlighted as a "champion in the fight to rid Detroit of blight," the television channels that had carried her complaints declined to return to the block where she had made them. Lou, a friend of Mavis' called the same tip lines to complain about a former corner store that loomed over the corner where she caught the bus for the half mile ride to and from Mavis' house. Mavis' neighbors joined in, lodging their own reports about how, despite the windows and doors being barricaded with metal covers, they feared the building's presence. One described to a production assistant how the structure blocked light from the nearby streetlamp, and cast the bus stop in a quadrant of darkness. Gesticulating wildly while pacing across the kitchen with her corded phone pressed to her ear, she recounted how she had narrowly escaped attempted purse snatchings by hitting the assailants with a walking stick she carried for this purpose. Producers politely refused the story leads, with one explaining that she needed to "spread the blight fighting love around." Lou, Mavis, and her neighbors were encouraged to call back if the building were still there in the next year.

For her part, Mavis was incensed, and resolved "to get more involved in holding the city accountable for removing blight." It was in this interest that I found myself bundled into Mavis' Dodge minivan on a weekday evening with her, Lou, Lou's husband Theo, and Shanique, Mavis' neighbor who, like me, was half the age of anyone else in the car. Our destination was the fellowship hall of a non-denominational church for a training on "City resources and processes for blight elimination." The van's collection of passengers was representative of the people who joined us for several hours that night. Most attendees were Black women in their sixties and seventies. Some were Black men of around the same age. A handful were younger Black men and women around Shanique's age. Several children ran in and out of a nursery adjacent to the fellowship hall, mostly to pick from the dinner spread of chicken shawarma. The only nonblack people in attendance were me and a representative from the mayor's office who introduced Mitch, a building inspector employed by the municipal Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environment Department, or BSEED.

Black and middle-aged, Mitch described how he was a lifelong Detroiter "proud to work for the department that is doing all we can to combat blight here in the city." Indeed, as a department, BSEED resulted from decades of budgetary consolidation such that its expansive portfolio contained most of the functions associated with municipal red tape. BSEED employees were tasked with conducting plumbing, electrical, and elevator safety inspections, enforcing industrial pollution and waste disposal ordinances, registering rental properties with certificates of occupancy, issuing business licenses, and authorizing building permits, as well as posting stop-work orders and fines when they find these processes have been violated. The group of inspectors that Mitch worked alongside, which included permanent municipal employees and temporary contractors, were specifically responsible for maintaining a list of blighted buildings

and processing demolition permits.

I was familiar with the processes of 'blight elimination' that Mitch described that evening, as I had observed him and several colleagues as they practiced these procedures in real time. Following allegations of blight that poured into BSEED over the phone, through email, and in-person, an inspector would be dispatched to document the exterior condition of the site in question. Cases of 'non-structural blight,' such as bulk waste dumped on a vacated lot, were referred to the city's privatized waste haulers for pickup. For buildings, inspectors' determination of whether or not a something constituted 'structural blight' were shaped by whether it was "an active nuisance" to those around it[36]. BSEED operating procedures defined active nuisance narrowly as buildings that were either "vacant and open to trespass" or those "in danger of immediate collapse." For buildings owned by the municipal government, an inspection report showing that either of these conditions existed could result in a demolition within several months. For those not in municipal ownership, demolition would require that city attorneys assemble the photographs and written accounts generated by BSEED inspectors into a legal demand that a judge classify the structure as 'blighted.' If that occurred, ownership could be transferred to the municipality[37].

As part of the question and answer session following Mitch's presentation, Mavis, Lou, Shanique, and Theo pressed him about the liquor store that stood near the bus stop. Theo expressed their frustrations well when he asked, "What do we have to do to get this thing blighted, or nuisanced, or whatever it is? Gone." In response to probes for information from

[36] As a legal paradigm, nuisance is foundational to environmental politics, since it situates private property within the terrain of public activity. Allegations of nuisance have been found in Anglo common law and statutory procedures since the fourteenth century (Chew and Kellaway 2016).

[37] Precedent setting cases in this regard includes *Moore v. City of Detroit* (159 Mich. App. 199 (1987)), *McNamara et al. v. Wynn* (Mich. Third Judicial Court (1999)), *GRDC et al. v. the Angel Group* (Mich. Third Judicial Court (2012)); *Duggan et al. v. 16250 Indiana* (Mich. Third Judicial Court (2014)). In each, the appeals of private owners were denied. See also Caverly 2019.

Mitch, members of my group discussed how store's entrances and windows were fitted with metal plates and that its cinderblock structure seemed thoroughly secure. Mitch gave a sigh as he replied, "So, I obviously haven't seen the spot, but if it's like what you say. If you call BSEED about one of those buildings, we'll send someone out, they will write a report finding no blight violations, and then move along." Mavis marched us out to the van shortly after this response.

The interaction Mavis and her neighbors had with Mitch crystalizes how the concept of blight awkwardly sutures together vernacular and administrative knowledge. Writing on empty buildings in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, anthropologist Sean Mallin (2016) details how competing definitions of blight align competing groups of citizens, municipal employees, non-profit workers, and observers. A building that certain networks of neighbors and administrative staff might experience as in need of immediate removal is, for others, a place of historic heritage or a potential home in need of preservation. Legal theorists note similar operations in other localities (Goodin 2007; Pritchett 2003). Indeed, campaigns for historic preservation assert that buildings slated for demolition are "vacant but not blighted" in attempts to disentangle the category of empty buildings from that of blighted ones[38].

In Detroit, frustrations with the relatively narrow municipal definition of blighted buildings sometimes produced calls to change them. This included a petition signed by representatives of several block clubs, including Mavis', and delivered to directors of municipal departments tasked with coordinating urban development. Among their demands was a point that read, "Blight removal should be decided by the community." During a meeting organized in response to the petition, an agency staffer's finger lingered on this line before he replied, "Don't

[38] After the Motor City Mapping project, Detroit's historic preservation activists began their own efforts to catalogue buildings in historic districts, which they argued should be restored rather than demolished. They organized this under the moniker "Vacant not Blighted," which had been borrowed from historic preservation initiatives in New Orleans and other cities.

worry, we don't just demolish every building. We are preserving the ones we can for future use." A woman around Mavis' age replied, "It's not just that you're not saving enough buildings. You're leaving up buildings that are blight. Ones that have been boarded for years and nothing has happened. We don't want that in our neighborhoods. We want them down yesterday. We want to control what happens in our communities." Municipal administrators may have been equipped to defend against activists who alleged they were demolishing too many buildings, but they were caught off-guard by the allegation that too few were coming down.

In explicit terms, this petition demanded local control over the designation of blight. The sentiments expressed by its proponents are consistent with those of political theorists and others who note how regulatory paradigms obscure complexity within their jurisdictions (Scott 1999; J. Reno 2011). At the same time, however, when regulations are situated within hyper-local geographies, they tend to reinforce segregation (Valverde 2011). Blight designations in Detroit demonstrate the tension between these modes of operation. Public Act 344, the State of Michigan statute on "Blighted Area Rehabilitation" reads, "[T]he conditions that constitute blight are to be broadly construed to permit a municipality to make an early identification of problems and to take early remedial action to correct a demonstrated pattern of deterioration and to prevent a worsening of blight conditions" (MCL 125.72). While this statute was updated as recently as 2013, this passage has been consistent since the act was implemented in 1945 in response to lobbying by Detroit's 'Blight Committee.' Joseph Wolff, director of Detroit's Department of Buildings from 1930 to 1958, pushed against such a broad definition, writing "The terms 'blighted area' and 'dilapidated dwelling' [are] devoid of a clear definition and leave plenty of latitude for one's judgment as to the degree involved. Whatever area may seem blighted to some

person, may appear perfectly normal to another"[39]. Despite Wolff's protests, the flexibility desired by property developers and their collaborators was codified in law.

The legacy of PA 344 is written in Detroit's landscape. Since 1945, declarations that particular neighborhoods were 'blighted' have been used to clear land for the construction of luxury neighborhoods, parks, public housing, medical centers, university facilities, and manufacturing facilities. These 'redevelopment' projects were sometimes surgically crafted around predominantly Black neighborhoods (Sugrue 2005; J. M. Thomas 2013). In their review of subsequent proposals for blight elimination, municipal administrators reflected how they were displacing Black Detroiters from districts that were in adequate condition when compared to exclusively white neighborhoods where residents lived without plumbing and heat[40]. Dorothy and Claude's commiseration about family who had been "blighted" from their homes is reflective of how "blight removal" is sometimes discussed as synonymous with "Black removal"[41]. It was only in the late 1990s, amidst the fallout from the highly-publicized, forced sale of homes by middle-class Black families to make way for an upscale housing development, that city administrators adopted procedures that limited identifications of 'blight' to buildings that were open to the elements or in danger of immediate collapse[42]. As such, when Mavis and other Detroiters chafed against the inability of Mitch and other BSEED inspectors to declare boarded-up buildings to be 'blighted,' they were encountering administrative restrictions enacted in hopes of eliminating conceptual flexibility as a tool for antiblack displacement.

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[39] Joseph Wolff to Edward Jeffries, January 3, 1941. "Our Housing Problem." MS/Mayor's 1941 2:"Housing"
[40] Emery, George (1945) "The Problems of Large Cities" *Planning 1945*: p.52 ; "Master Plan Technical Report on Areas Proposed for Redevelopment." MS/City Plan Commission Box 8.
[41] Such turns of phrase draw from earlier experiences of "urban renewal" as "negro removal." For more, see Detroit Urban League, Research Department (1967) *A Profile of the Detroit Negro, 1959-1967.* University of Michigan Library.
[42] Dixon, Jennifer (1997) "Displaced residents cry foul." *Detroit Free Press.* October 27:1A,4A.

Public Authority

For the past decade, Detroit's municipal government has coordinated an annual "Motor City Makeover" (MCM). Using corporate and philanthropic donations, municipal employees purchase gloves, trash bags, plywood, and hand tools for distribution to neighborhood groups and non-profit agencies who use them to gather garbage, clear blocked storm drains, and board up empty buildings. When it first occurred in 2002, MCM centralized municipal programs enlisting citizens in neighborhood maintenance, some of which had been ongoing since 1955. Organized around four consecutive weekends, staggered events allowed administrative flexibility in depositing supplies and retrieving the collected masses of leaves, grass clippings, sofas, and even boats. It also ensured that elected politicians were regular features on local newscasts and social media timelines during this period. Nevertheless, even though MCM was presented with much fanfare, I sometimes encountered aggravation among Detroiters who participated. As we lugged chunks of concrete weighing at least fifty pounds from the location where someone had dumped them behind an empty house on the far west side, one of Mitch's neighbors grumbled to me, "I don't understand why we get out here all excited every year. We are doing the work the city is supposed to be doing for us. Couldn't Mitch get someone to take care of this [stuff]?" Even neighborhoods that might be expected to benefit from the familiarity of Detroit's municipal workers were left to their own devices.

People who were intimately connected to municipal workers were not the only ones to bristle at performing maintenance that they considered a municipal responsibility. Consider how during an MCM event on Lou and Theo's block on the east side, Theo and I were tasked with cutting pieces of plywood and fitting them over the windows and doors of empty buildings. In an unsurprisingly gendered division of labor, we were joined in this work by other men from the

neighborhood. Meanwhile, Lou organized women and young children to paint the boards after they had been secured[43]. Following their interactions with Mitch almost a year before, Lou and Theo took care to ensure that only those openings visible from the street were closed over. Before we moved to the next structure, one of the pair would use a mobile phone to photograph open doors or windows on the rear of each building, noting the address on a clipboard marked "open to trespass." In this way, the conditions of empty buildings may have been 'beautified,' but they were not transformed beyond the definition of 'blight' claimed by municipal practice. Shanique, who had painted plywood window coverings to resemble windows with flower-filled window boxes, recalled the effort, "The community has done our part, […]. We've brought the eyes and hammers, now it's the city's job to tear down this blight." Even though demands of entrepreneurial dispositions may be integral to the upkeep of public space in the context of austerity, what geographer Ananya Roy (2009) refers to as "civic governmentality" is not inhabited without question or complaint.

In their effort to hold 'the city' to account, Shanique, Theo, Lou, and I again piled into Mavis' van and headed to the BSEED "Dangerous Buildings" office on the fourth floor of Detroit's downtown city hall. We brought a printed document that listed each of the twenty-four empty buildings in their neighborhood, each of them with a corresponding photo showing easy entry. A desk clerk took the report and ushered us into a nearby conference room. Fifteen minutes later, we were joined by Mitch, who — to much surprise — recognized the group. He had brought the report with him, and nodded along as Mavis and the others explained how they purposefully left openings so the buildings could be "blighted and demolished." Mitch sighed before replying, "Thank you all for coming, and for all of this helpful information. You have no

[43] This is a common practice that has been described in terms of a guerilla "defensive architecture" (Kinder 2014).

idea how valuable it is to know what things look like on the ground. But there is nothing we at the city can do about this blight now, it belongs to the DLBA." With that, he passed a manila file folder filled with computer printouts over to Shanique. These printouts identified "Detroit Land Bank Authority" as the owner of the buildings in question. Scrawled on the folder was the address for the DLBA on the upper floors of a skyscraper several blocks away. Handing the bound document back to Mavis, Mitch gave us directions to the DLBA office, shepherding us out the door with, "Sorry guys, I wish there was more we could do, but our hands are tied."

Because Mavis had already paid for a full afternoon of parking in a private structure, our group followed Mitch's directions to the lobby of an art-deco building. Once there, we recounted our interest in visiting the Detroit Land Bank Authority to a private security officer who directed us to sign-in on a visitor log filled with names with "DLBA" listed under "stated purpose." This same officer waved us into an elevator that delivered us into a nondescript waiting room where another desk clerk listened as Shanique presented the bound report and described our group's shared desire for the buildings listed inside to be demolished. When Shanique had finished, the clerk thanked us for "bringing this information to the DLBA's attention," but noted there was no one available to meet with us at that time. Instead, she invited us to return to the organization's monthly board meeting in several weeks.

While Mavis and Shanique were unable to return later, Lou and Theo assured them they were available. At the appointed time, I filed into a windowed meeting room with the couple and several of their neighbors. We filled out a quadrant of a meeting table around which almost twenty people were gathered. The meeting commenced, with an announcement from a woman who identified herself as "board chair of the Detroit Land Bank Authority." She gestured to our group, stating "For those visitors, our purpose is to manage public, vacant, and blighted property

in the city." Five people then introduced themselves by name as the land bank's board of directors, and five others were referred to collectively as "DLBA staff." From here, the meeting proceeded to 'public comment,' beginning with Shanique's husband, JC. A lifelong neighborhood resident, he had taken the afternoon off from his job as a security guard to attend the meeting, and told of the worries he and Shanique faced letting their four-year old daughter play outside due to the empty buildings next door. "Please, for the sake of my baby," he beseeched those seated at the table, "we need the city to bring this blight down." Other neighbors made similar pleas.

Figure 9 A meeting between the DLBA board of directors, DLBA staff, and Detroit residents requesting demolitions. Photo by author

When JC and his neighbors finished their two-minute allotments, the DLBA board chair thanked them for the information before moving the meeting to its regularly scheduled business. We listened for forty minutes as the panel received staff reports of demolition tallies from the past month, learned that the DLBA had just over 96,000 parcels in its 'inventory,' and approved

selling a handful of structures to a developer who would demolish some and renovate others them. Several acres of empty land were also sold to a farming enterprise. Part way through the agenda, the board chair announced the end of the public meeting and the beginning of a 'closed session' to discuss lawsuits pending against the DLBA. Lou, Theo, and their neighbors were directed out of the conference room and into a waiting elevator without a response as to when demolitions might be forthcoming. It would be more than two years before excavators would visit Lou and Theo's block.

In the moment, I did not understand what had happened. Mitch, a representative of the municipal department charged with identifying blight had agreed that the cases Lou and her neighbors presented him with met the arbitrary standard employed by the municipality. This was a standard I had observed be mobilized to fell structures, no matter who owned them. And yet, Mitch, a BSEED employee, could give no indication about when buildings might be demolished, despite this being one of the functions of his aspect of the municipal bureaucracy. Doing so required trips to offices and meetings in another building where the business cards, letterhead, website, and other identifying documents bore no reference to the municipal government.

Alicia, the consultant who had helped organize the 2014 Blight Elimination Taskforce, helped me parse the difference. She had become a DLBA employee over the course of my fieldwork, and over the din of happy hour at a west side dive bar explained,

> The DLBA is a non-profit authority formed in 2009 to deal with blight. Through an agreement with the City of Detroit, since 2014 we've been handling demolitions and property management functions that used to be in city departments. We work with many partners at the city and report to the mayor, but DLBA staff are not city employees.

Between 2009 and 2018, the DLBA acquired title to 109,853 parcels that would have previously been held in the city planning office. Totaling more than a full quarter of the city's land area, the

DLBA was eligible to collect fifty percent of the taxes during the five years after it sold individual parcels. While $9 million of the authority's $80 million annual budget was drawn from such sales, $15 million came in the form of a direct subsidy from the City of Detroit, and the balance was comprised of federal demolition grants redirected from the municipality. With a staff of around 150, the DLBA had approximately fifteen times the staff and eight times the budgetary allocation of municipal departments that had previously performed the same tasks.

The transfer of property ownership and blight management out of Detroit's municipal government remained out of sight and unremarked by many. Media coverage often described DLBA employees as representing 'the city'[44]. The subtlety of this shift was, nevertheless, apparent in the margins of reports produced by municipal government offices. Charts, maps, and other spatial depictions of Detroit's landscape increasingly bore the DLBA logo where previous versions had referenced a now defunct municipal cadastral office. When city firefighters contemplated a reorganization of department resources and vehicles to ensure faster response times, it was the DLBA who provided maps with the locations of recently reported fires. Before the Parks and Recreation Department could turn a cluster of empty lots at the center of an otherwise densely populated neighborhood into a new park, they needed the DLBA board to approve a land transfer and use agreement with the municipal government. In this way, even though the DLBA was initially endowed with the ability to acquire, sell, and demolish properties through an act of the municipal government, as inventories, expertise, and budgets were organized outside city hall, the public authority became both a reservoir of territory outside of municipal control. In just a few years, it became indispensable as the location of spatial capacities necessary for the execution of what were routine municipal functions.

[44] As one reporter told me, "We all thought the DLBA was just a new city department."

Historian Gail Radford (2013) describes how the institutional form of public authorities emerged in the late nineteenth century as a way of accumulating the capital necessary for infrastructure projects. Today, public authorities manage systems like roads, bridges, hospitals, transit systems and parking lots in ways that are legally separate from the jurisdictions in which they operate[45]. As Radford details, this institutional form offered a "path of least resistance" (15) for navigating progressive and conservative critics who shared a frustration with revenue generation from government activity[46]. To such criticisms, which are oriented around the financial dimensions of public obligations, we might add concerns about transparent and identifiable governance. Public authorities like the DLBA restructure the institutional and physical geographies of government such that they obscure where citizens must go for redress. As we have seen, when Detroit residents appealed to City of Detroit administrators for the demolition of particular buildings, they found themselves rebuffed. This was not due to the callousness of municipal employees. Rather, it was made possible through a system of land management that shifted the busted windows, collapsed foundations, and unoccupied buildings of 'blight' beyond the offices and purview of municipal governance.

Fractured Sovereignties

After several months when disgruntled Detroiters used DLBA board meetings as spaces

[45] One illuminating example is New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority. While this authority operates the buses and subways of "New York City Transit," it is a public authority controlled by the governor of New York State, not the New York City Mayor or City Council.

[46] Despite recurring legal challenges, the operation of public authorities has been regularly upheld by state and federal courts of varying ideological persuasions. In Michigan, the formation of public authorities is enabled by a 1937 case in which the City of Detroit joined with Wayne County to construct a set of four solid waste incinerators. Detroit residents had recently voted down a proposal for these incinerators, but the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in favor of the joint city-county project, noting the necessity of disposing of household waste (*Bacon v. City of Detroit* 282Mich.150 (1937)). Similarly, challenges to the formation of land bank authorities were dismissed due to the need to address "the public purpose of restoring blighted properties" (Mich.Ct.App 12-009669-CH)

to protest the authority's refusal to demolish buildings in their neighborhoods, a sign appeared on the front desk of the authority's office suite. The white computer printout was easy to miss among calendars and other promotional materials aimed at selling property.

> *Public Notice:*
> *Property owned by the Detroit Land Bank is not open to the public.*
>
> *Access to or entrance upon such property without the written consent of the Detroit Land Bank Authority constitutes trespass, and is a violation of Michigan Law.*
>
> *Trespassers may be subject to civil and criminal penalties.*

Recall how the DLBA board chair opened a meeting by describing the authority as responsible for managing publicly-owned buildings and territory. And yet, this sign marks how places under DLBA control are closed to public access except under specific circumstances. Unlike the hallways of Detroit's municipal offices, where any person who can pass through a metal detector without incident can roam through hearing rooms and public meetings, entering the DLBA domain requires explicit recognition and conforming to a politics of respectability. While city hall protests are tolerated, if not always welcomed or effective at changing administrative outcomes, the notice appears to confirm the critique that public authorities serve as a defacto means of privatization[47].

Contemporary observers of governance often reflect on the privatization of public services in contrast with moments of social democracy characterized by robust provisioning (Maskovsky and Brash 2014; L. Wacquant 2012). In the United States, the period since the 1970s is identified as one of neoliberalisation in which 'reforms' were made to public sector organization through repeated service reductions, specifically to programs supporting the health,

[47] This is a persistent critique of the form of the public authority (Walsh 1983). As one close observer of Detroit politics noted for me, DLBA boundary policing was similar to what happened when the city's electric generating station and water treatment plants were stripped from municipal control. Before, they were open to public access tours, but afterwards, even venturing into parking lots would draw warnings from security personnel.

education, and shelter of less privileged people (Adams 2012; Hackworth 2006; Harvey 2005b). Set against decades that saw the gradual assembly of various welfare apparatuses intent on fostering the wellbeing of the 'city,' 'state' and 'nation,' the elimination of those apparatuses appears less as a change in policy, and more as a shredding of imagined totalities through which social care has been enabled (Collier 2011; N. Rose 1996). Geographers Steve Graham and Simon Marvin (2002), poetically describe this as a "splintering" of shared resources, landscapes, and services appear purposefully splintered away from coherent, public management.

We could interpret the shift of blight elimination activities from various City of Detroit departments into the DLBA within this paradigm; yet another instance where previously coherent and transparent systems have been reorganized to make them inaccessible. We might temper this view, however, by questioning for whom governance was ever not splintered to begin with. The twentieth-century definitions of blight as a prerequisite for urban renewal were antiblack by design (Hunter 2013). In Detroit, Black workers, families, church congregations, and other collectives actively resisted efforts to displace them from neighborhoods. Their pleas to white municipal officials and elected leaders sometimes elicited expressions of sympathy, but did nothing to stop the evisceration of the few neighborhoods in which non-white Detroiters were allowed to live without fear of harassment (Miller 2015). The most telling example came at the behest of *The Detroit Plan* published by Detroit's Blight Committee. Between 1946 and 1951, the City of Detroit Department of Buildings organized the eviction of 2,000 Black families from twenty acres immediately east of the central business district. Only 600 of the 1000 families promised public housing units were ever able to move into them. Most others found themselves in worse housing conditions than they previously occupied[48]. It was not until 1963 that private

[48] Mowitz, Robert and Wright, Deil (1962) *Profile of a Metropolis.* Pp 30-44. University of Michigan Libraries.

developers finished the first of what became 900 units of new housing that exclusively targeted white, middle-class families[49]. Simply put, suggesting that service provisioning has only recently been splintered ignores how destructively uneven projects are the constitutive logic of racist oppression.

This is not to argue that contemporary regimes of neoliberal governance are somehow identical to those rendered by racist social democracy. Rather, following 'blight' charts lines of connection across temporalities of political organization. It is a concept of technocratic environmental management forged through early-twentieth-century progressive aspirations that remains salient in the present. Statutes written to address the 'blighted areas' of crowded housing and exorbitant rents almost a century ago prodded actions in that moment as much as they laid the groundwork for attempts to remove empty buildings from the city in the present. Otherwise put, declarations of Detroit's 2013 blight emergency and the ability of the DLBA to operate as an obscure bureaucracy descends from the Blight Committee's lobbying for blight as a statutory lever necessary to implement the *Detroit Plan*. This line of descent is suggestive of just how the administrative apparatus of antiblackness has been elaborated into one that denies clarity to citizens in general, regardless of race.

In this vein, it would be quite elegant to argue that tracing the enactment of 'blight' from Detroit's twentieth-century into the twenty-first clarifies how control over municipal environments has been entirely transformed from institutions of public government into alternate organizations like public authorities and private corporations. Such an argument would be consistent with assertions that forms of twenty-first century liberalism are distinguished from others by what David Madden (2010) refers to as "publicity without democracy." However, this

[49] Wolf, Eleanor and Ravitz, Mel (1964) "Lafayette Park: New Residents in the Core City." Journal of the American Institute of Planners. 30(3)234-239.

does not conform to the realities described above. Recall how it was a "Blight Committee" composed of Detroit business magnates, union executives, and property developers who developed and lobbied for the enactment of the 1945 statute that enabled municipalities to target the neighborhoods of Black citizens for building removal. If, as political theorists suggest, control over territory is an authorizing logic of state power (Scott 2018; Valverde 2012), then following the shifting material environments of blight clarifies how agents of the municipal administrative state have long shared this control with actors from the 'private' sphere.

My efforts to use the spatial configuration of blight to trouble clean divisions between past and present modes of governance come alongside geographer Siân Butcher's (2018), analyses of Johannesburg's territorial incorporation of mining waste. She details how, despite attempts to break from them, the paradigms of imperial company towns and those of apartheid segregation continue to operate through slag heaps. Likewise, BSEED, a municipal department, has not disappeared or become agglomerated into an entity outside of public government. For Mavis and so many others, the department is hailed as a critical site of spatial discipline. While this department and other municipal actors have been buttressed by NGOs and private actors in delimiting the 'blighted areas' of Detroit's built environment, government entities remained centering forces in determining what, where, and who contributed to 'blight.' The emergence of DLBA-owned properties as locations beyond the reach of established avenues for regulating the presence of built environments does appear to cast this sovereignty into doubt. However, the DLBA does not subvert municipal codes or divert tax revenues wholesale, only on the expanding section of Detroit's landscape to which it holds title. Rather than being eliminated in their entirety, the power of administrative technologies deployed by public government are revealed as being something other than absolute.

As DLBA inventories swell with parcels where burnt out rooms, cracked foundations, and broken windows meet municipal definitions of 'blight,' but are beyond the reach of BSEED inspectors, they make apparent just how the fractured sovereignties of these entities — a municipality and a non-profit public authority — sit cheek by jowl. This institutional separation of regulatory power between public government and other than government entities cuts against commonsense interpretations of the coherence of municipal state power. To this end, actions that we might think of as pertaining to core functions of 'the state' — policing compliance with codified regulations — do not always extend from singular locations. Instead, they accumulate through actors who straddle spatial, technological, legal, and organizational fissures that are sometimes purposefully difficult to ascertain.

Part 2
Recovery Projects

About a year after the 10,000th and 10,001st demolition celebrations, a photograph of the proceedings was brought back into my fieldwork as the mobile phone background of a woman I'll call Annette. She was a Black woman in her fifties, and we volunteered together at a non-profit that specialized in boarding up empty buildings. Every time Annette unlocked her phone, she swiped through an image of her standing in front of the 10,000 sign, side by side with demolition laborers and an elderly couple. I first noticed the photo when she gave me a ride home from the far southeast corner of the city. Her phone was mounted on the dashboard, and I asked about the image's significance. Annette explained that she knew the elderly couple from church, and that one of the laborers was their twenty-four-year-old grandson. The couple was excited for two reasons. For one, they hoped that following the removal, they might finally be able to sell their house. Demolition labor was also their grandson's first job with paystubs. As Annette said, "The demo isn't just about making the neighborhoods look better by bringing the buildings and houses down. It's about making sure that there's housing and careers available here. We've gotta bring the recovery to our communities. It can't all go downtown." Here, Annette notes the need for housing and jobs in "the neighborhoods" and "our communities" — terms commonly marshalled to distinguish working class districts of color outside Detroit's archipelago of wealthier districts, especially the whitening downtown core. For her, tearing down buildings was a project that would siphon off opportunities that might otherwise be funneled elsewhere.

Annette was not alone. Following federal budget cuts, assistance for the demolition program operated by the Detroit Land Bank Authority is due to expire at the end of 2020. Knowing this, in late 2019, the City of Detroit's municipal administration sought to issue $250 million in taxpayer funded bonds to fund the demolition program through 2025. Putting the bond issue to the ballot required approval from the city council, which had been cropped out of oversight of the DLBA and its programs. As a condition of allowing the bond issue to proceed to an election, several councilors were demanding that the DLBA be disbanded. Greg, a Black man in his thirties and the director of a workforce training organization that collaborated with the DLBA, advocated for the council to approve the bond. In a public meeting, he described how rising property values in areas of concentrated demolitions, as well as how the ranks of demolition laborers were "full of some of our most difficult to employ brethren, including those coming home from state supervision." Similar comments were made by others advocating for the bond. Greg closed by saying, "If we don't have demolition funding, we risk bringing Detroit's recovery to a standstill. Or worse, going backwards." The council declined to approve the bond. Later that day, Greg and I met up for a drink near his home in Northwest Detroit. We chatted about the defeat for a while before he sighed, "This is government investing in Black and Brown Detroiters. You'd think they'd want that." Our conversation then moved on to other topics.

The brief views of Annette and Greg that I have collected here are emblematic of how the process of building removal came to be a central feature of talk about Detroit's 'recovery.' Demolitions were discussed as efforts to bend the benefits of municipal care toward those who might otherwise be overlooked. Not only did building removals eliminate unwanted structures from the landscape, in so doing, they also appeared to open up opportunities to improve the political economic circumstances of precarious people, especially Detroiters of color. Greg and

others were keen to frame this as "government investing in Black and Brown Detroiters." But even though they were publicly-funded, these investments did not occur directly. In keeping with the neoliberal remit of public government as a checkbook for capital rather than a direct service provider, funds were filtered through a maze of private entities reliant on public contracts. While this included demolition contractors who specialized in collapsing buildings, it also involved organizations that coded algorithms to select buildings for demolition, those that trained formerly incarcerated people to operate heavy machinery, and those that compiled statistics on the effects of building removal. Some of these entities were for profit and others not, but their offerings came together in the crammed exhibit halls of conferences organized for public officials tasked with dealing with empty buildings and vacated land. As the program for one of these conferences urged viewers, "Visit our exhibitors: They make recovery happen."

The chapters in this part direct our attention to the ways that building removals feature within projects aiming to increase access to homeownership and formal sector employment, especially among non-white Detroiters. For those committed to removal, increasing these rates was a symbol of recovery — whether of individual people, buildings, or the city as a whole — from processes of financial collapse and deindustrialization that bear down acutely on the lives of working class Black people. Chapter Three focuses on the ways demolitions are understood to increase surrounding property values and render geographies eligible for low-interest mortgages. The algorithmic calculations that administrators rely on to justify concentrating demolitions on the margins of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods and deny them in areas with the greatest number of empty buildings offer a vantage on the inscription of racialized and classed assumptions about dwellings as financial instruments into physical topography of urban space. Then, in Chapter Four, we examine how many of the firms that profit from demolitions are

white, family-owned companies that got their start building out Detroit's metropolitan sprawl. Doing so requires more than simply retuning excavators and the predominantly white men who operate them. To splice them together, firms rely on the precarious employment of the typically Black men who are trained as demolition labor as part of their return from incarceration. Together, these chapters grapple with the ways that political economic expectations that drove industrial expansion, especially those in which whiteness enables profit and security, are reinforced as their technical systems are trained on mass disposal.

Chapter 3
Neighborhood Stabilization

"Demolitions have stabilized and expanded access to housing in Detroit." This declaration snapped my focus away from doodling and back toward the proceedings of a training on 'Demolition and Neighborhood Stabilization: The Growth Potential of Removal.' Like the several dozen municipal planners, nonprofit workers, and other administrators around me, I concentrated on the presentation being given by Martin, who worked as a data analyst for the Detroit Land Bank Authority. Given the commonsense reading of building removal, Martin's statement seems paradoxical. This was a purposeful move, and he asked a rhetorical question, "How can demolition — which takes away buildings — also stabilize and expand access to them?" In response, he noted how demolitions in Detroit do not usually correspond to the urban development strategy of demolition clearing the way for new construction. Martin's presentation substantiated "the growth potential of removal" by way of a set of statistical analyses. Tens of thousands of empty buildings had been demolished in Detroit over the past several years, and in that same period, the property value in surrounding neighborhoods had increased by 4.2%. These increases were linked to an uptick in the number of bank mortgages for home sales in those neighborhoods. One step at a time, Martin walked through a causal, statistical argument that linked the removal of empty buildings to the production of mortgages.

For Martin and his colleagues, findings like the ones he presented confirmed what they had hoped to find. Indeed, as this chapter will examine, much of the $500 million in public funding allocated to demolitions in Detroit between 2014 and 2020 was contingent on the

premise that removing empty buildings would open up new terrains for financialized real estate. As sociologist of technology Donald MacKenzie (2008) describes, mathematical models do not simply describe economic realities, they are integral in shaping the production of those realities. To use his phrase, market models are "an engine, not a camera." This is a driving force that is broadly observed in mathematical and statistical projects, especially those that claim to assess property value (Robin 2018; R. Weber 2016). Martin presented a stream of "spatially-dynamic econometric models" to suggest that demolitions "stabilize" property value and, with it, home mortgages. But this causal enumeration of value can exist only insofar as it is rendered, extracted, and performed as a mathematical function of quantitative data.

Such models have consequences, and we can observe them by examining where demolitions do and do not occur. Martin offered a map of showing how his sample of 4,465 building removals were clustered in green-colored "target zones." These zones only covered a fraction of Detroit's 138 square mile territory. DLBA press releases frequently discussed "neighborhood stabilization" in these zones. Sometimes these discussions were limited to graphs showing increases in the number of mortgages in a particular sector. More often than not, however, they were profiles of people who were purchasing and renovating homes in Detroit. One of those cases involved Kayla and Scott, a Black couple in their late twenties who relocated to Detroit from Minneapolis after Kayla, an industrial designer, took a job with one of the city's automakers. After renting for several years, the couple purchased a brick colonial within a target zone on Detroit's central west side. When they acquired it, the house was only a shell. It had been vacant for several years, and much of the wiring, plumbing, and other essential systems had been torn out. Water leaked through the roof and eventually collected in moldy pools in the basement. Contractors estimated it would cost around $160,000 to renovate the place from top to

bottom. Kayla and Scott financed the deal with a thirty-year, fixed-rate mortgage. As part of an agreement between the bank and the DLBA, $22,500 of this debt would be wiped away entirely if they lived in the home for five years after renovations were complete.

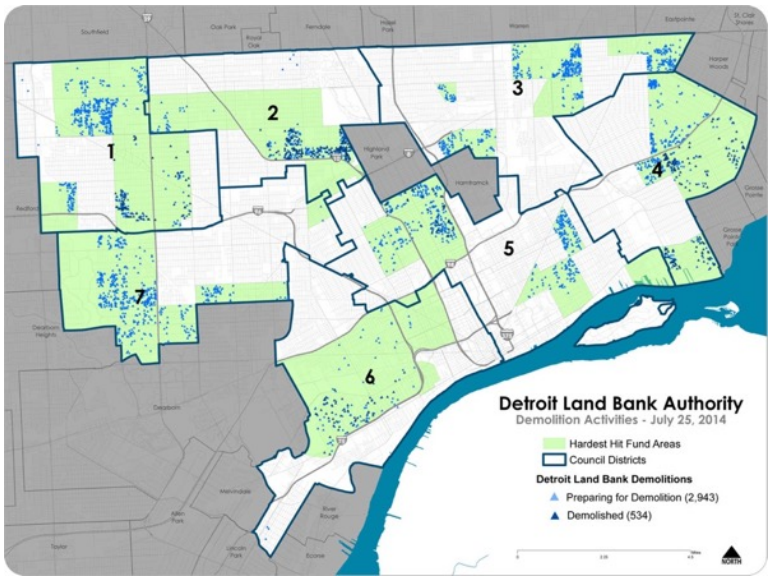

Figure 10 2014 Hardest Hit Fund geographies, including total structures demolished in July 2014. Source: Detroit Land Bank Authority

Meanwhile, two miles west of Kayla and Scott's house, outside of targeted zones, another Black couple, Craig and Melissa, lived in a nearly identical brick colonial. The pair were in their forties when I met them, with Melissa working as a social worker and Craig a municipal firefighter. They shared the home with their daughter, Tiya, Tiya's toddler son CJ, and Craig's mother, Louise. It was the sort of "family home" common in Detroit, and one that Louise and her deceased husband Craig Sr. had purchased in 1972. A receipt for the final mortgage payment — $185.75 on June 1, 1998 — sat in a frame on the mantle. The family had kept up the home over the years, but joists were beginning to sag and the foundation had started to subside. Contractors estimated that addressing these structural issues for $12,000. Renovating the kitchen and adding a master suite would bring the total to $27,000. While a bank would approve Melissa and Craig for a personal loan of this value, they would not approve a mortgage on the home without a proof of homeowners insurance. Such proof was impossible because no one would insure the dwelling

on account of the two empty colonials it sat between.

I first met Melissa in the lobby of the DLBA's downtown offices as she was relaying her situation to one of the agency's staffers and requesting they tear down the houses that stood on either side of hers. As the staffer told her, "I'm really sorry. But, unfortunately, you live outside a target zone and we cannot demolish buildings there. The target zones are set by an algorithm and we cannot break the rules or we risk losing our funding." This was information that DLBA staffers frequently conveyed to people upset that excavators were not rolling down their blocks. When Melissa asked if there was anything that could be done to change the algorithm, the staffer apologized again and shrugged before adding, "You could pray."

Neither Kayla and Scott nor Melissa and Craig are unique. There are many others like them. But this chapter focuses on these two particular families in order to illustrate the disparate financial landscapes brought into being by building removals. We will move between them as they renovate their dwellings in order to approach the demolition-selection algorithm that connects them. Kayla and Scott were entirely unaware of the algorithm that had ensured that empty buildings were cleared from the perimeter of their "high priority" neighborhood. Nevertheless, as its outputs guided administrative decisions about where to remove buildings, the algorithm was essential in maintaining that space as one in which low-interest financial products were readily available. By contrast, Melissa and Craig regularly confronted how their neighborhood's designation as "low priority" ensured empty buildings remained on their block. Given that the only possible avenue of change was divine intervention, they stabilized their home using savings and credit cards.

Put plainly, holding these locations together allows us to isolate how class privilege and deprivation are made through the algorithmic triage of care for physical landscapes. The uneven

allocation of demolitions along the margins of neighborhoods like Kayla and Scott's operates to shore up classed expectations of dwellings as financial instruments. At the same time, as this chapter considers how the demolition-selection algorithm differentially entered into the awareness of Detroit's residents, it also brushes up against data scientists like Martin who constructed the algorithm. For these administrative workers, the financialized geographies of demolition were not some unintended consequence of spare code; it was their deliberate goal. Indeed, we will examine how organizing demolitions to clear away empty buildings around Detroit's wealthiest sectors allowed those responsible for selecting buildings for removal to sidestep accusations of racial favoritism. Following their keystrokes, however, will give us a vantage on the ways race-making operates as a subtext of financial differentiation.

Spatial Triage

We live in a world of algorithms. The technical systems that anthropologists Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson (2019) identify as "roboprocesses" are instrumental in shaping relationships between human beings, including as they determine credit scores, shape policing practices, and catalogue online interactions. Calculations once made with human oversight, including student evaluations, medical diagnoses, and carceral sentencing are outsourced to algorithmic procedures. Like the bureaucracies they automate, purposefully and not, algorithms distance the causal responsibility of decisions from individual human hands (Foucault 1995; M. Weber 1978). Like any administrative system, algorithms discriminate, and in so doing they amplify existing distributions of privilege and oppression (Eubanks 2019; S. Noble 2018). Consider so-called risk assessment tools that increasingly determine whether or not people accused of crimes are allowed to live freely until their trial dates or whether incarcerated people

are paroled from prison. When introduced, these tools were heralded as opportunities to reform discriminatory systems, specifically those in which judicial decisions held Black men without bail and denied them parole more frequently than white men with similar charges. And yet, far from being 'race neutral,' risk assessment algorithms that amalgamate employment records, family histories, and other data produce similar results (Scannell 2019). Algorithms do not remove biases, they take categories of difference and encode them as unimpeachable, computational facts (Onuoha 2018). By turning to the software tool that determined whether or not empty buildings could be demolished, we can observe how these biases are constructed within physical spaces of triaged care.

Data scientist Cathy O'Neil describes algorithms like risk assessment tools as WMDs, or 'Weapons of Math Destruction.' As she writes, "You cannot appeal to a WMD. That's part of their fearsome power. They do not listen. Nor do they bend. They're deaf not only to charm, threats, and cajoling, but also to logic — even when there is good reason to question the data that feeds their conclusions" (10). Even though O'Neil is deeply critical of the effects of algorithmic sorting and evaluation, she holds out hope that if computational systems for targeted outcomes were made with different data, they might produce alternate, less unjust outcomes. Nevertheless, it is often not even possible to question the data upon which algorithmic decisions are made. In the assemblage of government and corporate networks that quantify and differentiate daily lives, data lives in a "black box" (Pasquale 2016). More often than not, it is inaccessible to the very people and places most affected by them. The corporate and government actors who rely on algorithmic decisions prefer that those decisions be 'proprietary,' 'confidential,' and 'top secret.'

The pages to come are an effort to open up the black box of one particular weapon of math destruction, the computational tool used to select buildings for demolition in Detroit. This

system does not have a household name like Instagram, Twitter, or FICO. While it takes on a variety of names, including "the algorithm," "the demolition selection tool," and "demolition impact analysis." Regardless, like those more well-known systems, the precise inputs and functions that concentrated demolitions in certain areas of Detroit while ignoring others were never subject to public scrutiny. When Detroit's city council asked questions like Melissa did of DLBA administrators, including about why empty buildings were standing adjacent to the homes and schools of their constituents, they received similarly curt responses. As one administrator noted, "We cannot do demolitions outside of areas targeted by our algorithm. It's unfortunate, but we just can't." The algorithm hangs in the air of a public meeting, but is left entirely unspecified. Bringing it to light requires us to look elsewhere, and this chapter takes its cue from anthropologist Nick Seaver's (2018) suggestion that understanding algorithms requires "finding the people within these systems" (385). Later in this chapter, we will find these people in city residents like Melissa, Craig, Kayla, and Scott who inhabited the results of algorithmic analysis. For now, I want to focus on people like Martin who coded Detroit's demolition algorithm.

Like me, you might be wondering whether or not the algorithm mentioned here ever actually existed. Could it have been just some rhetorical device? A ploy that parried citizens, journalists, elected officials, and researchers who asked questions about the uneven distribution of demolitions. Given the increasing role of algorithms in delineating access to care or exposure to neglect, it is entirely plausible that administrators faced people upset with their decisions would have substantiated them through empty gestures to this emergent "technological sublime" (Nye 1994). This was not the case, however, and there was actually an algorithm at play. It was based on something called the "Maximizing Community Impact software tool," or MCI. With demolitions costing some twenty thousand dollars apiece, even the $500 million allocated toward

building removal between 2015 and 2020 was not enough to tear down the 75,000 empty structures identified in 2014. MCI was constructed by urban designers and data scientists tasked with determining where the expansive (though also limited) funds available for demolition should be spent. As one of their reports described, the goal of MCI was to identify where vacant building removals would "Improve quality of life for the greatest number of people in the city"[1].

Martin was one of the data scientists who had coded MCI, and so was his colleague Laura. She was an urban designer by training, and described the software tool's purpose for me, saying:

> Before 2014 or so, we had all of these organizations — the city, non-profits, the land bank, private sector — all trying to improve life in Detroit neighborhoods. A lot of them were involved in either funding or advocating for demolitions in their service areas. But they were spread out across the city. We designed MCI to use data to show decision makers where to use limited resources.

Laura and Martin were far from alone in their efforts. At this moment, the fully networked 'smart city' of digitally monitored and monitoring infrastructures is more of a speculative test bed than a functioning prototype (Gabrys 2016; Halpern 2019). Nevertheless, academic programs and professional conferences are awash with proposals to leverage data streams to 'disrupt' the physical and bureaucratic systems of urban life[2]. MCI is one of hundreds of software tools created as part of a concerted push for "data-driven urbanism" in which the design of operations like storm water management, traffic circulation, and policing is coordinated through computational programs (Kitchin 2015). For proponents like Laura and Martin, devices like MCI are an effort to produce tailored outcomes. They are set against accounts of twentieth-century

[1] Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce (2014) "Final Report." P.80.
[2] A dozen or so students from these programs completed summer 'urban data science' internships in Detroit during my time there, the majority of them with the DLBA. Their project reports include those from Bradley Pough and Qian Wan (2017) "Data Analytics and the Fight Against Housing Blight – A Guide for Local Leaders." Harvard University. https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/03/DataAnalytics

governance as myopic and resistant to specificity (Scott 1999). By contrast, MCI is presented as, fundamentally attuned to local conditions. It conveys a promise to "use data to show decision makers where to use limited resources."

In Chapter Two, we observed just how Detroit residents grappled with changing systems of demolition administration that hived them out of municipal government and into non-profit, public authorities like the DLBA. MCI and its associated algorithms were part of that splintering movement. As Jason, an urban planner employed by the DLBA, described for me, "We're doing [demolition] better than they ever did at the city. Because we use data to target where demolitions will have a higher impact. They were just demolishing what people asked." Indeed, prior to losing control over demolition management, Detroit's municipal buildings officers had prioritized demolitions in the order that inspectors received complaints about empty buildings. Contrast this with the description that Laura gave of her position as a DLBA data analyst during a training for her colleagues working in other cities, "I work to use large-scale data streams from public and private sources to triage our properties [for demolition]. We use algorithmic analysis to align our interventions with areas that have the healthiest real estate markets." Part of Laura's job involved logging monthly batches of spatial data that included addresses of empty buildings, utility connection information, and details on real estate transactions. Unlike previous systems that allocated demolitions citywide on the basis of citizen demands, Laura and her colleagues braided spatial data together to situate the removal of empty buildings as imperative to the maintenance of Detroit's "healthiest real estate markets."

As Laura and others were quick to tell me, the MCI moniker was phased out, but its basic operations continued to guide where demolitions could and could not occur. In particular, the lists of demolition targets generated by DLBA administrators were limited to those empty

buildings standing adjacent to Detroit's census tracts with the greatest concentrations of mortgage transactions per square mile. Those central tracts correspond to neighborhoods with the highest property values, and there were typically few, and sometimes no, publicly-owned, empty buildings within their limits. However, such structures did exist just outside their limits. Once empty buildings were cleared from within these 'priority areas,' new tracts were added, radiating outward from the eight places where demolitions were initially concentrated in 2014. Special approval was given for the removal of empty buildings on 'thoroughfares' connecting these islands. Yet, even with incremental expansion, in 2020 a quarter of Detroit's geography and more than half of its empty buildings remained untouchable. A DLBA procurement officer recounted for me how they had once attempted to add an empty duplex near their mother's church to "the demolition pipeline." Routing the building for removal proved impossible because the address was in a "low priority" census tract.

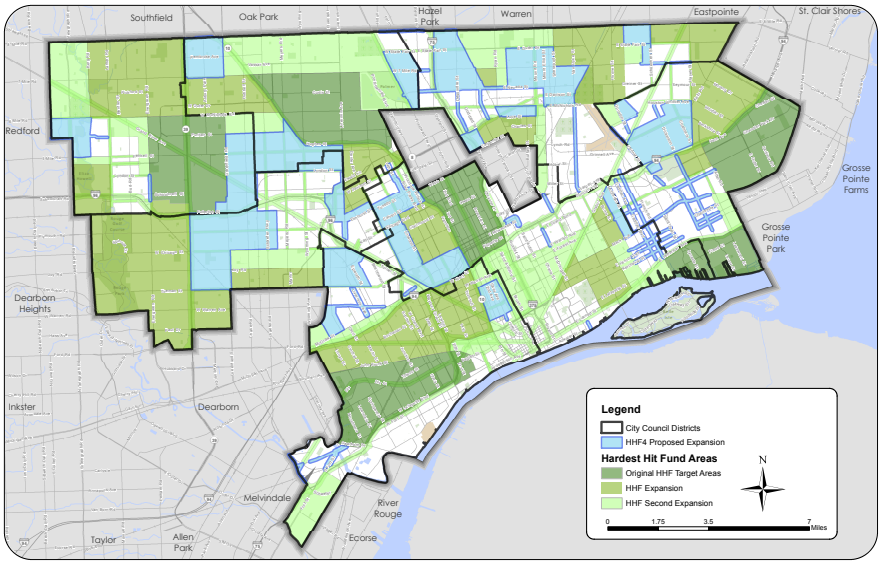

Figure 11 Hardest Hit Fund Geographies. Original target areas where demolitions were permitted in 2014, followed by an expansion in 2014. A second expansion of targeted areas occurred 2015 and third in 2017. Between 2014 and 2020, 75% of removals occurred in the green geographies. Source: Detroit Land Bank Authority.

Of course, the databases and queries that Laura and her colleagues designed could have been coded with other priorities. Since the postwar moment, federal funding allocations have

encouraged urban administrative projects that rely on the computation of spatial data (Flood 2011; Light 2005). For Detroit's midcentury planners, this included the design and installation of an electronic property database in the basement of the newly constructed city hall. Between 1965 and 1973, administrators tasked with identifying priority areas for demolition turned to this database to locate census tracts with the "highest need," defined as greatest concentrations of empty buildings and poverty[3]. While the database and "spot demolition program" were scrapped after the federal funds supporting them dried up, for a short while their computational outputs deliberately channeled building removals into Detroit's most deprived neighborhoods.

Despite the flattened character implied by singular designations like 'nation,' 'city,' and 'human,' political operations within these constructs are premised on unequal allocations of biopolitical attention (Foucault 2003; Redfield 2013; Ticktin 2011). In my conversations with people who selected buildings for demolition, I frequently raised the historical precedent of removing buildings from Detroit's poorest neighborhoods rather than on the margins of its wealthiest. Jason's response reflects what I heard from many others. "That's an interesting idea," he mused, "But we've got limited resources, so we've got to triage. We want to put them where we know the there is a high possibility for success"[4]. The model of triage mobilized here is not the medical one with which you might be most familiar — that is, one in which people with the most life-threatening wounds receive the fastest treatment. Instead, it resembles that of battlefield medicine in which treatment is provided first to those with the greatest likelihood of survival[5].

[3] Mayor's Committee for Community Renewal (1964) "Technical Report 3: Blight Rating Test." Purdy-Kresge Library, Wayne State University; City of Detroit (1966) *Detroit: the new city, summary report of the community renewal program.* Detroit: City of Detroit Publications Office. Purdy-Kresge Library, Wayne State University.
[4] As the director of the DLBA put it during a 2015 presentation, "We need to be building strengths on strengths."
[5] Iserson and Moskop (2007) and Moskop and Iserson (2007) offer a succinct history of triage systems, including how ambulatory triage of assigning care to the most serious injuries was adapted from programs of military triage that privileged the most likely to survive. Vinh-Kim Nguyen (2010) shows how triage is always a high-stakes matter.

One of Jason's superiors was more blunt when he addressed a lunch of philanthropic administrators charged with determining the neighborhoods where their respective employers would allocate grants. After detailing how the DLBA used data to concentrate demolitions, he remarked, "It's unfortunate, but we will only succeed if we build strengths on strengths. We can't keep putting resources into places where we don't know if they will work." Soon after, officials from the municipal government, multinational banks, and local foundations announced a $130 million "strategic neighborhood fund" that would subsidize housing and commercial development, but only in the few areas around which the DLBA was concentrating demolitions[6].

Like any algorithm, MCI and related software protocols used to identify 'eligible' buildings for demolition are exercises in control. Scholars of what has been called critical algorithm studies observe that algorithms route every click and action we make in digital realms. Their automated programing also pervades the surveillance of physical space (Benjamin 2019). Even with the best efforts at disguise, as algorithm scholar John Cheney-Lippold observes, "Algorithm is gonna get you" (93). Algorithmic control is at work from a distance every time a person's playlist is packaged for a targeted advertisement and when she is hailed (or, depending on her skin color and dress, misrecognized) within a facial recognition database. Those algorithms run in the background of our actual and virtual worlds, aggregating typologies of individuals as identities and bodies in which location is one piece of data among many (Seaver 2018). As MCI and related toolkits orient themselves less toward the control of bodies and more toward the configuration of space, they also set algorithmic determinations into alternate dimensions. For coders like Laura and Martin, as well as the algorithms they managed, the register of concern was not a physical or social being, but those of blocks, census tracts, and

[6] City of Detroit (2014) "Hardest Hit Fund Strategic Plan." https://tinyurl.com/yb3g6evc; Data-Driven Detroit (2015) "Overlapping Target Areas in the City of Detroit" https://tinyurl.com/y8syftmm

neighborhoods. Their amalgamation of spatial features substantiates the upwards distribution of care as the expected objective of urban development.

Hardest Hit

Detroit's history is written with parabolic graphs. We saw some of them in Chapter One — those that figured white flight through increases in the number of empty buildings alongside decreases in city residents from the late twentieth century through to the twenty-first. Here, I want to focus on ones with more recent origins as they calculate the number of home mortgages issued for properties within Detroit's limits. I first encountered this graph during a conversation with Charlie, a retired urban development specialist. We were seated in his wood-paneled home office in a mansion district on the city's east side when Charlie asked me, "Do you want to see what it looks like for the city to take a hit?" I agreed, and Charlie swiveled around his desktop monitor. He opened an email from a former colleague with a subject line "Annual Tracking" and opened the attached file. The graph depicted figures from a real estate clearinghouse that tracks mortgage closings through banking systems. The graph began in 2001, when 6,599 loans were made for home purchases in Detroit. It sloped up to 8,480 in 2005 before falling slightly to 7,756 in 2006, dropping to 3,964 in 2007, 1,400 in 2008 and near zero in 2009 before leveling off between two and four hundred until 2014. In 2015 the number ticked to 653, climbing by a few hundred in each of the subsequent years. Charlie and his former colleague were not alone as they reveled in these figures. Their numbers were emailed annually to local reporters as part of DLBA briefings on Detroit's housing markets[7]. Despite the upward turn of numbers, it is worth noting how in 2018, Columbus, Ohio and Memphis, Tennessee, cities with population sizes similar to

[7] Year by year totals reported by the DLBA are: 2014 (490), 2015 (557), 2016 (710), 2017 (940), 2018 (1,100).

Detroit, each saw around 3,500 mortgages initiated within their borders.

The slide in new mortgages in Detroit was part of a trend of 'financial crisis' that spread worldwide during the late 2010s. Across the globe, jobs disappeared, banks closed, people were foreclosed and evicted from their homes. And yet, as with each economic downturn since the Great Depression, Detroiters uttered a common refrain, "When the economy catches a cold, Detroit gets pneumonia"[8]. Despite decades of off-shoring over passing decades, the regional economy continues to be driven by sales of a single durable good: cars. Thus, even as the rest of the country celebrated skyrocketing home prices, automotive sales began declining in 2005. Layoffs hit major producers and small suppliers alike. Within a few years, two of the three major US-based automakers had filed for bankruptcy protection and received federal bailouts. Unemployed people fell behind on mortgage payments, and between 2005 and 2006, the number of households receiving foreclosure notices in Michigan rose from 22,369 to 56,228, a 151% increase[9]. It continued to rise through 2012. During this time, the Detroit region had the highest per-capita rate of foreclosure in the United States. More than sixty-five thousand households were turned out of their homes due to foreclosure. From 2006 to 2012, average property values fell by twenty-seven percent in the United States. In Michigan, the drop averaged twenty percent. In Detroit, property values fell by forty-six percent over this same period[10].

With unemployment and foreclosure rates spiking, the US federal government attempted to shore up labor and housing markets. Rhetorically at least, these efforts were similar to New Deal housing programs in which federal authorities offered jobs to the unemployed and assumed

[8] Bjorn and Gallert (2001) locate the origins of this phrase in the Great Depression (37). Stevens, William (1974) "Detroit." *The New York Times*. January 6: 155; Serrin, William (1979) "A growing despair in Detroit." *New York Times*. December 13:D1.
[9] Michigan Foreclosure Taskforce (2012) Michigan Historical Residential Foreclosure Data Project. https://tinyurl.com/yb5lldmx
[10] Ibid.

unpaid mortgages without evicting people from their homes[11]. However, unlike efforts to blunt the fallout of the Great Depression, in which government entities took direct oversight of social care, by the first decade of the twenty-first century, responsibility had devolved elsewhere. As medical anthropologist Vincanne Adams (2012; 2013) tracks, in the United States government assistance is typically routed through private-sector firms who pad healthy profit margins even when they fail to deliver promised aid. Likewise, efforts to mitigate floods of foreclosures and layoff notices were directed through 'bail outs' of the very employers and financial institutions that benefited from salary reductions and dispossessions. It should be unsurprising, then, that even though an estimated $300 billion in federal funding was allocated toward incentivizing lenders to modify home mortgages, banks denied more than seventy percent of applications for assistance (Stout 2019). When this happened, banks foreclosed and evicted people from their homes in the hopes of reselling later for a profit.

While most federal efforts to prop up financial institutions took a nationwide footprint, some were targeted only into those states identified as most acutely affected by financial crisis. In 2010, the US Treasury allocated $1.5 billion to an aptly named "Hardest Hit Fund (HHF)" distributed to the five states in which average property values had plummeted more than twenty percent — California, Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Michigan. The purposes of these funds were "to allow Housing Finance Agencies in the nation's hardest hit housing markets to design innovative, locally-targeted foreclosure prevention programs"[12]. Over the next six years, HHF was expanded to $9.6 billion. $762 million was allocated for targeted foreclosure assistance in

[11] This was the purpose of entities like the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA). While sometimes remembered as the closest the United States ever came to functional social democracy, these programs were thoroughly organized around racist and sexist logics that provided premium support for white men rather than others (Miller 2015).
[12] TARP Two-Year Retrospective. US Department of Treasury – OFS. 2010, pg. 88. https://tinyurl.com/vyqhrnh

Michigan, the fourth largest sum of any state and the most per resident. As with other forms of purported assistance to people behind on their mortgage payments, however, these funds were more of a mirage than a firm path forward. In Michigan, fifty-two percent of applications for assistance, including for modified loan terms or temporary payment reductions, were denied[13]. Among applicants with incomes lower than $30,000, the denial rate was seventy-two percent[14]. Claire, who worked as a housing counselor at a nonprofit, demonstrated the denial rate for me using her office filing cabinets. Two were stuffed with what she said were almost two thousand denied applications for HHF modifications. One was only partially filled with the eight hundred that had been accepted.

Rejected applications crumpled up in filing cabinets or languishing on hard drives are of a piece with the post-recession systems of what anthropologist Noelle Stout (2019) describes as "predatory bureaucracy." In her definition, such systems are "a collection of private-sector bureaucratic techniques aimed to disguise injury as inefficiency, to sidestep transparency, and to extract profits while concealing these goals within a rhetoric of assistance" (146). Like Stout's interlocutors in California's Sacramento Valley, the seemingly routine denial of mortgage modifications to Detroiters, especially the city's poorest, was described as the result of missed deadlines and poorly organized paperwork. As a project manager in the statewide public authority that manages housing assistance programs in Michigan described for me, "I sympathize [with people who lose their homes] but we can't bend the rules if people don't have the commitment to make sure they have the right documents in at the right time." Like Stout, housing counselors disputed this description, including the one who showed me her filing

[13] MSHDA, HHF Performance Report, September 2019. https://tinyurl.com/uphxque
[14] Improving TARP's Investment in American Workers (SIGTARP 17-001), January 2017. https://tinyurl.com/sohpmce

cabinets. As evidence, Claire rattled open a file drawer and pulled out an application. It was a three-inch-thick stack of paperwork that landed with a thud when she dropped it on her desk. The application had been rejected due to 'incomplete documentation of income,' specifically a missing paystub. The stub in question was in the file, but its dates had been accidentally misprinted by the applicant's employer. They were marked for January of 2002 rather than 2012. It had taken six months for the application to be denied. According to Claire, rather than apply again and face a court-ordered eviction, the applicant instead moved out on her own terms.

Within most accounts of predatory foreclosure, the central facet of predation is a move of accumulation by dispossession through which financial institutions profit time after time. Stout, for instance, details case after case resembling that of her friends Brooke and Jarred, who had purchased their California home in the early 2000s. Their mortgage was 'subprime.' It had a low introductory interest rate that multiplied repeatedly after a few years (3). After struggling to keep up with steep increases in monthly payments and without promised assistance, Brooke and Jarred defaulted on their mortgage (4). Ownership of their home passed to the financial institution that had issued the loan, with the bank selling it to an investment firm that subsequently gutted its insides, renovated, and rented it to new tenants (200-201). Profits accrued as the direct consequence of Brooke and Jarred's loss. Like tens of millions of others, their experience tracks how, despite intense material and symbolic commitments to home ownership as the cornerstone of American middle-class aspiration, the financial technologies that make ownership possible can quickly turn it into a nightmare (Dudley 2002; Satter 2010). When this happens, investments in the physical architectures of dwellings are stripped away and monetized for others benefit.

Stories like Brooke and Jarred's were easy to come by in Detroit. The city, like majority nonwhite communities across the United States, had been targeted by financial institutions

hawking loans that were deliberately configured to become unpayable. Economic analyses demonstrate how financial institutions steered wealthy Black borrowers into these subprime products, even as they offered poorer white applicants loans with lower interest and better protections from default (Rugh, Albright, and Massey 2015). And yet, as foreclosures swept through Detroit, the scars they left diverged from the investor-owned housing flips like Brooke and Jarred's. Instead, in Detroit, foreclosed houses (as well as foreclosed office towers, factories, and commercial spaces) sat empty. Like the limited license firms we observed in Chapter One, banks 'let them go' to tax foreclosure. In Northern California, waves of dispossession and denied applications might have crashed down in the form of HGTV-inspired renovations and open houses. By contrast, in Detroit, hardest hit status was marked by the persistence of darkened windows, buckled floors, and subsiding foundations.

Mortgage Ready

Following the widespread denial of applications for foreclosure assistance, the funds allocated to it were directed to demolition. In Michigan, this included $350 million in Hardest Hit Funds that were 'reprogramed' for building removals, most of them in Detroit, as well as $150 million directed from other priorities. Indeed, the waiver granted for the State of Michigan to spend foreclosure-prevention funds on demolition rather than homeowner assistance set a standard that was reproduced in other states, especially those with majority non-white municipalities where financial institutions let foreclosed properties sit empty after evicting people from them[15]. These structures dragged on the city in more ways than one. In previous chapters, we have seen how empty buildings physically disrupt the lives of those around them.

[15] Those states included Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Tennessee, and Illinois. Center for Community Progress (2014) "Report: Hardest Hit Funds demolition policy change on track to become a boon for distressed communities"

Yet, as housing specialists in municipal, nonprofit, and private-sector offices were acutely aware, the sheer number of empty buildings in Detroit also made them difficult to purchase for people who wanted to live in the city. A real estate agent once presented this conundrum to me by way of a tour of several impeccably maintained dwellings across the city, including a two-bedroom bungalow, a four-bedroom Tudor revival, and a three-bedroom midcentury ranch. Priced between $35,500 and $74,999, they were deals[16]. But the listings had languished for months. Insurance companies had declined to insure them on account of their proximity to empty buildings. Without a certificate of homeowners insurance, banks refused to issue a mortgage. The redirection of Hardest Hit Fund allocations toward strategic demolitions was an intervention in this landscape. It aimed to prop up mortgage opportunities for new homebuyers using funds that had been denied to people facing foreclosure.

We can follow how this landscape was carefully cropped to Detroit's wealthiest neighborhoods by way of Kayla and Scott, whose case you were briefly introduced to earlier in this chapter. I met them through an architect that was coordinating renovations on their newly purchased home. At the time we met, the couple was living in a spacious rental apartment in Southwest Detroit. They paid $1,200 each month for a four-bedroom space in an art deco building. One of the bedrooms served as Kayla's home studio where she did freelance logo and web design work. Two others were regularly rented out on AirBnB. Their listings offered a "1920s Vintage Apartment in Southwest Detroit," as well as photographs featuring built ins and tile mosaics in the bathroom, kitchen, and living room fireplace. Before the couple relocated to Detroit from Minneapolis, Scott had worked as a legal researcher. But no job had been forthcoming in Detroit, so he described himself as "Gig employed." In addition to hosting short-

[16] At the time, similar houses in Detroit's suburbs had sold for around $125,000.

term guests, Scott regularly taught a financial skills course in a nearby charter high school and sometimes drove for Lyft. Despite Scott's transition to a much more unstable employment situation, he and Kayla were excited to be living in Detroit. As Kayla put it, her job in the conceptual design department of an automotive company was "something I've dreamed about since high school." Scott had also been eager to relocate closer to his parents, who had recently-retired and still lived in the house where he grew up in suburban West Bloomfield.

Kayla and Scott had moved to Detroit and landed in their Southwest Detroit apartment anticipating it would be a short-term place while they went through the process of purchasing a home. When we met five years later, they were still renting the apartment. As Scott described to me, "Our friends in Minneapolis were sending us news articles about how Detroit was this place where you could buy a house for less than a car. We knew it would be more expensive to find something livable, but we didn't think a mortgage would be basically off the table." Accounts of people who bought buildings in Detroit for as little as $500 and lived in them while renovating room by room had indeed reverberated around the internet[17]. But this practice was relatively unconventional. Nationwide, seventy-seven percent of residential real estate purchases occur using a mortgage. That is, the buyer applies for a loan from a bank. The bank cuts a check to the seller, with the buyer repaying the bank with interest. Since New Deal programs began regulating mortgages in the 1930s, repayment periods have been standardized to fifteen and thirty years. This relatively long time horizon, as well as fixed interest rates and tax write-offs, are made possible through federal authorities that offer banks guarantees of mortgage repayment (Poon 2009). While such subsidies are often unacknowledged by their wealthy and middle-class beneficiaries, they underwrite imaginative couplings between home ownership and self-

[17] This is the plot of writer Drew Philp's (2017) *A $500 House in Detroit*, which began as a longform piece in Buzzfeed News.

sufficiency (Stout 2016). In Detroit, the statistics are flipped, with twenty-one percent of property sales between 2016 and 2019 involving a mortgage. The rest were handled entirely in cash.

Over their years in Detroit, Kayla and Scott had become familiar with the difficulties of purchasing a home using methods that would be typical in most other parts of the United States. Given Scott's sporadic work and income, the pair applied for a mortgage solely on the basis of Kayla's income. After reviewing Kayla's recent paystubs and bank records, a loan officer had approved her for a loan of up to $285,500. Yet even this sum proved insufficient for Kayla and Scott to buy a place of their own. In one case, their offer of $150,000 was accepted by a retiree selling a sprawling Victorian just a few blocks from their current apartment. However, an appraiser hired by the bank to estimate the 'market value' of the property had valued it at $98,500 on account of a vacant liquor store standing a few yards down the block. The Victorian was subsequently purchased for $135,500 in cash by a property management group that listed it for rent at $1,500 per month.

A few months later, the couple also lost out on a duplex on the central west side. While an appraiser's estimate had corresponded with their $125,000 offer for the recently renovated building, the transaction had fallen apart due to repeated refusals by insurance companies to insure the structure. Scott recalled requesting quotes from twelve companies, with each one eventually declining. Over the phone, one agent had told him that a Google streetview examination of the block showed it was "risky" due to the existence of empty buildings. This agent and several others had offered to provide a bare-bones policy that would have covered repairs from tornadoes and other 'forces majeures' but not costs of damages from break-ins or fires. Without comprehensive coverage, Scott and Kayla's bank would not approve their

mortgage. The colonial went unsold and was converted into a rental property. Shortly after, the couple abandoned their first efforts to buy a home.

Kayla and Scott's experience raises the specter of 'insurance redlining' in which insurers refuse policies in neighborhoods of color or, more frequently, charge more for such policies than in predominantly white locations (Squires 2003). In response to such allegations, insurance agents and their representatives insist that constraints on the availability of their products in places like Detroit are not a matter of racial discrimination, but one of the 'risk' associated with the geographies of empty buildings. One insurance agent, who doubled as a real estate appraiser, peppered my inbox with strings of forwarded messages from her colleagues describing reduced property values within five hundred meters of empty buildings, as well as higher possibilities for fires and property crime in their vicinity[18]. These defenses underscore how the barriers to mortgageability for people like Kayla and Scott was not their own inability to conform to neoliberal norms of self-management — say of employment or credit. They were not interpellated as risky economic subjects (cf. Han 2012; Zaloom 2019). Rather, the places they sought to acquire using a financial instrument existed within proximal landscapes of empty buildings that made the desired structures effectively unmortgageable.

DLBA administrators were mindful of the routes of appraisers and insurance agents as they charted their triaged approach to demolition. As discussed above, the computational routines of selecting buildings for demolition prioritized empty structures that stood closest to buildings with an existing mortgage. In addition, demolitions were concentrated along "corridors" between priority neighborhoods. On maps of permitted demolition locations, these corridors were plotted as spindles of blue and green branching out to connect these

[18] These assertions marshall urban planning and public health analyses of empty buildings, including Branas et al. (2016) and South et al. (2015).

neighborhoods to each other via major roadways. Likewise, if it appeared that an empty building within a priority zone could be conceivably sold at a profit, the DLBA would dispatch a crew to remove any existing plywood or metal covers and "clear board" it instead. In such a case, the structure's windows and doors would be covered by thick polycarbonate which appeared like storm coverings from the street. As a DLBA demolition coordinator described to a gathering of nonprofit property development specialists, "Our goal is to make it so people coming into Detroit, whether residents, or maybe potential residents, real estate agents, or appraisers, experience a city that doesn't have [empty buildings] in it." Of course, this treatment was dispensed only within those triaged geographies permitted by DLBA administrators and their purpose-built algorithm.

Kayla and Scott benefited directly from the landscape produced through targeted demolitions. Years after their first attempts to buy a house turned up empty, they tried again. This time, they focused in the constellation of neighborhoods prioritized by the DLBA. Scott was still working gig jobs, but Kayla's salary had increased since the previous effort. A bank approved them for a loan of up to $350,000. At an open house for DLBA-owned buildings on the west side, the couple had fallen for an all brick colonial with four bedrooms and two baths. From the outside, it appeared in fantastic condition, with red-brown brick, built-in stained glass windows, and French doors opening from the master bedroom onto a small rear balcony. But the interior was another story. The structure's wiring and plumbing had been ripped out and likely sold for scrap metal. Gouges a few inches wide marked the course of where copper had previously ran through the walls and ceilings. Rust-colored streaks also betrayed where water had been leaking through the from a hole in the roof flashing. A contractor that Kayla and Scott brought along for the open house estimated it would take $160,000 to make the house habitable,

including with the expansive kitchen island and master suite that Kayla and Scott desired. Following the open house, Kayla and Scott's $25,000 bid won a DLBA-sponsored auction. Their bank rolled this bid together with the renovation cost after an appraiser, finding no empty buildings nearby, estimated the completed project could sell for $190,000.

Contractors initially estimated they could turn around Kayla and Scott's house in six months. The actual project took close to a year and a half. I walked through the house with Kayla shortly after the couple closed and took official ownership. With the exception of refinished wood floors, doors, and moldings, all of the finishes were new. The gashes that previously traced through the home were gone. New drywall, painted in shades of white and grey, obscured how the dwelling's electric, plumbing, and HVAC systems had also been upgraded. The subway tiled kitchen included a massive, marble-topped island, and the upstairs had been reconfigured from four bedrooms to three in order to accommodate a master suite with a walk-in, waterfall shower. It was a beautiful home. Kayla had even set up a studio and small machine shop in the basement.

But for our purposes, I want to focus on the documents that Kayla and Scott signed at closing in their bank's downtown office. Renovations had cost $165,000, which together with the auction bid totaled $190,000. This was covered by three separate loans. The first, made by Kayla and Scott's bank, was for $167,500. With a fixed, 3.8% interest rate, the monthly payment would run $780.48 for thirty years. A second loan for $15,000 and a third for $7,500 had no payment estimates. These were 'forgivable loans' that Kayla and Scott qualified for because they were purchasing property using a mortgage in a census tract that had been designated as a zone for Hardest Hit Fund spending[19]. So long as the couple lived in the house for five years, those loan

[19] These programs were specifically the Michigan State Housing Development Authority's StepForward supplemental mortgage and Wells Fargo's NeighborhoodLIFT program. Both were funded by multibillion dollar legal settlements extracted from financial institutions that targeted people of color for subprime mortgages. People

balances would be wiped away entirely.

At the beginning of this chapter, we encountered Martin, a DLBA data analyst as he celebrated how, "Demolitions have stabilized and expanded access to housing in Detroit." The statistical data compiled by Martin and his colleagues offered an abstract vision of cases like Kayla and Scott's. That is, people who were able to successfully purchase dwellings using mortgages following algorithmically targeted demolitions. My effort here has not been to attend to the financial conditions that made those demolitions possible. Not only were tens of thousands of Detroiters displaced through foreclosures, but the funds intended to keep them in their homes were redirected to remove structures, including those they left behind. The process of doing so benefited those who arrived in the aftermath. For newcomers like Kayla and Scott, demolitions were of a piece with low-rate mortgages and those that would never need to be repaid. As such, public assistance was routed into geographic zones identified as having borne the brunt of predatory finance. Nevertheless, doing so also directed it away from those people who were most acutely affected.

Stable Foundations

In 2017, Detroit transitioned from being one in which the majority of residents owned their homes into one in which the majority rented. Local housing agencies and researchers organized discussions to fret over the brewing "instability." Nationwide, homeownership rates have hovered between sixty and seventy percent since the postwar period, and Detroit's own ratio between homeowners and renters has tended to mirror this average. However, this correspondence made the city notable because it had one of the highest rates of homeownership

like Kayla and Scott who were able to access the programs were typically not those who had been evicted by foreclosure.

among Black families. In 2004, nearly forty years after the Fair Housing Act leveled formal barriers to mortgages for nonwhite people, just over fifty percent of Black Americans owned their home[20]. By comparison, more than seventy percent of white Americans owned their homes at this time, as did sixty percent of Black Detroiters[21]. These disparate homeownership figures, whether by racial category or geography, are the direct product of historical conditions that burnished white wealth through the exploitation of nonwhite people, especially Black Americans (Freund 2007). More than a third of family wealth in the United States is held in homeownership[22]. This is wealth that compounds year after year and, especially when property values increase, rolls forward through generations[23]. Thus, when housing specialists connected demolitions with increasing property values in the context of a majority-Black Detroit, their efforts appear as interventions that might level the racial wealth gap. Nevertheless, their practices focus on the selective stabilization of homeownership as a financial product in ways that obscure other possibilities of dwelling.

To explore what I mean here, come with me to the home of Craig and Melissa, another brick colonial built in the 1920s. It is not far from their house to Kayla and Scott's. Just a straight shot of a few miles on one of the east-west thoroughfares that cut through Detroit. From the outside, the couples' homes were nearly identical, down to the color of their reddish brick and stained-glass inlays. One difference was how the trim of Craig and Melissa's home was painted a brilliant white, while painters employed by Kayla and Scott coated theirs in a deep black. Inside, Craig and Melissa's house retained its original configuration. They shared four bedrooms with

[20] Hedman, Carl and Ralph Pendall (2018) Rebuilding and Sustaining Homeownership for African Americans. The Urban Institute. https://tinyurl.com/uo28wxe
[21] Ibid.
[22] Eggleston, Johnathan and Donald Hays (2019) Gaps in the wealth of Americans by household type. US Census Bureau. https://tinyurl.com/wdgcbh9
[23] Ibid.

Craig's seventy-year-old mother, Louise, as well as their twentysomething daughter Tiya and Tiya toddler son CJ. Louise and her deceased husband had bought the house in 1972. She had made the final mortgage payment in 1998, only months after becoming a widow. And yet, as Louise observed, "You never really own it. The tax man always comes, so does Mr. Edison for the lights and gas[24]." Louise described herself as "a domestic engineer" whose primary work had been raising Craig and his two older brothers. When Craig's father passed away unexpectedly, Louise had been fifty-one, and was left to manage on a small pension from his job driving a municipal garbage truck. The $1,115 check she received each month was easily drained by the personified costs of maintaining the house. In order to bring household finances above water, Craig and Melissa had moved in around 2000, bringing a five-year-old Tiya in tow.

Craig, a City of Detroit firefighter, and Melissa, a social worker for the State of Michigan, were characteristic of the ways Black middle class status has been premised upon skilled employment, especially in the public sector (Lacy 2007). While not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, their combined incomes tripled Detroit's median household income of $29,481, and placed them a above the statewide median of $54,938. Budget cuts and compulsory furloughs in the late 2000s and early 2010s had coincided with making tuition, room, and board payments for Tiya's degree in communications from a public university in Ohio. However, without the burden of a regular mortgage or rent payment, the family had been able to shoulder pay cuts. Tiya worked part-time for an education NGO, and since returning to live with her family, also contributed to family finances.

Quite apparently, Craig and Melissa's family had greater access to economic resources than the average household. They were fortunate to be able to afford the costs of college, old age,

[24] Detroit's private electric and gas utility, DTE Energy, was called Detroit Edison from 1904 until 1996.

health care, and emergencies that bankrupt millions of Americans annually. A close friend of theirs from church worked for a multinational bank, and he insisted they should capitalize on their financial situation by purchasing a home of their own. Craig and Melissa brought years of pay stubs, tax returns, and savings account statements with them to a bank branch. An employee plugged numbers into a digital algorithm designed to calculate the maximum mortgage applicants could afford. The algorithm returned $225,000, a figure far greater than Craig or Melissa had imagined. With no down payment and a 4.2% interest rate, it would cost $1383.62 per month for thirty years. Despite a budget that could have easily moved them to suburbs with more reliable services, Melissa and Craig were committed to remaining in Detroit. They did fantasize about leaving, however. While a few of the families that Craig and his brothers had grown up alongside still lived on the block, many had left. Some had purposefully relocated to places with better school districts or job opportunities. Others had been forced out by foreclosures, especially during the Great Recession. A dozen houses had been demolished and a handful sat vacant, including those on both sides of the one where Craig, Melissa, and their family lived. For several days, the couple texted each other listings of houses for sale on well-populated blocks in Northwest Detroit, including ones with asking prices ranging from $89,500 to $165,000.

Louise threw a wrench into Melissa and Craig's moving plans as soon as they broached the possibility. During what Tiya told me became a fraught dinner, Louise made plain that she only planned to leave the home "Feet first." When I discussed the position of her home directly between two empty buildings, one of which had recently been the site of an altercation between a pimp and several johns, Louise told me emphatically, "This is our fortress. We've got to protect it. Not run from it." Indeed, shortly after the incident, Craig and several neighbors, like others

you have read about in previous chapters, built plywood barricades to close up the uninhabited dwelling. Yet Louise's protective concern extended inside the home as well. Since moving in, Craig and Melissa had completed minor upkeep — tuckpointing brick, painting the exterior, patching the roof — but Louise refused to allow any major renovations. She preferred to keep the house as it had been when her late husband had died. The kitchen and bathroom reflected they 1970s style they had installed shortly after purchasing the home. Melissa and Craig pitched Louise on the possibilities of something other than the peeling laminate of avocado green kitchen counters and floral printed bathroom tile. Nevertheless, the grandmother was steadfast in her refrain, "This is our fortress. We've got to protect it."

Despite initial protestations, Craig and Melissa agreed to stay on the condition that they be allowed to undertake some modifications to the home. To overcome Louise's hesitant approach to change, they suggested converting a mostly unused formal dining room on the first floor into a bedroom for her. Not only would Louise no longer need to climb stairs that were becoming more cumbersome to navigate, but her relocation would allow for the combination of two upstairs bedrooms into a master bedroom suite with a private bathroom. Craig and Melissa also hoped to replace the kitchen cabinets and countertops. A contractor who had renovated their church's choir balcony estimated the planned changes would cost $15,000. However, a subsequent survey of the home showed that several floor joists supporting the structure had begun to bow at a point. A few ceiling rafters showed signs of rot from a previous roof leak. Addressing these structural issues would bring the total budget to twenty-seven grand.

With a budget almost twice their expectations, Melissa and Craig returned to their bank. They figured if they had qualified for a $225,000 mortgage, they could receive a renovation loan for much less. The same banker who had approved the mortgage laughed in their face, knowing,

as they had previously told him, that Louise's house was located in the midst of several empty buildings. As he told them, "That house is worth maybe ten grand. I couldn't give you a reno mortgage for a penny more than that. And even then, renovating that house? You're throwing away money. It's worse than renting." With his suggestion that rent payments were nothing but a loss, this banker does more than reflect prevailing opinions in the United States. He also captures how — despite a recession and millions of foreclosures that had recently proven otherwise — many presume privately-owned property to only ever be an appreciating asset. Such contrasts relegate the human need for shelter to a value judgment of possible profits. Regardless, given the near impossibility of getting affordable home insurance in their neighborhood, Louise's house was uninsured, making a renovation loan out of the question. Instead, the banker proposed the couple take out a personal line of credit of $30,000. Paying it off over five years would cost $891.63 per month, including 8% interest.

Mildly offended, Craig and Melissa left the bank without the loan. They negotiated with their contractor to bring down the proposed cost. In an arrangement I saw repeated by others, the contractor agreed to complete all structural work, including shoring up the foundation and joists, removing the existing kitchen cabinets, blowing out the upstairs wall, and giving a rough, drywalled finish to the new bedroom and bath. The family would pay him three, monthly installments of $5,000 and be left on their own to complete 'finishing work,' including installing the new kitchen, tiling the bathroom, and painting. Melissa and Craig paid for those finishes incrementally, distributing them across six months and several credit cards. With interest, the total project rang in at $19,436.25. We were leveling stone tiles on the bathroom floor when I asked Craig if he thought spending the money was worth it. He replied, "When the roof leaks or the foundation cracks, you gotta fix 'em." Like Louise's insistence that her home was a fortress

in need of protection, Craig's statement is suggestive of an orientation to the dwelling as something other than a financial instrument that might appreciate. Instead, he motivated it as an object that demanded physical care independent of whether it could serve as collateral.

As I mentioned earlier, Melissa and Craig are a relatively particular case. Their ability to expend a fairly large amount of money, even if spaced out over half a year, not only depended on reliable salaries of middle-class work, but also upon the absence of a monthly housing payment. Even if their banker accused them of throwing money away on renovations, Louise's house had already paid it forward. Nevertheless, this family is not singular, so much as a magnification of practices utilized by other Detroiters cropped out of mortgage markets, including by poverty, and inability to get comprehensive insurance. I once helped a family stretch a massive blue tarp over their roof in order to keep water out while they spent several years saving to replace the roof. Likewise, after his landlord refused to replace a faulty gas-powered furnace, one of Melissa's brothers enlisted me to hold a flashlight and iPad steady as we replaced it ourselves. We also used tiles left over from Louise's house to resurface the cracked floor of his laundry room. Actions like these to prolong basic structural systems cut against prevailing logics that shoring up mortgage markets is the only way to reinforce precarious dwellings. In particular, they show how the selective allocation of demolitions around Detroit's wealthiest neighborhoods obscured the simple fact that people do not merely inhabit buildings as financial instruments, but as physical structures in need of stabilization.

Felt Geographies

There is a striking contrast between the renovations detailed above — despite presenting as similarly capable financial subjects. In one case, renovation costs were subsidized, while in

the other such assistance was foreclosed by virtue of physical location. Yet Melissa and Craig's experiences do not even come close to illustrating the stakes of unstable buildings. As anywhere in the United States, affordable housing is in dwindling supply in Detroit. Housing counsellors who sought to catapult families to the top of rental voucher waiting lists told me of clients living with dysfunctional plumbing, with holes in their roofs, and inches of standing water in their basements. These conditions typically persisted when landlords refused to address them or because families who owned their homes, whether outright or on land contract, did not have cash on hand to make repairs. Leaving was typically out of the question, as first month's rent and security deposit can easily run several thousand dollars, even for modestly priced accommodations. Sociologist Matthew Desmond (2016) details precisely how displacement is a costly cycle that grinds down the meagre finances of working class families. And yet, thousands of demolitions were occurring every year in Detroit at a cost of $25,000 a piece. For those tasked with constructing and monitoring the algorithm that distributed those funds, deploying them to boost mortgageable value in already wealthy neighborhoods was the only sensible path. Though presented as detached from human feeling, the algorithmic deployment of demolition funds was loaded with expectations that linked deservingness to increasing property value.

Martin, the DLBA data analyst who has appeared throughout this chapter, had introduced me to Claire, the counselor who had showed me her filing cabinets filled with denied applications for mortgage modifications. The three of us drank together sometimes at an eastside bar. It was at one of these gatherings that Claire and one of her coworkers confronted Martin about the targeted geographies and cost of demolitions. As Claire's colleague put it, "So, you're demolishing houses to increase property values in Sherwood Forest [a wealthy neighborhood in Northwest Detroit] but our clients are on five-year waiting lists for affordable housing. That's

misplaced priorities, Martin." For his part, Martin commiserated, agreeing that spiking rents — some analyses showed twenty percent increases in Detroit over only a few years — and stagnant wages were having an acute effect on the working poor. "But," he insisted, "The feds limit our funds to demos. And only demos to increase surrounding values. If we increase property tax returns in Sherwood Forest, the city can expand housing and social programs." With that, our conversation pivoted to a critique of government programs increasingly limited aid to impoverished people as a 'trickle-down' from assistance to the comparatively wealthy. It helped that the television above the bar was carrying a speech from a conservative state legislator decrying federal spending on food stamps. That same legislator supported subsidies for wealthy people and corporations on the factually-vacant claim that doing so would increase state tax revenue[25].

This interaction resonated with discussions that occurred during a panel on affordable housing that featured several representatives from the DLBA in conversation with one from the US Treasury who I will call Elizabeth. As a moderator noted at the outset of the discussion, the standing room only audience was excited to hear about "housing policy for resurgent markets." Like Martin did at the beginning of this chapter, the panelists all credited the DLBA's selective demolition program with increasing property values in Detroit. As part of the discussion following the panel, an audience member asked, "What do you say to people who argue that only doing demolitions in certain places is an equity issue? You're ignoring concentrations of blight in poor neighborhoods and making buffer zones around rich ones." Elizabeth had the

[25] Claims like this have been a tenet of fiscal austerity in the United States since the 1990s. In 2012, the State of Kansas implemented a plan desired by the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) that eliminated business taxes entirely as well as additional subsidies. ALEC had pushed the plan through with projections that state revenues would increase. However, by 2017, the state had a $900 million budget gap and the taxes were restored (Alvord 2020).

microphone and replied, “Congress authorized HHF funds to reduce foreclosure. Our data shows that this is the only way to do demolitions in compliance with that law.” The conversation moved on, perhaps reflecting the audience’s tacit acceptance of the notion that legal imperatives justified unequal treatment.

Following the panel, audience members had been invited for a bus tour showcasing the effects of targeted demolitions. Fifty of us trooped out of the darkened auditorium and into the bright summer sun, packing ourselves into an idling coach bus. I was seated next to Elizabeth. The landscape shifted from dense mixed-use and commercial buildings into more sprawling residential as the coach crept along in rush hour traffic leaving Downtown. As it did, Elizabeth and I struck up a conversation about the process of assuring a correspondence between the mandates of federal legislation and the actions taken on the ground by agencies like the DLBA. I observed that it must have been difficult to know whether the demolition algorithm would be successful at preventing foreclosure, given that producing a causal link between the two relied on such a cascade of factors. Elizabeth replied, “Oh yeah! We got real lucky that the data played out our initial hunch on that one.” She went on to describe how she and a few colleagues had been brought to Detroit soon after the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013 and tasked with channeling funds into the city.

According to Elizabeth, “At that point, we had HHF and the city needed demo funds. We asked if demos prevented abandonment and nobody could tell us.” In lieu of numerical evidence, Elizabeth recalled how municipal and nonprofit workers had taken her and her colleagues on tours of the city, focusing on neighborhoods with concentrations of empty buildings. They then observed demolitions in progress and returned after the lots had been covered with grass seed. As Elizabeth recalled, “That change, from empty houses and stores to grass, was such a big thing. It

felt better. Obviously. We authorized some pilot funds to see if the data would bear it out. Congress got involved too and changed HHF to allow demo." I heard similar things from DLBA administrators, including the media relations specialist who was speaking into the bus intercom. We were driving into a 'target neighborhood,' and he noted how hundreds of demolitions had happened on its outskirts in recent months. Then he pointed to a crew that was painting the outside of a two-story craftsman style home. There was a "For Sale" sign planted in the yard. "When the people see that we're making an investment in the value of their neighborhood, they feel better about making investments in themselves," his voice echoed through the coach, which stopped in front of the craftsman so we could disembark.

On the front porch of the craftsman, we heard from a Black man named Dino who described himself as its "principal investor." An online search would show that the structure had been owned by the same limited license corporation for the better part of a decade, and that the LLC had been hit with repeated maintenance tickets after the front porch had collapsed. Part of it had tumbled into the neighbors' yard. The porch had now been firmly reconstructed, and a round of applause greeted Dino who opined on how asking prices had risen from $75,000 to $150,000 in just over a year. In his words, "Jefferson-Chalmers [the neighborhood] is taking off. And we're so happy the DLBA is helping to clear the way to make that happen." This was followed by a walking tour of several other homes and a commercial space the investor was readying for sale. Before we were loaded back onto the bus, he described how the renovations were being funded, in part, through municipal subsidies tied to the neighborhoods around which the DLBA was concentrating demolitions.

Returning to my seat, I plopped back down next to Elizabeth, who asked, "Wasn't that exciting to see?" I agreed, but proceeded to ask what she thought about demolitions clearing way

for investors like Dino. For contrast, I described Melissa and Craig's struggle to finance a renovation in a home surrounded by empty buildings. "They've owned that house for years, shouldn't we use funds and demolitions to help them too?" I inquired. The bus was passing through a neighborhood in which only a few obviously inhabited houses were scattered amidst empty dwellings and the burned-out husk of a former school. I pointed out the window, "Shouldn't these people?" Elizabeth gave a brief reply, which began with a description of how limited funds could not be spread thin enough to help everyone. "So," she concluded, "We need to concentrate on the parts of the city where we can preserve and grow value. That's what targeted demos do. We don't have evidence showing value in a place like this to support that mission." While the experience of watching building removals might have filled Elizabeth and her colleagues with a hunch that demolitions made things 'feel better,' those feelings were only channeled toward neighborhoods in which removals might produce returns on investment. We sat in silence for the rest of the ride and said a curt goodbye when it concluded.

Within the prism of federal funding forwarded by people like Elizabeth, the primary intent of demolitions is to increase property value, as represented in the renovation and sale of buildings like those Dino put on show. This goal was encoded through algorithmic systems like MCI and others that parceled out care to some parts of the city and denied it to others. To be sure, the assumptions baked into targeted processes of building removal obscure even the possible existence of people like Melissa and Craig — relatively wealthy people who renovated houses in neighborhoods with empty buildings and low property values. These assumptions make evident how concepts like 'value' and 'growth' do not exist independently of the rhetorical and technological processes that bring them into existence (MacKenzie 2008). Urban political economist Rachel Weber (2016) examines how the 'boom and bust' cycles taken to be

characteristic of capitalist property markets are not mere metaphors, but the product of pay scales and incentive structures through which cycles of investment and disinvestment are made into routinized performances. Elizabeth and her colleagues participated in similar routines, further revealing how the geographic allocation of value is as much a product of technical rationalities as it is bodily feelings. Remind yourself of how it was the feelings of professional administrators as they watched buildings fall that routed new streams of demolition funding to Detroit to begin with. Meanwhile, efforts to stretch those feelings toward the needs of people living outside 'high value' targeted neighborhoods were met with allegations that evidence did not exist to make such efforts worthwhile.

~~Racial~~ Valuation in Algorithmic Space

In her critique of "algorithmic violence," geographer Sara Safransky (2020) notes how "how seemingly neutral technologies can be embedded with social values, assumptions, and biases" (216). To do so, Safransky examines the correspondence between twentieth-century rating systems that enabled the nonwhite communities to be 'redlined' out of federal mortgage programs and twenty-first-century Market Value Analysis (MVA) systems that cluster public investments within wealthier neighborhoods. Safrasky's aim mirrors sociologist of technology Ruha Benjamin's (2019) contention that the opaque operations of technical systems are an "antiblack box" in need of critical interrogation (34-36, cf. Pasquale 2014). Indeed, MVA justifies municipal disinvestment from communities of color due to the fact that their property values are lower than others, a fact stems directly from the antiblack remit of centuries of American real estate practices (Hillier 2003; Rothstein 2017; Taylor 2019). Amidst the neoliberal directive for wrenching down funds spent on municipal care, then, MVA produces

racialized distributions of resources that can be represented as race-neutral considerations of financial value (Safransky 2020: 211-212).

The Maximizing Community Impact (MCI) tool and other algorithmic geographies of building removal entail logics akin to MVA. Neighborhoods with higher property values — like the one where Kayla and Scott purchased a home or the district where Dino had acquired significant holdings — receive desired forms of assistance, with empty buildings being physically swept from their borders. Meanwhile, locations with lower values, including the blocks where Melissa, Craig, Louise, Tiya, and CJ lived, are left to fend for themselves. When Melissa pleaded for assistance to remove the vacant buildings that abutted her home, a DLBA administrator deferred to algorithmic decision making. Melissa's frustration was shared by others. I once observed a meeting of the DLBA board of directors where a member of the public declared, "You all are just doing demolitions and putting in resources to the white parts of town. Hoping us Black folks pack up and get gone." Were this the case, it would correspond to the distinction between 'old' and 'new' Detroiters that is narrated as a Black/white binary (Kinney 2016; Pedroni 2011). And yet, when I recounted this occurrence to Martin, he disputed their characterization by analyzing the census-reported characteristics of the neighborhoods into which the DLBA sought to drive investment. According to Martin's analysis, Detroit's "High Value" and "Middle High Value" neighborhoods were predominantly Black and Latinx. Meanwhile, the city's white residents were most likely to live in the "Middle Low Value" and "Low Value" neighborhoods where demolitions could not occur.

On its face, Martin's analysis appears to cut against allegations that demolitions cut a purposefully antiblack geography. Indeed, it shows how demolitions were deliberately configured to increase the financial value and mortgage potential of neighborhoods that had

fewer white residents. As Martin put it, "If anything our demos aren't helping whiter neighborhoods." But keep in mind the peculiarities of the ten percent of Detroiters identified as 'non-Hispanic white' in census statistics. Many of these people are working poor, and some are classified as 'white' even as they might identify otherwise[26]. Even as the twenty-first century has seen a significant number of white newcomers to Detroit who congregate close to the central business district, their combined wealth paled in comparison to Detroit's handful of majority-Black mansion districts[27]. The neighborhood where Kayla and Scott bought their home was not one of these elite areas, but the median income of the 3,123 people who lived there was $56,245. 93% of them identified as Black. As demolitions operate to increase the value of neighborhoods like this one, they highlight how Detroit's racial geographies undermine stereotyped binaries of whiteness as wealth and Blackness as tantamount to poverty.

These binaries do come into view, however, when tools developed to place Detroit's neighborhoods within a hierarchy of financial value are taken beyond the city limits. Let's return to the training on "Demolition and Neighborhood Stabilization: The Growth Potential of Removal" where I first introduced you to Martin. His presentation was followed by a man identified as "an expert on the economics of urban property." This presenter thanked Martin and the DLBA for their work developing means of using census tract information, including on property sales, income, foreclosure rates in order to "differentiate the value of neighborhoods to enable targeted interventions." The crux of the presentation was an invitation to consider how algorithms like the one used to identify where demolitions might reasonably clear ground in Detroit could be adapted to other ends. For instance, slides illustrated how applying the MCI in

[26] John Hartigan (2000) captures the out-of-place experience of low-income white Detroiters. Meanwhile, Andrew Shryock (2008) examines how census technologies recode Arab and Arab-American identifying people, of whom Detroit has a significant minority population, as 'white.'
[27] Recent sales prices in those districts average between $700,000 and $1.1 million.

Milwaukee could identify neighborhoods where developers might benefit from tax-reductions, or in Oakland it could be used to prioritize emergency response. Like the MVA Safransky analyzes, in these situations, neighborhoods with higher incomes and property values would receive special treatment, while lower-valued ones would be ignored. Unlike Detroit's demolitions, however, demographic data showed that it was predominantly white neighborhoods in Milwaukee and Oakland that would receive tax breaks and faster ambulances. When deployed in Detroit, the demolition algorithm might have steered assistance away from white residents, but when taken outside the city limits, it brought prevailing assumptions about hierarchies of race and economic value back into alignment.

For his part, the property economist had raised the issue of racial disparities in an effort to warn the audience about the possibility that they could be reproduced through decisions made purely on the basis of economic data. Yet I could not help but notice the notes being scribbled by the man to my left, whose nametag identified him as an urban planning master's student from Cincinnati. Square in the middle of the page he had scratched, "Property value = Data proxy for race." It was underlined, seemingly for good measure. This student shuffled out of the training before it finished, so I did not get the opportunity to ask what the meaning of his notes were. Legally, municipal decision making on the basis of racial categories is forbidden. But decisions on the basis of income, property value, and other economic indicators are permitted. We might argue, encouraged[28]. It does not take much creativity to imagine the power of knowing the conjunction between property value and race. As the cases drawn from Milwaukee and Oakland illustrated — intentionally or not — racial discrimination and the reinforcement of white

[28] Polluting industries, for instance, justify subjecting nonwhite communities to harmful runoff by arguing they have chosen those locations because they have the lowest costs of doing business (Kurtz 2009). Ecocritic Rob Nixon (2011) discusses how this occurs at a planetary scale.

privilege can easily be the subtext of technologies for economic differentiation.

When this chapter began, we preceded from the seeming contradiction between building removals and the stabilization of affordable housing. The period between 2014 and 2020 saw more than $500 million poured into demolitions in Detroit on these grounds, with much of this funding redirected from relief efforts that failed to prevent millions of Americans from being evicted from their homes. The specificities of this funding stream and the normative experiences of people managing it resulted in an algorithmic allocation of building removals only in the vicinity of Detroit's wealthiest neighborhoods. By linking demolition approvals to their potential to expand the physical landscape of mortgageability, the algorithmic decisions set in motion by Martin and others at the DLBA ensured empty buildings remained an imposition to people like Melissa and Craig. While their particular family had the resources necessary to shore up their home using savings and credit cards, they were prevented from accessing the sorts of low-rate loan products that people like Kayla, Scott, and Dino found in ready supply. At first glance, the uneven terrain of neighborhood stabilization in Detroit appears to cut against allegations that the status quo of financial assistance reinforces white privilege. However, when situated within other geographies, the very algorithm that delimits the geography of demolition emphasizes how race-based decisions are implicit within routinized decisions of economic uplift.

Chapter 4
Decline Economies

In the time I spent with planning and redevelopment administrators working in Detroit's municipal government and the multitude of NGOs that intersect with their efforts, I regularly heard talk of "putting houses into production." In one such instance, a woman I call Andrea, a project coordinator at the Detroit Land Bank Authority, was describing the authority's operations to an official from Cleveland when she said, "We are trying to get batches of 300 houses into production every month this year." In so doing, she referenced a digital dashboard projected on a screen in the conference room. Titled, "Residential Production Flow," the dashboard included a variety of metrics, including progress toward an annual goal of 4,000. Flipping to another screen would have revealed similar meters organized around "Commercial Production Flow." As the non-profit, quasi-governmental entity in control of approximately one in four properties in the city, you might think that Andrea was referencing targets to construct new housing units on some of the more than sixty-thousand grass-covered parcels in its inventory. She was not. Instead, when Andrea and others discussed goals, quotas, and metrics about 'production,' they were describing plans for the removal of the fifty thousand empty buildings they estimated to stand in Detroit, especially the forty thousand owned by the DLBA.

For the DLBA and related organizations, the number of buildings reduced to rubble were a key index of productive capacities. Regular reports distributed amongst the authority's departments and funders described the various 'pipelines' through which the agency worked to fulfill its mission to "[return] Detroit's vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed property to productive

use." As these reports describe, between 2014 and 2018, the DLBA sold 3,772 structures to new owners and demolished 15,184. To be clear, in most cases of demolition in Detroit, building removal does not signal the imminent construction of something new, and over the same period only 1,843 new structures were built within the city limits. This is not a new process, and since 1950, approximately one-third of Detroit's building stock — over 250,000 structures — has been removed without replacement. Thus, when the DLBA took over control of municipal demolition and land management operations in 2014, it entered into a terrain in which unmaking the built environment was already an end in and of itself.

Figure 12 Residential Production Flow. Photo by Chad Livengood.

This chapter takes the overlap of production with destruction literally rather than as just a potentially convenient metaphor. It does so because building removals are often analyzed as a necessary component in the metaphorical 'creative destruction' that Marx (1993) and others position as essential to the maintenance of capitalism[1]. In particular, this is because demolitions

[1] Schumpeter's (1950) formulation of creative destruction deviates slightly from Marx's, but mainly preserves his insights that capitalism is driven through the routinized destruction of gains.

upend the spatial fixes of capital by freeing up territory for the construction of something new. In a familiar arc, luxury condos replace working-class homes, destination neighborhoods supplant red-light districts, suburban tracts rise where farmhouses once stood (Harms 2017; Smith 2005). Across these instances, demolitions are understood to occur because there are greater possibilities for profit in whatever comes afterward. I do not refuse this understanding of capital accumulation as spatially and temporally manifest. However, positioning removals as only one step in a metaphorical process obscures how capital does not just accrue as existing structures are destroyed and new ones built up in their stead. Because the majority of Detroit's demolished buildings are only ever imagined to be replaced by grass or clover, they offer an invitation to dwell on the ways removals are not simply profitable because of speculative imagination, including those we observed in Chapter Three. Rather, profits amass through literal destruction. The labor regimes, machineries, and embodied inequities that make demolitions profitable are adapted from artifacts of Fordist production. By focusing on these adaptations, especially as they occur through grapple-bucket excavators, this chapter pays particular attention to the ways white, masculine security and antiblack, misogynist precarity persist in transitions from economic landscapes of industrial growth to those of postindustrial decline.

Decline Economies

Detroit is the origin point of Fordist mirages of full employment and collective protection through industrial capitalism[2]. It is the location where Fordism as a political economic and affective rationality is inextricable from the personal and industrial projects of Henry Ford the man. Ford built his first assembly line in Detroit, and people laboring in factories continue to

[2] They are pipedreams because even the most developed Fordist-Keynesian systems were predicated on the exclusionary allocation of benefits (Roediger and Esch 2012; Sugrue 2005).

churn out durable goods in city, though none of them emblazoned with Ford's name[3]. Getting a job "down at the plant" is still a sensical statement, including for operations that produce metal, watches, clothing, automobiles, and their components. These are jobs that raise families, buy houses, and sometimes come with pensions and working conditions negotiated in union contracts. However, the decomposing hulks of defunct factories, some of bearing Ford's mark, gesture to the ways that dignified waged labor and the industrial processes it powers are increasingly scarce. This is not just the case in Detroit, the Rust Belt, or North America (cf. High and Lewis 2007). On a broadly distributed scale, the securities that some once drew from industrial production have evaporated (Muehlebach 2012; H. White 2012). In their absence, people inhabit the anxious precarity of "post-Fordism," a capitalism without well-compensated work, and sometimes without work entirely (Allison 2012; Berlant 2011; Dudley 1997). And yet, as excavators clear away the wreckage left by this transition, their operators are not the ultimate grave-diggers of capital that Marx (2017, 11) might have hoped for. Instead, as we will see, the economic landscapes people encounter in the elimination of Fordist projects are ones that are tuned to exacerbate their already unequal states of play.

In order to make the extractive economies of demolition profitable, people who amassed implements of mass production recast them into tools for mass disposal. Though sometimes overshadowed by production and consumption, disposal is what makes political economic relations possible (Gille 2007). Technical processes for picking things apart are just as essential to the accumulation of capital as those that put them together in the first place (J. O. Reno 2015). Building removals offer an instance in which ownership of the means of production is recast into

[3] Ford was an early pioneer at plant suburbanization. In the 1910s, he shifted operations out of Detroit into locations in adjacent Highland Park and Dearborn to avoid Detroit's municipal taxation and regulatory schemes. The Highland Park plant has been shuttered since the 1970s, but pickup trucks are still produced at the River Rouge facility in Dearborn.

the means of destruction. During my fieldwork, I observed demolitions conducted by dozens of specialized firms licensed by the City of Detroit to manage tens of thousands of removals occurring annually in the city. Many were previously construction and excavating operations that converted dormant trucks and excavators to building removal during slowdowns in those industries. With few exceptions, these enterprises were white-owned companies whose employees returned to suburban homes and equipment yards after days spent demolishing buildings within the limits of a predominantly Black city. As demolitions offer new uses for construction equipment, the process of turning this equipment over tends to sustain the racialized political economic relations in which the means of production is already embedded.

The political economic relations that reinvigorate white-owned construction firms are inextricable from ones that marshal incarcerated people as a labor reserve. In efforts to ensure city residents benefited from what demolition administrators refer to as "Detroit's twenty-first century growth industry," programs were organized to train primarily Black men returning to Detroit from prison to do odd-jobs on demolition sites. Their experiences confirm how picking, sorting, compacting, and other technical labors that sustain capital by motivating undesired matter from place-to-place also tend to be among the most precarious (Fredericks 2018; Millar 2018). At the same time, building removals clarify how precarity for some drives security for others. The people channeled into demolition labor following incarceration find themselves working closely with predominantly white, overwhelmingly male-bodied people who draw dependable salaries from their labors as excavator operators, waste haulers, and administrators. The worksites that bring them together make apparent how — wittingly or not — projects that claim to uplift marginalized people are premised on maintaining the very structural inequalities they aim to mitigate (Fairbanks 2009; West 2016). In particular, demolitions clarify how racially

unequal distributions of income, cyclical employment, and workplace injury are conditioned through pre-existing disparities in accumulations of industrial equipment and operational expertise.

Demolitions rely as much on field site laborers who use retooled equipment to tear unwanted buildings into piles of parts as they do office workers who use specially-formatted spreadsheets to track billing, paychecks, and profit margins. While management may appear disconnected from actually existing landscapes, the two tend to intersect (Pachirat 2013). Work processes move across administrative meetings, technical procedures, and shop floor interactions such that they complicate all-too-easy bifurcations between 'labor' and 'management' or 'skilled' and 'unskilled' people (Burawoy 1982). Nevertheless, even as the work of building removal laces together administrators, managers, machine operators, and laborers, the routes they form are shot through with racialized and gendered assumptions about the contributions they make. As this chapter proceeds, it underscores how — despite the existence of people of color and white women as firm owners, laborers, and operators — their qualifications for these roles is regularly called into question by peers who are typically white men. Such occurrences crystalize how presumptions of embodied competency are wielded as a tool for exclusions that fortify privilege.

Detroit, where the employment rates and median income figures fall far below national averages, is often considered in the throes of 'decline,' a designation premised on the elimination of profit-generated enterprises (Pallagst 2013; Ryan 2012). Since 1950, Detroit has shed seventy-percent of its waged jobs, including more than 300,000, or ninety percent, of its manufacturing jobs. As this sweep corresponds to the emergence of empty buildings where homes, factories, stores, schools, and other places once stood, decline appears to be what remains when people and

production seem to have vanished to suburbs, to sunbelts, and to offshore (Apel 2015; Walley 2013). This chapter traces how these landscapes are not devoid of economic life, but grounds for extraction. They are decline economies that reconfigure the remains of Fordist industry in ways that remain vested in hierarchical differentiation and exploitation of workers' bodies. Indeed, heavy machineries, racialized labor forces, and gendered expectations of work capacity critical to building removal as a viable practice evoke those of twentieth-century mass production. By attending to how building removal unevenly distributes livelihoods and profits by reshuffling machineries, inequalities, and expectations of industrial life, this chapter questions assumptions of complete political economic rupture upon which analytics of ostensibly postindustrial economic transformations are predicated.

Making a 'Gold Mine'

When examining the technical means necessary for demolition, the excavator literally and figuratively dominates the scene. As I observed, demolition crews consisted of as few as two people: a licensed excavator operator and a laborer. While operators pilot excavators to knock holes in a building before sometimes literally pulling it from its foundation and sorting its components so they can be transferred to specialized landfills, laborers complete tasks ranging from maintaining dust suppressing water mists to jumping atop waste haulers to force in stubborn bits of plaster and studs. This said, media reports of demolitions centered on excavators, with descriptions of multi-ton machines ripping buildings into shreds, crowding out people and equipment on the scene. Such an understanding was reprised during a heavily anticipated demolition observed by Detroit's mayor and top advisors where one administrator kicked-off the proceedings by imitating a racing announcer's declaration with "Excavators, start

your engines!" Preoccupation with a singular piece of equipment crops from view how building removal sites coordinate excavators that 'knock down' buildings with waste haulers who 'load out' mangled parts to area landfills. There are also usually skid-steers involved in leveling out topsoil for 'site finalization,' to say nothing of the people who mobilize machineries on the ground. This section unpacks the assemblages that make demolition possible, situating the iconic excavator amidst relationships between people, machines, and employers. Doing so finds how machineries and operational knowledge once devoted to repetitive construction are converted into a profitable means of building removal.

Though differentiated by brands like Volvo, John Deere, Komatsu, Liebherr, and Caterpillar, excavators are mass produced machines. The general architecture of each is effectively the same. No matter the make, for my interlocutors, a new, demolition-capable excavator ran three to five hundred thousand dollars. It included a 'house' consisting of a diesel engine, hydraulic pumps, and a massive counterweight resting atop a continuous-track undercarriage. From a cab attached to the house, an operator could use a set of joysticks and control switches to power the machine on, move it back and forth, swing it around, and maneuver the boom, bucket, and any other attachments. At a glance, the excavators that chewed through Detroit's buildings resemble those you might see digging through earth or concrete on any construction site. A key difference, however, is that following mid-2000s revisions to Detroit's municipal demolition codes, demolitions were required to be completed using a "grapple-bucket" rather than a standard excavator. Grapple-buckets are excavators fitted with an additional hydraulic 'thumb' that closes over the standard-issue construction bucket. Continuing anatomical metaphors that see excavator booms referred to as 'arms' and buckets as 'wrists' or 'hands' engaging the thumb allows the machine to scoop and grip building materials.

Figure 13 Following 'knock down,' an operator uses a grapple-bucket excavator to 'load out' a small commercial building. Out of the frame, a laborer uses a firehose to direct water onto the bucket. Photo by author.

As the only slight differences between grapple-buckets and standard excavators makes evident, building removal does not require entirely novel mechanic architectures. Francesca Ammon's (2016) history of the bulldozer traces how the continuous tracks critical to the success of Allied tank assaults during World War II were incorporated into construction equipment on the home front. Linked assumptions between destruction and victory are more than mere metaphor (Highsmith 2015). This said, excavators cut a slightly different path from bulldozers, even though both are associated with the destructive work of building removals. Chase, a sixty-year old, white co-owner of a company I call Mack Brothers Construction helped me make this connection. Square-jawed with close-cropped hair, Chase typically wore a suit and tie to the office of the company his uncle had founded in 1952. Chase had worked for the company since before graduating from high school. He recalled piloting excavators around 1970s housing developments where Mack Brothers had specialized in excavating spaces for the basements, roadbeds, and sewage infrastructures that enabled the sprawl of midcentury suburban expansion.

The suit had become the uniform of the 'desk job' he had taken on coordinating operations after purchasing a stake in the firm a decade or so before.

As we spoke about the history of the company, I noticed the digitized copy of the 1920s postcard that serves as Chase's computer desktop background. In the image, a steam-shovel appears to crush and remove rocks as part of a quarry operation in Northern Michigan. While apparently similar in design to contemporary hydraulic excavators, the motions of steam, and later diesel, shovel arms are controlled by chains and pulleys attached to mechanical drivetrains rather than hydraulic fluid pumps. Furthermore, the machine is mounted on railways, evoking modalities of conquest and imperial expansion predating the Second World War hinges on which Ammon's bulldozers swing. Still, as Chase told me, "When my uncle and his friends started this company, that was the sort of equipment they used to build Detroit out." After a pause, he added, "Now we've switched over to taking the city apart." Indeed, in the machine yard adjacent to Chase's office, a mechanic was in the process of welding hydraulic line extensions necessary to affix a thumb onto a newly delivered excavator.

I had met Chase through his uncle Mack, the man from whom Mack Brothers Construction takes its name. As part of my regular fieldwork, I observed demolition sites, often notified of their locations by operators, laborers, and neighbors. On a dreary afternoon, I leaned on the hood of my car watching as Jim, a Mack Brothers operator, swiveled his excavator across a mangle of siding and plaster in order to begin smashing his excavator bucket on the concrete pad that had once been a garage floor. Next to me was Joel, a Mack Brothers laborer who had a few minutes to relax before he would be called on to assist Jim by tossing small bits of concrete into the excavator bucket after the thumb failed to pick them up. With flicks of the joysticks, Jim would hoist the lot into a trailer-mounted dumpster. Chris, who would drive the lot to a crushing

facility, was seated on the curb nearby. Both men straightened up, however, and milled across the street toward the demolition site when a brown, Chevrolet Silverado rounded the corner onto the block. The truck slowed as it approached my position, revealing a door emblazoned with "Mack Bros." in the same cursive script that adorned the excavator, dumpster, and neon t-shirts of workers on the scene. After stopping in front of me, the tinted driver-side window rolled down and an evidently elderly man peered out from behind it. "You the state?" he barked, evincing the disgruntlement with which demolition workers generally treated state environmental and occupational health regulators, the implications of which are examined in Chapter Five. His tone lightened after I explained that I was a researcher trying to figure out how demolitions work. Introducing himself as Mack, he continued, "Didn't think you were the state. We tell our guys not to talk to the state."

Following this encounter, Mack notified me before his regular visits to the company's worksites. Though in his late eighties and long-since retired, Mack remained known to company employees, and several times a week he would make the trip to demolition sites from his sprawling ranch forty miles outside the city limits. Like many contractors and operators, he left his suburban abode between five and six o'clock in the morning in order to allow adequate time to stop for a drive through coffee on his way into the city. On one of these occasions, Mack described how Mack Brothers came to be as we watched Joel and Jim unload an excavator from a trailer in front of a vacant two-family flat they were scheduled to demolish on Detroit's central east side. The full name of the company listed on incorporation documents from the 1950s was "Mack and Brothers Construction." Nevertheless, this proved unwieldy, and in the intervening years the company became known as Mack Brothers in all but the most official capacities. Even this was a bit of a fiction since, as Mack would tell me, "I don't have any brothers, not by blood.

It was me and two friends — Willie and Johnnie — that started things, but brothers sounded better."

As Chase had told me, the three specialized in excavations, and the company soon grew to have a fleet of excavators, gravel trucks, and people employed to work them. Like Chase, many employees were also kin. Still, despite a continued push to build new houses on Detroit's exurban fringe, the effects of a stagnating regional population have been apparent to the construction industry for a long time. As Mack tells it, "Digging ditches just wasn't paying the bills starting in the 80s. But it only took a couple thumbs to move into demolition. If your operator can scoop up dirt he can scoop up a building. We sent in some bids and the business came roaring back." To reinforce his point, he pantomimed the joystick nudges Jim was likely making as he butted the excavator bucket against the first-story of the structure, causing it to tilt sideways as studs snapped and separated from foundation blocks. By Mack's recollection, those are the same motions necessary to pack soil into a vertical wall.

Conversions occurred to more than excavators. Indeed, as Mack pointed out, the trailers that Chris towed as he drove loads of demolition waste to landfills, concrete to recycling facilities, and metals to scrap yards had, at one point, hauled sand and gravel to construction projects. Before shifting to demolition, the firm had needed to procure hoses for keeping buildings adequately wet and suppressing unwanted dust. Yet even these were easily located when an operator called upon a cousin who was a fire fighter to arrange a donation of used ones. Though the hoses were hooked up to fire hydrants in similar ways, like excavators, they were no longer tools for the construction and preservation of built worlds. With a little creative effort, they could be made implements in tearing those worlds apart.

Figure 14 Waste hauler dumping at landfill. Photo by Able Demolition.

Another demolition contractor, whose family had previously operated an excavating firm before moving into building removal following the complete shutdown of residential construction after US housing finance markets collapsed in 2008, described a similar changeover. In his words, "Demolition let us make abandoned buildings and abandoned tools into a gold mine." It is difficult for me to put a precise figure on this gold mine, since contractors were reluctant to disclose their profit margins for fear of being underbid or, worse, having agencies that fund demolitions impose stringent price caps. Nevertheless, the new Silverados, F-150s, Cadillacs, and Lincolns driven by contractors and their families, as well as the palatial homes in which they lived, appeared to indicate that business was going alright.

It is worth reflecting on how Mack Brothers and other *construction* companies specialize in demolishing structures, not building them. Whether these firms transitioned to building removal when work slowed in the twentieth century or as it stopped entirely during the early years of the 2000s, a few spot welds and hydraulic extensions allow machines that dug out the foundations for Fordist industrial growth to remove such foundations from the world. This is not a process limited to Detroit. Excavators loaded up in equipment yards in Southeast Michigan were towed to demolition sites in Pontiac, Toledo, Flint, Ypsilanti, and other locales where once

humming assembly lines have gone quiet. Converting equipment from construction to demolition entails bringing machineries of mass production to new fields. Family firms like Mack Brothers that dominate demolition contracting (that is, those in single-industries with employees possessing little more than high school diplomas) are the sorts of companies and people glossed as 'left behind' by economic changes occurring between the late twentieth century and the twenty-first[4]. Nevertheless, it is in such companies with the need to provide regular employment for distributed kin relations where ideas for transforming work from production to disposal took hold. That, by virtue of these histories, many such firms were closely held by white, suburban families and tended to employ white, suburban men did not escape the notice of demolition administrators concerned that people of color not continue to be shut out from relatively high-paying trades. The next section turns to the hopes that such opportunities brought for predominantly Black city residents and leveled expectations that occurred when they encountered engrained worksite disparities.

Training Expectations

On one occasion when I observed demolitions with Mack, we watched a stretch of six, two-story brick houses being razed on Detroit's far west side. Mack arrived with a pair of black coffees — bitter brews in jumbo-sized Styrofoam cups — and we sat on the tailgate watching three excavators be unloaded in the early morning fog. Jim and Joel were among the teams working this job, joined by excavator operators Bill and Billy — a father and son pair — as well as laborers TJ and Maurice. Later, we would be joined by Chris and two other waste haul drivers,

[4] Consider how the 21st century rise of nationalist populism in North America and Europe has been framed as a response to the economic dislocation of white, working people, even though support has been firmly grounded by racist anxieties among wealthier white people experiencing little economic distress (Walley 2017; see also Dudley).

Tony and Steve, as well as field supervisor Frank. Mack gazed at the scene, a slight smile spreading over his wrinkled face as he said, "They say there ain't any jobs, that people can't find work, that it's not stable like it used to be, but look at this. We got white guys, Black guys, and a Latino all earning their way together. It really shows that with a strong back and hard work ethic, you'll be alright. You'll be alright." Here, Mack gestured to how demolition work is bundled as a 'man's job,' something that is the topic of the following section. Left entirely unremarked, however, is how, despite a relatively multi-generational, racially integrated job site, the work positions on that site were distributed along a racial gradient. White guys — Jim, Bill, Billy, Chris, Tony, Steve, and Frank — worked better paid jobs that, with the exception of Frank, were subject to union contracts. Black guys — Joel and Maurice — and TJ, the Latino, were general laborers earning eleven dollars an hour for at-will employment. Pressing on this discrepancy reveals how discriminatory histories of racialized employment exclusion continue to shape distributions of economic opportunity.

The Mack Brothers worksite was not an anomaly. Across firms, operators and waste haulers tended to be white, while laborers were more typically of color. At sites where laborers were employed through the local laborers union, workers were more often white. Regardless, they were almost all men. The few demolition firms owned by people of color offered a marked contrast to this racialization as their workforces were mostly Black men. These latter firms tended to be headquartered within Detroit's city limits and employ non-union workers. While this made equipment yards easier to reach for city residents, non-union status made such firms the object of ridicule from predominantly white unionized workers and the firms that employed them. Ken, a Black man in his fifties who was part owner of a building removal firm, explained his reasoning for non-union status, "I'm from a union family. My dad is UAW and that put food

on the table, clothes on my back, and college on my résumé. But these union guys, when you sign-up with them it means you have to hire their guys. Their guys aren't my guys. We need to build wealth in our community and that's what I aim to do." [5] Ken's statement gestures to the complicated histories of organized labor and race. Although Ken's father was an automotive line worker, Ken identifies him in terms of the union — the United Autoworkers — with which he still affiliates as a retiree. Nevertheless, as people of Ken's father's age experienced, shop floors were often places where labor organizers turned a blind eye to everyday racism that denied employment to people of color (Thompson 2001). In some cases, such practices were institutionalized through collective bargaining (H. Hill 1996). By the same token, in a moment when most union-credentialed operators and waste haulers were white men, Ken portrays a commitment to building wealth by hiring "his guys," Black men, for these positions.

Racial disparities between union and non-union workforces are not accidental. Unlike industrial unions who were forced to contend with militant calls for integration from shop floors whose hiring doors opened into neighborhoods of color (Roediger and Esch 2012), skilled trades collectives were able to mobilize physical geography as a device for maintaining largely white memberships. In a story repeated to me by union and non-union workers, supervisors, and trainers alike, union-operated training facilities for electricians, carpenters, iron workers, and others were largely relocated from Detroit during the mid-twentieth century alongside their mostly white members. While most unions maintained executive offices within the city, becoming a union member required venturing beyond its limits. The operating engineers' outdoor training facility, for instance, was a sixty-mile drive northwest from Detroit in a town

[5] Opportunities at firms like Ken's were not plentiful. Firms owned by white men accounted for three-quarters of demolitions between 2014 and 2018, while Black-owned firms accounted for sixteen percent. This occurred through a bidding process that channeled work to larger, exclusively white-owned firms with greater bonding capacities, even when their bids were higher.

known for being the home to several white supremacist organizations. As one instructor at a pre-apprenticeship program funded by local unions to funnel Detroit teenagers of color into union training programs told me, "If teens can pass the math and reading tests and have transportation, I try to suggest the carpenters, plumbers, electricians, or iron workers. Warren and Ferndale and Wixom aren't Detroit, but they aren't hostile like the folks in Howell." At least by this person's interpretation, selecting a trade brought with it the vexing stakes of being a Black face in one of many white places.

Still, the protected geographies of instructional location softened. Operating engineers were quick to note how their union had worked to remedy disparities, pointing to recent trainees who were men and women of color, including those recruited as part of pre-apprenticeship 'pipelines' like the one mentioned above. This said, current members received first notification when applications for paid apprenticeships opened each year. Bill, a white operating engineer for Mack Brothers in his early forties, described learning when this four-day window would open at a union cookout the summer after his son graduated from high school. "Billy, I sat him down and told him, you're going to go down and apply, or I'm going to get ten of your friends to do it." Three years out from that interaction, Billy was a licensed excavator operator taking home approximately $28 per hour with pension eligibility and benefits that covered him, his wife, and child with no premium costs. Bill went on to detail how his father had cornered him in a similar conversation. Indeed, many excavator operators recounted how fathers, uncles, and other male figures had drawn them into the profession. This mode of recruitment was by no means limited to union apprenticeships, and non-union contractors filled available operator positions, albeit at lower wages than union firms by leaning on the friends, brothers, sons, and cousins of firm owners and employees. Such reliance helps explain, at least in part, how operators tended to find

themselves with "their guys."

Just as disparities in access to employment as equipment operators and drivers indexed the uneven pasts through which these professions had been organized, for some they also signaled an opportunity for change. When the first installment of what became $450 million in federal demolition funding was announced in 2014, it was as Detroit's official unemployment rate was hitting twenty-one percent, compared to six percent in the rest of the metropolitan region. Workforce development administrators seized on this disparity to contend that if unemployed people could be certified to operate heavy machinery, they might find a source of steady work that would otherwise only benefit a slim band of mostly white and suburban-dwelling, operators and contractors. As Janine, a non-profit workforce training coordinator said to a gathering of colleagues that year, "We're going to be demolishing houses here in Detroit till the cows come home. This is a 21st century growth industry here in Detroit, and it is a great first rung on the jobs ladder for people who are difficult to employ." Here, 'difficult to employ' is a euphemism for anyone who has been without formal employment for more than a year, especially the two-thousand or so Detroiters who return every year from incarceration[6]. Reflecting advice from criminal justice scholars and activists (Berg and Huebner 2011), workforce development officials speculated that demolition could operate similar to construction trades, which were known as being 'felon-friendly,' and provide a steady source of income, easing the 'transition back into society' for people who had been locked-up for periods ranging from months to decades.

I met Joel — a Black father of three no older than Bill — years before Mack and I

[6] This reflects a trend of using prisoners and newly decarcerated people as a surplus labor pool for demolition, including during midcentury urban renewal projects and as part of teams tasked with 'cleaning up' buildings burned as part of Detroit's 1967 uprising against police brutality and racially restrictive housing ("Labor for Vacancy" Cavanagh Papers, Wayne State University Reuther Library. Box 302, Folder 4).

observed him working as a demolition laborer. We were both enrolled in an eight-week training program designed to channel unemployed people into demolition employment. Balding, with a monotone voice and stoic face that only rarely betrayed his emotions, Joel had returned to Detroit from a northern Michigan prison where he had spent one-year of a three-year sentence following a marijuana charge. His participation in the training program had been approved as part of a parole agreement, with the tuition paid for by a federal grant. Mine was covered with several thousand dollars in research funds. For eight to ten hours per day, five days per week, we sat with six other currently unemployed Black folks, three recently released from prison. A rotation of instructors taught us about worksite safety protocols, hazardous materials regulations, and résumé writing. In time, we migrated from classrooms out into an equipment yard where we learned to drive a commercial waste hauling truck and operate an excavator. One-by-one, we practiced using joysticks to reposition the excavator bucket and gouge holes in the yard's gravel covering. Stacks of pallets stood in as mock-ups for the structures of buildings to be demolished, and I was the last to get the hang of punching the excavator's auxiliary hydraulic switch to trigger the thumb such that we could grasp pallets and maneuver them into the open top of the trailer mounted dumpster.

On the bus ride home one day, Joel mimed using the joysticks as he described how he had dreamt of getting a job demolishing the vacant houses that abutted each side of his mother's eastside home. Katrease, another trainee in her twenties, called over from her seat across the aisle, "Naw man, I'm gonna get to work on that stadium. None of that demo for me." At the time, the bus was rolling past the site where a taxpayer subsidized hockey arena was to be constructed. Behind fences, excavators could be seen digging the first trenches into the site. As part of the deal providing a $260-million subsidy to the millionaire owners of the hockey team,

city administrators had slipped in a provision requiring that more than half of the construction work hours be performed by city residents. This clause was one of the few commitments developers made when they received public funds to build apartments, condominiums, and other structures. Contractors that failed to meet the spatial allocation of labor-time were fined, with funds being channeled into the sort of job training programs where I met Katrease and Joel. These fines included one for $52 million paid by the stadium developers. In that instance, contractors first attempted to avoid the payment by contending that they could not find a qualified workforce. When city councilors attempted to enforce similar provisions in demolition contracts, they were prevented from doing so because funding for removals was routed through non-profit public authorities like the DLBA rather than directly from the general fund.

Neither Katrease nor Joel's dreams came to fruition. Though both received the state licenses necessary to operate excavators or drive commercial waste haulers at the conclusion of the training program, they lacked the social networks or union affiliations that might provide them with a foot in the door to demolition contractors[7]. Through a 'placement coordinator' at the same non-profit that had sponsored their training program tuitions, Katrease found a full-time job emptying trash bins owned by a downtown business association. Joel, meanwhile, cycled through a series of part-time landscaping and snow removal positions. Neither earned much more than the state minimum wage, which at the time was $8.15. Such results were typical. Several months after appearing to place such faith in demolition as a means of upward mobility, Janine, the workforce training coordinator spoke with me, "We're just not seeing the placements we thought, but if our trainees work hard at it, they'll get there." Similar, rosy words appeared in a report Janine's colleagues prepared for to the public and philanthropic entities subsidizing

[7] Some trainees did not receive their licensures because state law disqualified people with certain felony records.

demolition training programs. Nevertheless, the report's footnotes revealed how, out of a total of 120 trainees, seventy-five were employed by demolition contractors, three as operators and seventy-two as "general labor."

It was several years before I heard from Joel again. Like many trainees, he eventually did find employment in building removal, just not behind the wheel of a waste hauler or the joysticks of an excavator. Instead, the placement coordinator had found him a spot as a 'general laborer' at Mack Brothers, a job that paid $11 an hour and provided family benefits at a reasonable cost. One afternoon, following a ten-hour stint heaving hoses and building parts around a demolition site, Joel reflected on his job as we sat in the neon glow of a bar he frequented with other laborers, "This is a good job," he began, "It's not what I wanted or thought that training we did would lead to, but it pays nice and comes with benefits. My back hurts, but not so bad as mowing lawns and shoveling snow." TJ, who was seated just next to us chimed in, "Yeah, they even held my job after I sprained my ankle and needed to be out for a week." A month or so before, TJ had landed hard after jumping down from the waste hauler he had scrambled atop to unfurl a cover meant to prevent dust from blowing off the waste as it hurtled down the expressway. Both men exploded in laughter when I hazarded a question about whether TJ had received workplace injury compensation or used his federally guaranteed, albeit unpaid, injury leave. As TJ said, "Man, that's some white nonsense. I'm lucky they held the job, in the first place. My other job, landscaping, a guy stepped on a nail and they paid him his day and told him to not come back."

Though worksite injuries were not commonplace, when they occurred it was to laborers, whose bodies were more likely to be exposed than operators and waste haulers who sat in enclosed cabs for most of the day. As is often observed, precariously employed people are more likely to be denied workplace benefits and protections, even if those protections are guaranteed

by statute (Purser 2019). Joel appeared to situate as much when he responded to TJ's description of my inquiry about compensation for workplace injuries, "It's the same as it's always been, you folks take the good jobs and Black folks get what's left. My dad and granddad told me that's the way it was on the line. But you do the job, make your money, and live your life. That's Detroit. That's 'being a productive member of society.'" His characteristic monotone lifted into an ironic lilt as he made air quotes around the final phrase.

For Janine and Mack, demolition offers employment opportunities in which livelihoods may be gained and citizenship exercised through hard work. To return to Mack's words from the beginning of this section, "[W]ith a strong back and hard work ethic, you'll be alright." Yet, such ethics often fail to bear fruit, despite their sustained positioning as lucrative and redemptive in the context of capitalist accumulation (Fairbanks 2009; M. Weber 2001). Joel's statement is, perhaps, more illustrative. Rather than an acclamation of demolition employment as a site of untapped possibility, he locates it within a history of uneven production, not just on the manufacturing line, but in the city he calls home and its broader social field. In Joel's formulation, Detroit is a place where inverse distributions of job possibilities and worksite injuries have refracted racist expectations for some time. To be interpellated within them is to be interpreted as contributing to collective wellbeing, Seen in this light, employment in demolition labor does not appear as a stepping stone to something different, but highlights how employment markets are made ladders for some and quagmires for others. Although Billy and others may secure family wages and benefits from the cabs of excavators and waste haulers, Joel and TJ are barred from such positions because, even though they have mandated credentials to drive these machines, they are shut out from the union entrée and familial connections that might get them behind the wheel.

Bodily Capacities

As much as demolition worksites were characterized by racialized hierarchies in work position, they also exhibited gendered divisions of labor. Work had just started on a one and a half story frame dwelling in Detroit's northeast quadrant when a woman pulled up to the site in an unmarked white pickup truck and strode toward the excavator, waving her hands as if to signal that the operator stop work. As the woman clambered atop the excavator tracks and conversed with the operator, I walked over to a laborer to inquire about who she was. "She's the state," he replied. This said, upon talking with the operator after work had concluded for the day, I learned that the woman in question was not a state regulator, but his wife. Her daily commute brought her close to his worksite that day and she stopped to confirm that he would retrieve their children from school that day as she was required to work late. The misidentification of an operator's partner as regulatory enforcement is revealing. Although the handful of state environmental and occupational health regulators who made occasional appearances on demolition sites were almost evenly split between men and women, these women were typically the only female presences on such sites. This is not to argue that building removal was made possible entirely by men. Administrative staff for the Detroit Land Bank Authority who organized demolition funding and bid specification were just as likely to be women as men; however, demolition contractors, laborers, excavator operators, and other site-based workers were overwhelmingly men. Examining how male coworkers and supervisors position women as out-of-place when they take up work on demolition sites reveals how — despite evidence to the contrary — gendered divisions of labor are experienced through assumptions about the masculine limits of embodied, mechanical knowledge.

The simultaneous flexibility and rigidity with which gender intersects with American industrial work is often illustrated using gendered shifts in labor force participation before, during, and after the Second World War. Historian Ruth Milkman (2016) details how during this period women were purposefully drawn onto production lines when able-bodied men were enlisted in combat. Yet, despite increasing production in postwar years, hiring policies in automotive and industrial sectors ensured women were forced out when men returned home. These moves parallel earlier expansion of 'women's work' in clerical professions during the rise of mass production (Fine 1990). In later decades of the twentieth century, an expanding 'pink-collar' workforce was noted in regulatory, administrative, and service sectors (Freeman 2000; Parreñas 2015). This said, even when non-male bodies are crucial to industrial production, they are frequently obscured (Nakamura 2014). In this way, the figure of the male worker — often inflected with an unstated, racialized whiteness — has maintained popular salience and political importance. Consider how during the presidential election that occurred during my fieldwork, both major candidates came to Detroit and its suburbs to announce their platforms for elevating the standing of working people. For each, the backdrop included cheering ranks of predominantly male employees employed on regional production lines. That demolition worksites reflect gendered imbalances of industrial labor is suggestive of how political economies of production and removal are less distinct than sometimes appears (cf. Reno 2016).

The relative absence of women in building removal training programs was a subject of consternation for the NGO employees who organized them. In the same meeting where Janine discussed the ability of trainees to become excavator operators as an outcome of people who "work hard," she contemplated how only five of the program's participants had been women. In her words, "It's really unfortunate that we can't recruit and retrain more women. I don't know

what it is, but we can't get the numbers." Katrease was one of the few women who even made it through the door. Tall and slim, she described the negotiations necessary to convince the program recruiter she was capable of hefting debris, hoses, and other equipment. I did not observe this interaction, but witnessed others in the employment fairs hosted by elected politicians and non-profit agencies. Mostly male representatives from Janine's program and others displayed pamphlets on tables arranged in conference centers and classrooms where recruiters would ask prospective applicants about their interest in operating an excavator or working as a demolition laborer. "You look like you belong in the beauty shop," one recruiter told a woman with acrylic nails and a blonde weave. The prospective applicant was encouraged to visit the table where "ladies from home health aides" were located rather than consider the "dirty work" of demolition where her ability to wear nails and hairpieces would be limited by gloves and hardhats. Instead, demolition training recruiters sought to identify people whose large bodies and rough hands appeared suited to heavy lifting and rough working conditions, a group comprised overwhelmingly by men[8].

Routing people into particular employment positions based on assumed, gendered bodily capacities is well-documented (Fernandes 1997; Vora 2015), and this instance highlights how these routes can be greased based on outward expressions of gendered self-fashioning. Once in training programs, however, male bodies were disciplined as much as female ones. As part of the agreement Katrease, Joel, and I signed at the outset our demolition training program, we agreed to "come to training everyday in a presentable condition." Such condition included having our

[8] For some programs, this preference was structural, as grants that funded training costs drew on funds that required trainees to meet certain criteria. This commonly included that they be currently unemployed, within a certain age range, and lack education beyond high school equivalent. However, one agency only provided funds to people who did not have dependent children residing at their address. The purpose of this exclusion was never clear, but it worked to eliminate many prospective female trainees.

nails trimmed and faces cleanly shaven. While long nails snagged on gloves and prevented easy handling of equipment controls, facial hair kept respirators from making a complete seal, negating their purpose. Alongside bodily maintenance, we were required to wear the baggy blue workpants, neon shirts, and reflective vests provided as part of the program, as well as non-skid work boots selected from a catalogue. Katrease encountered this uniform with welcome relief. Standing next to me to display our similar figures, she exclaimed, "In our Carhartts [the brand of pants and shirts], we're the same." Nevertheless, I stood with Trent, a middle-aged white man who instructed us in how to properly guide excavators and waste haulers into position, as he observed Katrease and four men set-up for a mock demolition. Katrease lifted a coil of fire hose and lugged it over to a fire hydrant where she used a large wrench to attach one to the other and unleash a torrent of water. From our distance out of earshot, Trent murmured to me, "She works just as hard as the guys. I couldn't even tell that was her." Indeed, as Katrease had noted, carefully bundling clothing around human bodies can subvert established gendered orders (Halberstam 1998). However, the resulting body in this instance is not free of interpellation within presumed hierarchies, but understood as a masculine generic.

Like most trainees, Katrease struggled to gain a foothold using the credentials she had earned, and she worked for almost a year as an "ambassador" for the downtown business association. This position entailed dressing in a bulky, neon work suit and driving a pickup truck around the central business district to retrieve the contents of garbage bins and unload them at a central disposal facility. During this period, Katrease submitted applications to several construction and demolition firms, yet, despite similar credentials as others in our training cohort, never received a call back. It was only after growing disillusioned with the notion that she might ever sit behind an excavator again that Katrease took up a friend's offer to start work

as a tow truck driver. Once again wearing her training Carhartts, she mused about the reactions of motorists whose calls for roadside assistance brought her to their aide, "I wonder what they think when I jump down. Do they see me or the Carhartts?" As Katrease intimates, disparately gendered expectations of bodily capacity and knowledge arc beyond demolition into mundane tasks of changing flat tires and jumpstarting stalled automobiles.

Yet, inferences that women lack insight into the practicalities of demolition were not limited to trainees. For instance, consider the time when I attended a Detroit Building Authority hearing called to determine whether contractors were in compliance with the terms of their contracts. I arrived at the hearing from a demolition site and was still in my work boots, jeans, and work shirt. In the hallway in front of the hearing room I ran into Gwen, a professionally dressed white woman in her thirties who owned a demolition firm along with other members of her family. We spoke briefly about an upcoming company picnic and filed into adjacent seats along the wall of the hearing room.

When Gwen's firm was called, she moved to the front of the rectangular hearing table, explaining to the panel of staff from the DBA, DLBA, and various City of Detroit departments that she had been late in submitting demolition invoices because high winds over several weeks had prevented her firm's crews from safely working. The panel chair, a white man in his forties, was incredulous. Replying to Gwen, he quipped, "That's nice, but typically we need a firm owner here to verify things." Gwen explained that she was a part-owner and the firm's fiduciary executive. "Hmm," mused the panel chair, motioning to me, "Maybe she can have her guy come over and explain why wind affected the work." As Gwen raised her eyebrows, I stammered an explanation that I was not her employee. The situation was resolved by a man who had long supervised demolitions for the City of Detroit, but had only recently been appointed to the panel.

Turning to the panel chair, he said, “Gwen knows how things work. She learned to work an excavator on her daddy’s knee.” Indeed, as Gwen’s father was fond of explaining, he taught his three sons and one daughter how to operate excavators before they could legally drive cars, but only Gwen displayed a knack for balancing the books, something that led to her assuming a managerial role rather than an operator post.

It is remarkable that Gwen, someone identified as a firm owner, had her competency to explain how excavators and demolitions are affected by wind called into question. Meanwhile I, an entirely unknown person, was enrolled as a potential source of expert knowledge. A generous read of this interaction might highlight how it could have been my apparel, more fitting to a demolition worksite than Gwen’s conservative suit, that led the panel chair to dismiss her and single me out. Such an occurrence would fit with the typical experience of executives having little practical understanding of machines and technical processes that ‘subordinates’ understand with intimate familiarity (D. F. Noble 1984). Nevertheless, the means through which the hearing was brought back on track cast doubt on this explanation. It required the substantiation of two men — a City of Detroit employee and Gwen’s father — for Gwen to be considered a reliable source capable of describing jobsite processes under her own steam. Though in a different arena of demolition work, the suggestion that Gwen might need “her guy” to prop up explanations of high wind speeds, unstable structures, and excavator operations, resonates with Katrease’s experience propelling herself into a demolition training program and, later, moving into other employment. Together, they are indicative of how the potential to comprehend how building removal operates has filtered through the lens of a gendered body. In particular, among those who control critical levers of recruitment, training, and contracting, barriers to this knowledge appear gathered around the edges of the male form.

The Ends of Decline

The people and machineries that make demolition possible give caution to claims that twenty-first century landscapes in places like Detroit are those of endemic 'decline' from which opportunities for profit have been evacuated (cf. Dewar and Thomas 2012). To quote my interlocutors, demolition is a "gold mine" and "growth industry" as it reworks firms, machineries, and people around the removal of empty dwellings, factories, and facilities that signal how heady days of industrial life have come and gone. Still, eliminating the very environments that appear to trace 'decline' from the pinnacle of productivity is not simply a step in the progression toward future economic gains. It is itself a profitable enterprise, one that inverts the relationship posited between arenas of decline and profit generation. As empty buildings are placed through the wringer of laborers, operators, grapple-buckets, and others "knock down and load out" buildings to specialized landfills, they crystalize how the landscapes produced by racialized population and capital flight are not ones devoid of profit potential; rather, they form the basis of a sort of decline economy from which new rounds of uneven accumulation can be extracted.

As the 'Motor City,' Detroit has been symbolically linked to automotive manufacturing. This said, the 1953 statement attributed to then General Motors president Charles Wilson, "What is good for General Motors is good for the country," would be laughable more than six decades on from when Wilson is alleged to have uttered it. Cars no longer appear to be king. Witness how, in early 2018, the non-profit authority charged with organizing Detroit's economic development promised online commerce giant Amazon eight billion dollars in public financing, including a thirty-year suspension of corporate taxes, if the firm built located a headquarters

expansion project in the city. In the face of uproar over public subsidies for an immensely profitable company, authority officials argued that landing thousands of engineering and technology positions was worth the expense. Amazon did not take the bait. A few months later, when Ford Motor Company purchased the Michigan Central Station, the long-empty tower that served as an icon of Detroit's industrial arc over the twentieth century, the same authority recommended $101 million in taxpayer subsidies to convert the building and several others into a campus for autonomous vehicle development. Despite Ford's agreement to fill the long-vacant train station with engineers and programmers, the level of public funds proposed for each project is indicative of how automotive capitalism appeared to take a backseat to others, even in its own hometown.

Like several people discussed in this chapter, many in Detroit recall familial connections to manufacturing production. Fathers, grandfathers, and uncles, as well as in limited instances, mothers, grandmothers, and aunts are discussed as earning their livings in machine shops and along assembly lines. But those days have largely gone. A number of manufacturing facilities existed within the city limits in the early decades of the twenty-first century, but only two pumped out cars. Long before talk of free trade agreements and offshoring, automakers relocated plants from places like Detroit to suburban areas beginning in the 1950s as they sought larger footprints for automated facilities, homogenously white workforces, and lower tax rates (Sugrue 2005). Whereas 340 thousand people labored on Detroit's manufacturing lines in the years after World War II, 113 thousand did so in 1980, and twenty thousand in 2010. Across the same period, employment in so-called 'service sectors' ballooned from 19% of formal employment in 1950 to 38% in 2010. Within this, city residents and people of color largely worked in low-wage retail and food service industries, while a noticeably whiter managerial class in finance, medical,

and legal professions used expressways for their intended purpose: speeding into the downtown business district from the reaches of far-flung suburbs.

From these schematic figures, Detroit appears to be decidedly 'postindustrial.' Yet this is not in the same postindustrial framework as New York, in which the halls of textile works, print shops and food processing facilities were converted into offices for speculative finance and luxury housing (Ocejo 2014; Susser 2012). Nor is it identical to places like Pittsburgh where mills and steelworks have been replaced by design labs for medical and mobility technologies (Dietrich-Ward 2016). In such instances, industrial buildings are monumentalized in the strategic conversion of industrial sites to new locations of commerce. Detroit has few instances of this "smokestack nostalgia" (Cowie and Heathcott 2003), and when they are even proposed, it is within the 7.2 square miles of 'Greater Downtown' where incoming, wealthier residents continue to settle in the midst of a 138 square mile city. Beyond, empty dwellings sit alongside silenced production lines as testament to people and industries that are no longer present. Vacant structures signal pasts in which employment is remembered as plentiful, if unevenly distributed, rather than impending opportunities. When industrial population and production lines relocate, profit may accrue in suburbs or corporate bottom-lines, but in so doing it is deliberately dribbled away from the central city (Darden 2010). Within this optic, postindustrial locations appear as those in which modes industrial production have been suspended as their constituents wait for something categorically different[9].

By way of the decline economies of building removal, this chapter suggests the epochal breaks presumed by formations of postindustrial transformation conceal of how possibilities for

[9] American studies scholar Chloe Taft's (2016) study of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania as it transformed from the center of US Steel production into a casino destination is illustrative of how people are usually understood to experience the closure of industrial installations as final, even as their symbolic paraphernalia might become tethered to alternative possibilities for capital accumulation.

working remains of industrial lives into economic sustenance do not emerge from a disruptive vacuum. The evacuation of manufacturing from 'shrinking' and 'legacy' cities in North America, Europe, and elsewhere has been positioned as ushering in a new regime of more flexible employment, with postindustrial livelihoods taken to be predicated on the production and circulation of services rather than material goods, on short-term gigs rather than contractual stability (Doussard 2013; M. King 2014). Following how excavators, construction firms, and unemployed people are brought together through building removal in Detroit does not dispute these claims wholesale; it emphasizes how some emergent means of production can be more exploitative than others. However, as the organization of building removal demonstrates, expectations of work, profit, and labor exploitation that ripple through demolition bear a striking resemblance to those conditioned through industrial lives, and unevenly profitable economies of mass disposal are predicated on the active adjustment of technologies of mass production. As this chapter has emphasized, heavy machineries, assumptions of racialized and gendered capacities, and unequal work opportunities that were central to the production of twentieth-century industry — in Detroit's case, literal Fordist industry — motivate endeavors to render those foundations from view.

Part 3
After Demolition

Following a meeting in which they walked me through the process of ensuring demolitions were completed "in a safe and timely manner," an administrator from the Detroit Building Authority (the public authority that managed building removal contracting for the Detroit Land Bank Authority) emailed me a video clip of several demolitions. Included in the message was a brief note, "This is the quick progress I'm talking about. Our contractors get things cleaned up quickly after demo." The clip itself is one that ran frequently on public access television, as did others sponsored by the DLBA and DBA as part of campaigns to publicize what they contended was "the largest and most transparent demolition program in the country" [1]. This particular clip included an accelerated time lapse of the removals of two single-family houses that once stood side-by-side on in Southwest Detroit. Neither house had windows, and one was mostly collapsed due to a fire. The video begins on a Friday, with an excavator operator and laborer breaking the structures down and loading them out into waste haulers. By the end of the day, concrete basement walls are all that remained of either house. Those basements are broken up and removed soon after work begins on Monday. On Tuesday, workers arrive early in the morning, bringing with them trailers full of dirt and a skid steer that they use to spread the soil across the site. By the end of the day, they had flattened the earth and spread grass seed and straw over it. The clip concludes with shots of children playing atop the straw-covered lot with voiceovers of adults thankful for the removal.

[1] City of Detroit (2016) "Watch Detroit Demolish 2 Houses in 2 Minutes" https://youtu.be/ML5l8GrJEe0. Saved to Internet Archive.

Figure 15 After Demolition. Photo by author.

The hurried pace offered by a time lapsed view of two demolitions in two minutes conceals how the process had likely started months before. Consider the notes taken by Stella, a Black woman in her seventies who spent most of her days observing her block of Detroit's central west side. Whether from her front porch or from an interior window seat, Stella tracked the condition of buildings in her view. Like a few others, she relayed their conditions to me, including the erasure of the two-family flat directly across the street from her home:

> **June 5, 2017.** A man in a white truck came. He waved. Said he was taking pictures so they could demolish the house.
> **March 12, 2018.** A bunch of people came. 4 men. They are wearing hazmat gear and packing bags full of stuff. They put it in a dumpster marked "asbestos."
> **March 13, 2018.** More asbestos removal
> **March 14, 2018.** The asbestos people left in the middle of the afternoon. One of them waved and said their work is done. Their dumpster is still here.
> **April 1, 2018.** A truck came to take the dumpster.
> **May 3, 2018.** They came to demolish the abandoned white house today!
> **May 5, 2018.** The demolition happened two days ago. But they left a bunch of wood beams and other garbage piled in the basement.
> **May 10, 2018.** They came and finished the demolition. Now the basement is a big empty hole.
> **May 30, 2018.** They came and filled the hole today.
> **June 7, 2018.** They came and put dirt and straw on the lot.
> **July 7, 2018.** They came and poured new sidewalks where the machines had broken them.

August 31, 2018. I can see green coming up through the straw.

The pace of events that Stella observed was typical for the removal of small residential and commercial structures. Large apartment buildings or factories would take months longer. As Stella's notes suggest, for people on the ground, scrubbing away traces of empty structures was not experienced as a simple cut between before and after over the course of a few days. It was a process that unspooled over an extended timeframe, with the landscape only beginning to appear 'after demolition' more than a year after work initially began.

Nevertheless, what Stella and others observed as halting progressions were the product of coordinated work routines. I saw as much as a passenger in Marlowe's truck cab. A white man in his fifties, Marlowe drove a hauler for a demolition company. From the cab of his rig, Marlowe was able to deposit whatever was loaded into 100 cubic yard trailer within a drop zone radius of a few feet. One day when I rode along with him, Marlowe's morning began as it typically did around 7:15 — idling in a line of similar tractor-trailers waiting for the mixtures of dirt and crushed concrete that were used to fill the basement cavities of demolished buildings. We then drove some ten or so miles from the supply yard in Detroit's industrial midsection to the yawning hole that I recognized as having been left by the DLBA's 10,001st demolition. By 8:30, we had moved five miles south to the ongoing demolition of what had once been a small department store. We idled for half an hour before the cab began rocking as the excavator operator packed mangles of brick and other materials into the trailer. Marlowe then drove some forty miles beyond Detroit's city limits to a landfill approved to accept demolition debris. We crept along with a stream of rigs carrying similar loads, all waiting for our turn to dump them into a purpose-built crevasse[2]. Every three rigs contained the mangled equivalent of a 2,000

[2] This process is identical to the one Josh Reno (2015) chronicles in his ethnography of a Michigan landfill.

square foot building. It was eleven when Marlowe piloted us out of the landfill, and we would repeat the same circuit once more that day. By the end, he had clocked 327 miles on the odometer.

Despite the seeming promise of demolitions as a means of scouring Detroit's landscape free of any trace of empty buildings, Chapters Five and Six examine structural components that escape trips to the landfill. In Chapter Five we focus on building materials like insulation and drywall that are laced with fireproof asbestos fibers. When these substances are broken apart, they turn components that once kept people safe into airborne hazards. While environmental regulators attempt to keep asbestos-containing materials from being sent skyward, the enclosures demanded by regulatory statute create the conditions in which white-owned asbestos contractors can expect their typically Black workers to labor without protective equipment. As asbestos fibers are channeled into the lungs of working-class people of color, they materialize how atmospheres of antiblackness and white privilege are physically are recursively structured into racialized bodies. Chapter Six attends to the contaminated soils and private property regimes that remain in place after demolition. For wealthy, typically white developers, bringing these three together allows for the extraction of capital from Detroit's already impoverished municipal government. At the same time, working class Detroiters of color are sometimes able to combine these three to legally seize vacated land from absentee owners. As building removals kick toxins into the air and drive them into the dirt, the chapters in Part 3 emphasize how racist environmental conditions are preserved through the transformation of empty buildings into leveled ground. At the same time, remain attentive to the ways that racially-oppressed people struggle, sometimes successfully, to shift the prevailing inequities of demolition into alternate configurations.

Chapter 5
Tiny Threads

A cloud of dark grey dust rose as the shell of a building crashed inward upon itself. Ten minutes before, that shell had been recognizable as a yellow brick colonial on Detroit's west side. Two men, one operating a forty-ton excavator and the other wielding a fire hose spewing water across the site, transformed the structure into a jumbled pile of bricks, siding, studs, plaster, wires, pipes, and other scraps of what had once been a home. An almost intact sofa peeked out from the wreckage as the dust cloud expanded outward in a ring, its boundaries colliding with the sides of still occupied residences. Seconds later, the mass reached the throng of ten neighbors who stood at the point where a front walkway still intersected with the sidewalk. While many in the gathering had applauded when the structure thudded down, their celebration quickly ended as they rushed to pull shirt collars up over their mouths and bundle children away from the approaching plume. The thick mass obscured those who remained, but their faint outlines could be discerned, some doubled over as they coughed after inhaling the particulate. Louder still was the telltale whine of the excavator as its operator continued swiveling back and forth to smash brick walls into pieces small enough to hoist into semi-truck mounted dumpsters that would soon arrive to carry the building's remains to a suburban landfill.

I observed many demolitions like this one over the years I spent following building removals in Detroit[1]. This particular instance was captured on video by a middle-aged Black

[1] I (2018) have written about some in another venue.

woman named Shavon. She and twelve others brought the grainy cellphone video with them to a 'community meeting' hosted by the Detroit Land Bank Authority[2]. Typically, these meetings were low-key affairs. A few dozen city residents lined up in the gathering space of a municipal recreation center, waiting to approach a handful of DLBA staffers who would respond to inquiries about the demolition status of a particular building. This meeting broke from the norm, however, when Shavon and her neighbors reached the front of the queue. Shavon began playing the clip on her outstretched phone, asking, "My neighbors and I are here to ask, why are you letting demolitions pollute our communities?". In lobbing this question, Shavon used her free hand to gesture to the group people bunched behind her. Some of the faces were recognizable from the video, their Brown and Black complexions consistent with the mostly African-American and Latinx makeup of the middle-income, working class neighborhood Shavon referenced in her narration.

This scene may feel familiar to anthropologists and others who focus their attentions on the uneven distribution of environmental contamination. It is an instance in which people who find themselves acutely subject to the harms of industrial life strive to capture the very materiality of those harms to demand alternate organizations of production, consumption, and disposal (Ahmann 2018; J. Reno 2011). Indeed, within the hollowed out vestiges of regulatory states, such turns to 'citizen science' have been valorized for their capacities to provoke change in ways that disempowered state actors can or will not (Graeter 2017; Wylie 2018)[3]. And yet, neither Shavon's video nor other more high-profile instances where demolition particulates were captured on video did much to shift operations on demolition sites. In 2017, Detroit's municipal

[2] For reasons of confidentiality, I will not share the video. Here is one posted online https://youtu.be/2VjiQ0cDgdo.
[3] I mentioned the existence of demolition dust clouds to public health specialists, they would often speculate about supplying Detroit residents with portable air quality monitors and cameras to record demolitions. Several researchers attempted to do so. Results from these studies were never forthcoming.

Health Department issued a report suggesting that dusts from demolishing lead-painted walls was linked to the uptick in childhood lead poisoning cases in the city[4]. In the aftermath of the report, demolition coordinators agreed to distribute flyers warning people to remain inside during demolitions, but nothing was done to implement controls on airborne lead.

In response to Shavon's question, "Why are you letting demolitions pollute our communities?" Phil keyed the address in question into the authority's online database. He sighed, "We've got entries showing the house had an asbestos abatement last year and a post-abatement check on the tenth before the demo on the thirty-first. And it looks like the crew was using water, so this is a clean demo." Shavon and her neighbors challenged Phil's assessment. How could this represent a 'clean' demolition if it generated a cloud of dust? Noting the dust, Phil relented, "Well obviously this isn't clean. But it meets all regulations for health and safety." This response betrayed common knowledge among people familiar with building demolitions: in the United States, the only environmental controls at work on demolition sites are federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements that asbestos-containing components be identified and removed prior to knock-down. Lead, PCBs and other toxins common in building components are left unsurveilled, confirming how regulatory statutes shift attention to certain material enactments and away from others (Murphy 2006; Petryna 2002).

Chapter Six takes up what happens to lead, PCBs, and other acknowledged but unregulated contaminants when they settle into the ground surrounding demolition sites. Here, we will focus on the operations of asbestos regulations in the context of demolition. Among environmental justice advocates and concerned Detroiters, the frontier for actually making demolitions 'clean' and 'safe' lay in using asbestos regulations as a guide for containing other

[4] Report on lead and demolitions. Detroit Health Department, January 2017. View document here: https://bit.ly/2uhI3Tg

toxins. As one report connecting lead poisoning to demolition suggested, "We actually have a model for how to do [demolition] better. The EPA could regulate lead the way it regulates asbestos"[5]. In the pages to come, we will elucidate for whom the simple expansion of regulatory controls offers a keystone to health and safety. To do so, we fill follow the identification and extraction of asbestos-containing materials from the yellow colonial in Shavon's neighborhood and other buildings like it. Doing so illustrates how regulations may shift the physical location of harmful materials, but they cannot make them disappear. Protocols that some assume to be airtight are often drafty when put into practice. When asbestos regulatory procedures impress hazardous dust into human bodies, they thrust into relief how regulations entail strategic calculations for the distribution of harm, not its absolute elimination.

As asbestos-containing materials are motivated along planned and unplanned routes out of structures like the yellow colonial, they give vantage on the making of what historian of medicine, Noemi Tousignant (2018), terms "unprotection, […] an ongoing, active process that fails to protect, even though it may not aim to expose" (16). From this vantage we will come across some of the processes that Tousignant and others have located at the source of toxic exposures, especially underfunded and overburdened regulatory staff, as well as corporate entities who willfully skirt protections for environmental health and occupational safety (Boudia and Jas 2013; Checker 2005; Hecht 2012). Yet we will also encounter how exposures to asbestos hazards are shaped by the peculiar history of a known toxin composed of fibers less than five microns in length and described in safety trainings as "tiny threads." Despite being recognized as the unique cause of certain respiratory illnesses and cancerous growths, with prohibitions against their use in much of the world, these threads continue to be legally woven into American

[5] O'Neill, E. 2017. "Are We Doing All We Can to Prevent Lead Poisoning?" *The Nation*, February 21.

products to make them durable and flame retardant. Thus, when asbestos abatement workers and others grapple with airborne toxins linked to labored breathing and coughing fits, they are encountering the very same materials that, at least at some point, kept other people safe.

Grasping at asbestos fibers reveals how scrubbing away vestiges of "late industrialism" (Fortun 2015, 120–22) engenders its own forms of embodied environmental harm. Spectacular figures like the demolition dust at the beginning of this chapter — a cloud that expanded outward and upward — are critical to the argument that all beings, no matter how far removed, face common threats from anthropocentric threats (Beck 1992). And yet, tracing asbestos emissions from demolition sites reveals how hazardous dusts settle among certain people and places, especially jobsites and neighborhoods inhabited by people of color. When containments leak, they are canalized into already marginal bodies and locations. As previous chapters have argued, vacant buildings are an incredibly racialized waste product. Still, this chapter contends that the "away" of waste is not always the landfill, but also the cracks, leaks, and gaps made along the way. As building removals transform latent toxins into active harms, they demonstrate how environmental racism is not merely driven by state determinations that non-white people have "the wrong complexion for protection" (Bullard and Wright 2012, 100). Rather, turning to the material techniques of asbestos abatement reveals how racist disparities are maintained by technical systems that cultivate uneven collectivities of privilege and subjection as a feature of environmental repair.

The Magic Mineral

In the United States — hardly recognized for a progressive approach to identifying environmental dangers — a few hundred substances are classified as 'hazardous air pollutants.'

Many have names like methyl isocyanate, acronitrile, and 4-nitrophenol that are certainly recognized as harmful by those familiar with them. Yet for most of us, it might be difficult to differentiate between identified toxins and those materials that can be legally incorporated as food preservatives. This is probably not the case with asbestos, which in addition to carrying a regulatory classification is popularly recognized as harmful. To quote Jamion, a man in his early fifties who lived near me in Detroit, "Just thinking about asbestos makes my spine tingle." We were squeezed into the booth of a nearby bar watching a televised hockey match when a commercial played asking the viewer to consider if they might have used asbestos-containing baby powder. For more information, we were encouraged to place a toll-free call to an attorney who was gearing up for a class action lawsuit[6].

If you are reading this in the United States, it is quite possible you have seen commercials with appeals like the one that Jamion and I encountered that evening. They are mainstays of television advertising and, depending on your browser history, online marginalia. You might have gleaned something about how this naturally-occurring mineral causes unique breathing problems and cancers. You might have heard about afflictions linked to asbestos exposure that have killed 200,000 people in the United States over the past few decades, or how companies kept silent when they realized that household products like talcum powder contained significant doses of carcinogenic fibers[7]. Like Jamion, simply thinking about asbestos might put a tingle in your spine. But also, like Jamion, you might struggle to identify exactly why that tingle is there. When I inquired about why he found the material so off-putting, he mused, "I can't really tell

[6] Taken together, asbestos exposure claims are one of the longest running and costly set of tort claims in US history (Carroll et al. 2005). Despite the large payouts, it is important to remember that compensation is rarely equivalent to justice (Jain 2006).

[7] Asbestos-containing talcum powder is the most recent frontier of 'asbestos litigation' (e.g. Echeverria v. Johnson & Johnson et al. B286283 (2018) Cal.App.Ct.) aimed at industries who claimed their products were 'safe' despite knowing they contained asbestos.

you why, but everyone says its bad." The next few pages detail the peculiar qualities of asbestos and its incorporation into the stuff of domestic life. Historian of science, Michelle Murphy (2006), reminds us that "toxicity is in the details" (64-65), and teasing apart the material histories of asbestos threads brings into focus how a known carcinogen continues to legally permeate so many American environments, just so long as it is not made airborne.

Despite its singular name, asbestos is not a singular molecular formation. Naturally-occurring deposits identified by this name can be any one of six distinct silica crystals. These ores "hang together" (Mol 2002) on the basis of what is called 'asbestiform habit,' in that they are composed of high-tensile fibers that are easily separated. Crystalline veins of asbestos are distributed across all continents, with light pressure from human fingers being enough to pull them into long, thread-like arrays. Further crushing further results in spindly, microscopic crystals, the first human uses of which are located pots and burial shrouds dating to around 2500 BCE. Clay and textiles enriched with inert asbestos fibers are practically impervious to fire, water, and chemical decay. Even for those aware that inhalation carries toxic risks, asbestos is glossed as a "magic mineral" on account of its combination of strength, fireproof indestructibility, and corrosion resistance that are unmatched by other materials, whether naturally occurring or synthetic[8].

The first recorded asbestos deposits in North America were mapped in the early nineteenth century as part of a mineral belt that runs from Vermont into southern Quebec. Demand for asbestos-containing building products spiked in the 1890s after early producers marketed them as means of protecting a national populace from the perils of fires known to tear

[8] Paul Brodeur's (1968) history of this moniker is repeated in contemporary trainings for asbestos workers. In a 2005 exchange, a real estate developer who would later become the US president, defended the use of asbestos-containing materials in his buildings using this term. Watch a recording of that exchange here: https://cs.pn/2HA2qnk

through burgeoning industrial cities. American consumption rose from only a few metric tons in 1900 to 150 thousand in 1920 to 800 thousand in 1970, with milled fibers mixed into plasters, drywalls, pipes, insulations, flooring, and other components. Such products are celebrated in a 1922 short film, *The Story of Asbestos*, produced by the US Department of Interior in collaboration with asbestos producers[9]. First, bare-handed workers lug three hundred pound bundles of asbestos ore from tunnels in Arizona and New England onto train cars bound for manufacturing facilities in Illinois and New Jersey. Once there, factory workers operate machines that crush and screen asbestos into piles of tiny fibers that the viewer learns are mixed into commercial products, including brake linings, cloth, cement, window glaze, paint, siding, clothing, and roofing materials. Finally, a manager applies "the blowtorch test" to a section of asbestos-reinforced roofing paper stretched over a wood panel. Despite the paper blackening while being subjected to flames for almost an hour, the wood beneath it remains unburnt. As the film informs the reader, "[Asbestos] is inflammable and may be handled the same as wool or cotton," characteristics that facilitated its mixture into staple products of the American construction industry for much of the twentieth century.

Especially in the early decades of the twentieth century, asbestos mines and manufacturing facilities, including those in *The Story of Asbestos*, tended to be dusty affairs. Without warning or notice, microscopic fibers made their way into the airways of shipbuilders, construction workers, automotive mechanics, miners, and others whose daily work entailed the manufacture and installation of asbestos-containing insulation, building components, brake pads, and other materials (Johnston and McIvor 2004; Sellers and Melling 2012; Walker 2011). Like any dust, breathing in asbestos dust may hurt in the moment, but unlike others, with time this

[9] US Dept. of Interior – Bureau of Mines with Johns-Manville Inc. (1922) *The Story of Asbestos*. 31 min. (to view, see: https://archive.org/details/0929StoryOfAsbestos)

dust can prove fatal. Once lodged in lungs and respiratory tracts, it takes years for the jagged edges of asbestos fibers to work through tissues like so many tiny knives. With passing years, they become progressively more painful, spurring cancers and other growths.

The extended lag time of asbestos illnesses made it difficult for physicians and occupational health specialists to track, and workers were typically long-retired before they experienced chest tightening or pain. Nevertheless, beginning in 1918, a steady drip of reports noted concentrations of previously unseen lung cancers, pulmonary illnesses, and coughing fits among asbestos mining and manufacturing workers[10]. Statistical analyses showed earlier deaths among such workers when compared to others[11]. Often, physicians who snapped x-rays of choking workers' lungs or cut through their corpses took note of first century Greek and Roman writers who observed the premature deaths of slaves forced to spin their garments from threads plucked out of asbestos outcrops[12]. In the United Kingdom, reports of elevated worker deaths and breathing difficulties compelled the first set of occupational health protections for workers in asbestos mills, including mandates for shop floor ventilation to prevent, "the escape of Asbestos dust into the air of any room in which persons work."[13] Similar accounts in the United States produced suggestions for reducing the number of asbestos fibers inhaled by workers and emitted from production facilities, but such guidelines were largely unheeded by facilities at which they

[10] Pancoast H.K., Miller T.G., Landis H.R.M. A Roentgenologic Study of the Effects of Dust Inhalation upon the Lungs. American Journal of Roentgenology. 1918(31) 97; Lanza A.J., McConnell W.J., Fehnel J.W. Effects of the inhalation of asbestos dust on the lungs of asbestos workers. Public Health Reports. 1935(50)1–12.
[11] Hoffman F.L. Mortality from Respiratory Diseases in Dusty Trades. Inorganic Dusts, Bulletin of Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 231 (Industrial Accidents and Hygiene, Series No. 17) U.S. Bureau of Labor; Washington, DC, USA: 1918.
[12] Contemporary judicial proceedings and safety trainings continue to reference entries from Greek geographer Strabo's *Geography* and Roman historian Pliny's *Natural History* that were translated into English in the late nineteenth century.
[13] Asbestos Industry Regulations 1931, S.I. 1931 No. 1140, London, HMSO.

were leveled[14].

For years, corporations that specialized in production publicly claimed to be unaware of the risks posed by inhaling the fibers from which they profited. Their façades concealed how, since the 1920s, industrial hygienists and other employees persistently fretted about airborne asbestos fibers in the lungs of workers[15]. With regularity, interventions for keeping asbestos fibers out of workers' lungs — such as respirators, ventilated work areas, and water sprays — were never realized outside the pages of confidential reports[16]. In the words of a 1966 memo sent between executives of competing companies, one suggests a way of confronting frustrated workers: "My answer to the problem is: If you have enjoyed a good life while working with asbestos products, why not die from it? There's got to be some cause."[17] When spliced with accounts of bodies riddled with mesotheliomas and pleural plaques, such statements manifest the callous footings of capitalized industry in which harms do not accrue in error; they are the predicate to profit[18].

Confidential corporate communications that surfaced through leaks and judicial orders fueled bans on asbestos use across the global north and south. These calls were buttressed by the

[14] Dreessen W.D., Dallavalle J.M., Edwards T.L., Miller J.W., Sayers R.R. 1938. A Study of Asbestosis in the Asbestos Textile Industry, Public Health Bulletin 241. U.S. Treasury Department, Public Health Service; Washington, DC.

[15] Many of these documents came to light as part of a 1988 memorandum from the trust established to pay asbestos compensation claims from Johns-Manville employees. Previously, industry had claimed it had no knowledge of asbestos toxicity prior to 1964 (see: https://bit.ly/2UQTr4a). While most documents remain under legal seal, they are detailed by 'experts' who testify in such lawsuits (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2013).

[16] Hoffman F.L. Mortality from Respiratory Diseases in Dusty Trades. Inorganic Dusts, Bulletin of Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 231 (Industrial Accidents and Hygiene, Series No. 17) U.S. Bureau of Labor; Washington, DC: 1918; Pancoast H.K., Miller T.G., Landis H.R.M. A Roentgenologic Study of the Effects of Dust Inhalation upon the Lungs. American Journal of Roentgenology. 1918(31) 97; Lanza A.J., McConnell W.J., Fehnel J.W. Effects of the inhalation of asbestos dust on the lungs of asbestos workers. Public Health Reports. 1935(50)1–12.

[17] Letter from E.A. Martin (Bendix Corporation) to Noel Hendry (Johns-Manville). September 12, 1966. This letter, among others, has been regularly held to demonstrate that executives were aware of the human health consequences of asbestos inhalation, yet sought to link those consequences to other sources, including trees (see Philips et al. v. Honeywell (2017) Cal. Super. Ct. No. 12CECG04055). To read the memo, see https://bit.ly/2u5eu7m.

[18] Sven Lindqvist (1979) reflects on "silvery fibres" of asbestos recovered from lungs of deceased cement workers, to argue for a worker-centric study of the history of capitalism, "because the results of history are still with us" (28).

emerging consensus among regulators, public health researchers, workers' advocates, and environmental activists that 'fugitive' asbestos fibers escaped from even the most elaborate enclosures[19]. To quote US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidance to construction and demolition workers, "There is no 'safe' level of exposure to any type of asbestos fiber." As of 2019, fifty-five nation-states uphold wholesale bans on asbestos mining, manufacture, and use. The US EPA issued such a ban in 1989, but it was quickly struck down following circuit court decisions agreeing that outlawing asbestos products would be "unduly burdensome" to an incredibly profitable industry[20]. Nevertheless, regulators, labor unions, public health organizations, and others wielded the biopolitical cudgel of hundreds of thousands of worker deaths and illnesses in order to implement a later order that asbestos be sealed within worksites. Workers who might encounter air with more than 0.1 fiber of asbestos per cubic centimeter must be provided with respirators, physician visits, and other safety precautions[21].

Even as plans are made in the hopes of reducing or eliminating contamination moving forward, once dispersed, toxic things tend to resist being put back in the bag. For decades, buildings, construction codes, and entire cities were designed with asbestos in mind (Maines 2013). Silvery asbestos fibers remain the physical stuff of lived worlds built from fireproof plaster, flooring, roof tile, siding, and cement. Despite haphazard efforts to remove asbestos from breathing spaces, environmental and occupational health regulations allow asbestos to remain in

[19] For a helpful review, see Case et al. 2011
[20] Technical Amendment in Response to Court Decision on Asbestos; Manufacture, Importation, Processing and Distribution Prohibitions. Environmental Protection Agency. 40 CFR Part 763, September 1994.
[21] Asbestos Exposure: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Transportation, and Tourism of the Committee on Energy and Commerce. House of Representatives. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1986. Occupational Exposure to Asbestos. Department of Labor – Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 29 CFR Parts 1910, 1915, and 1926, August 1994. See also: (Furuya et al. 2018)

the shingles, pipes, insulations, and other components of many built environments[22]. While mine closures have reduced the volumes of asbestos-containing materials produced each year in the United States, it is estimated that all buildings constructed in the country before 1980 include asbestos within them somewhere.

Figure 16 Asbestos hazard in place. Photo by author.

Three-quarters of buildings in Detroit were built in this period. Industrial facilities, both operational and defunct, are littered with signs that read "Asbestos Hazard: Do Not Disturb." Yet asbestos-containing materials also course through domestic built environments. When an environmental justice organization distributed a flyer containing "Household Toxin Advice" to several Detroit neighborhoods, the entry on asbestos stated, "Asbestos is a naturally occurring fiber found in drywall, insulation, artificial fireplace logs, and other building materials. Repeated exposure can cause breathing problems and cancers. The EPA recommends leaving asbestos in place." Following the included citation led to the following words penned by federal regulators,

[22] Notably, in 2018 US president Donald Trump issued an executive order expanding the products into which asbestos can be legally incorporated, a directive that resulted in his face being printed on the packaging of Russian asbestos exporter UralAsbest (for photos, see: https://bit.ly/2MwWQRk)

"Undisturbed asbestos materials do not pose a health risk. The mere presence of asbestos in a building does not mean that the health of building occupants is endangered"[23]. The flyer and EPA circulars alike recommended readers place as much distance as possible between themselves and bisphenol-A, lead, formaldehyde, and so many other substances[24]. Rather than physical elimination, it is notable that protecting yourself from asbestos required doing absolutely nothing. Within regulatory imaginations at least, once asbestos has been hauled from the earth, processed into threads, and sewn into other matters — likely shedding fibers into respiratory tracts along the way — it enters a state in which hazardous qualities are suspended. They are considered dangerous if dredged up, but benevolent enough if left alone.

Critical Barriers

Demolitions scramble the built environment and, with it, the regulatory settlement that allows asbestos fibers to remain unaddressed in papers, mastics, and other materials. Federal regulations stipulate that asbestos may only be removed from these confines within airtight, multilayered plastic enclosures referred to as "critical barriers"[25]. Failure to do so brings with it the threat of escalating fines and criminal charges. While it is technically feasible to construct a barrier large enough to enclose both a building and the excavator necessary to demolish it, doing so cost several times the $25,000 modal cost that Detroit's municipality and non-profit authorities allocated per demolition. As Dave, a DLBA demolition coordinator remarked to me regarding limited federal reimbursements that the authority tapped to pay demolition contractors, "The brass tacks financial reality of the situation is that we can't afford the time and billions of

[23] *Managing Asbestos in Place*. EPA – Office of Pesticides and Toxic Substances, July 1990.
[24] Indeed, physical distance often forms a cornerstone of scalar regulatory actions (Boudia and Jas 2013).
[25] Asbestos Standards for the Construction Industry, Definitions. Department of Labor – Occupational Safety and Health Administration. 29 CFR 1101(b),

dollars it would take to tent every house and get this done before funding expires." EPA emissions standards only allow building demolitions to release visible dust if they are certified as free of asbestos-containing materials. So, to bring demolitions in on schedule, under budget, and within the boundaries of, DLBA contracts required contractors to remove asbestos from buildings by hand before bringing in excavators to finish the job.

Locating asbestos in the sorts of buildings slated for demolition in Detroit — structures built in a time before asbestos-containing products were required to bear warnings of their toxic contents in bold face type — requires the coordination of specially-trained inspectors and technicians. The serrated edges of microscopic asbestos fibers embedded in the physical materiality of existing buildings are practically invisible to the human eye. Maureen, a 'certified asbestos inspector' once demonstrated this for me during an interview by laying out a set of plastic-sealed handfuls of asbestos infused tile adhesive, plaster, and insulation atop her office desk. Alongside these bags she placed others containing seemingly identical pieces of products that did not contain the additive. The substances looked and felt the same, with the dry materials crumbling when I pressed them through plastic membranes. Nevertheless, breaking open one set of packages to breathe deeply from their contents would likely cause me to cough. Doing so to the other might provoke a coughing fit followed by cancers decades later. The distinction between toxic and benign samples had been determined in a nearby laboratory in which one of Maureen's colleagues used tweezers, microscopes, chemical stains, and polarized light to parse the telltale jagged outlines of asbestos fibers.

The samples strewn across the metal top of Maureen's desk had been plucked from the skeleton of a 1949 yellow brick colonial on Detroit's west side. The same colonial whose dust-choked removal Shavon and her neighbors witnessed. Eighteen months before the demolition, I

had accompanied Maureen room-by-room through the home as she conducted a 'pre-demolition asbestos survey.' Like most of the contractors who performed these procedures, Maureen drove into Detroit that day from her home and office in one of Detroit's predominantly white, professional middle-class suburbs. I was waiting for her arrival, seated on the narrow concrete stoop. The house was entirely closed up, with faded plywood covered where windows and doors once were. Accessing the structure required a pry bar that Maureen carried in her truck for this purpose. A damp, musty smell sprang forth as we peeled back plywood from the first-floor windows and entryways. With headlamps and respirators positioned on our heads, we shouldered our way through a front door that had swelled to fit the frame surrounding it. In contrast with the force of our entry, upon traversing the threshold we stepped gingerly over undulating wood floors that bounced as if they might give way.

After two hours in the fifteen-hundred-square-foot dwelling, Maureen packed up a bin containing several dozen individually labeled plastic bags. Folded inside some were core samples of wall materials, others contained scrapings of window glaze and tile adhesive, more than a few were filled with strips of insulation gleaned by punching holes through walls to access the pipes behind them, the balance contained entire floor tiles Maureen had pried loose in the kitchen and bathroom. Several days after depositing the bin at a testing laboratory, Maureen compiled a report for DLBA administrators estimating that the west side colonial contained approximately 2,747 square feet of plaster, 141 linear feet of window glaze, and 25 linear feet of pipe insulation for which samples had tested positive for asbestos.

Figure 17 Bagged asbestos sample. MDEQ Regulatory File 0954. Received under FOIA

Maureen and I had plodded our way through that west side colonial on a muggy August afternoon when the temperature cracked ninety degrees. At several intervals, we emerged from the stuffy interior of the boarded house to take a break from respirators that pooled with sweat. I returned to that block over a year later when it was a humid seventy degrees at eight in the morning. In the intervening months, the colonial had sat empty on a block where most other dwellings were inhabited. That week, however, it was to be filled by a team of three men subcontracted by a demolition firm to conduct an 'asbestos abatement.' Using Maureen's report as a guide, the men would strip asbestos-containing plaster, window glaze, and pipe insulation from the dwelling. They would seal the materials in thick plastic bags and storage drums labeled with the dwelling's address. The bags and drums would be stacked in a plastic lined shipping container and interred on the grounds of a landfill.

It was evident that abatement work was underway from the moment I turned my car onto the block. A shipping container was situated in the front yard, and the plywood panels Maureen and I had found covering the house's openings were piled alongside it. Thick, milky plastic

sheets clung to the places where windows and doors once were, held in place by red tape that a close inspection would reveal was printed with, “Danger Asbestos Hazard.” Paper signs plastered at regular intervals delivered a message in the uppercase type mandated by regulatory statute:

DANGER
ASBESTOS
MAY CAUSE CANCER
CAUSES DAMAGE TO LUNGS
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
WEAR RESPIRATORY PROTECTION
AND PROTECTIVE CLOTHING
IN THIS AREA

As I turned off my car and walked toward the house, I saw two figures clad in white, Tyvek jumpsuits making their way into a multi-compartment airlock crafted from the same plastic and tape that covered the windows. One of the people entering the house was Rayshawn, the thirty-three-year-old father who had alerted me to the abatement taking place that day. Like the laborers on most abatement sites I visited, Rayshawn was Black. He had worked as an asbestos abatement specialist since his parole two years before. As with hundreds of other formerly incarcerated people who worked in asbestos abatement, Rayshawn credited his ability to find a job that paid $17.50 per hour — more than double the statewide minimum wage — to a program operated in the state penitentiary system that trained convicts to construct plastic enclosures and airlocks before packaging mock asbestos-containing materials for transit.

Figure 18 Critical Barrier. Photo by author.

After three days of work by Rayshawn and his colleagues, the once solid walls of the midcentury colonial had been stripped to the studs. Any indication that the structure was once filled with asbestos-laden plaster, insulation, and window glaze — the materials themselves, the plastic sheeting, the hazard labels — had been carted away. This said, I did not personally observe the physical labor necessary to pry asbestos components from place. Rayshawn and many of his fellow abatement workers cautioned me against ever pressing through a temporary airlock, even if I were swaddled in protective coveralls, gloves, and a full-face respirator. "Why risk those soft suburb lungs of yours?" Rayshawn asked me when I once tried to follow him through. While others drew attention to my white skin and advanced degrees as evidence that I should avoid entering abatement sites at all cost, Rayshawn would go on to triangulate these with the exurban location where I was raised. By contrast to the presumably sheltered state of my respiratory tract, he described his already labored "city lungs" as "hardened" by a childhood

home adjacent to an oil refinery and a smoking habit acquired during his time in prison.

Comments from Rayshawn and others about my 'soft' hands, sensibilities, and lungs were typically delivered with a wink or a wry smile. They betrayed interpretations that I was ill-suited to labor alongside the commenter[26]. Regardless, when demolition and abatement workers posited a difference between their lungs and my own, they also gestured to the lived experience of fibrosis, a thickening of lung membranes that follows inhaling airborne pollutants like asbestos, factory emissions, and cigarette smoke. As one environmental health researcher familiar with the consequences of pollution on respiratory capacity described for me, "Healthy lung tissue is like a fresh sponge. Fibrotic lungs are like sponges that are entirely dried out. They're hard as rocks." Bodies harden literally as much as figuratively.

Figure 19 After abatement. These were previously plaster walls and ceilings. Photo by author.

Pleural differences are routinely racialized ones, with the embodied experience of breathing problems skewing along discriminatory fault lines[27]. More disconcertingly, the notion

[26] Job site humor offers a mode of critiquing workplace hierarchies. In male-dominated fields this often comes across as questioning the masculine fitness of another to work in particular ways (Ekers 2013; Ramirez 2011).
[27] Racial differences in lung function and breathing are routine findings of public health research on environmental inequalities. Lundy Braun (2014) examines how such differences have been encoded onto devices for respiratory measurement.

that my lily white, suburban lungs were deserving of protection while my interlocutors' already polluted, urban lungs of color could muddle through further exposure raises the specter of stereotypes about the bodies of Black people, especially men, as fundamentally 'resilient.'[28] By comparison, people with whitened skin are imaginatively positioned as prone to corruption, especially by materialities associated with people of color[29]. I never heard typically white managers mobilize this logic to explain the darkened complexions of their abatement workforces. However, in light of comments like the one I received from Rayshawn, the possibility haunted my fieldwork and subsequent attempts to make sense of it.

Following admonishments from Rayshawn and others, I resolved never to venture within 'critical barriers' fashioned from layers of sheeting and tape. Instead, I relied on the accounts of abatement workers to grasp what happened inside. Sometimes, I received pictures of regulatory perfection, with portable generators, high-efficiency vacuums, and water sprays arranged within the skeletons of vacant houses, offices, and automotive repair shops. Such apparatuses ensured that even the little dust that might have been kicked up when workers punched through plaster walls was pulled into the folds of a mechanical filter rather than those of a human respiratory tract. More often than not, however, I heard of the sorts of cloudy scenes that might occupy the nightmares of occupational health specialists. Common concerns included limited supplies of water for field showers and dust suppression. Generators powering specialized vacuums ran out of gas. Respirators that, even when worn, did not fit snugly on workers' faces and let in bursts of

[28] This is a stereotype that haunts historical and contemporary terrains alike, especially when white, typically male, people justified using Black people as test subjects for experimentation on the basis of them being allegedly impervious to pain (Gamble 1997). Similar beliefs resonate in the present-day under prescription of pain medication to people of color, or the descriptions of women of color as capable of enduring difficulties that might cripple others. bell hooks (2015) details how these exoticizing imaginaries permeate popular culture.

[29] Robin DiAngelo (2018) piercingly details this in her elaboration of "white fragility" as the orientation of white people in the United States. Though we might also find similar themes in other imperial contexts (W. Anderson 2006).

unfiltered air. Tyvek suits tended to tear on stray nails and sharp corners but were kept on without replacement.

Though they entered the west side colonial in full protective gear, Rayshawn and his coworkers described stripping it off soon after to remove thousands of square feet of asbestos-containing materials shirtless and without respirators. In Rayshawn's words, punctuated by deep coughs, "Man, it's hot as shit inside. Gotta be like 100 degrees. Can't move with those coveralls. Can't breathe with the respirator. Can't work as fast as they want us to and I need this job for my parole." The three days Rayshawn's supervisor allocated for the abatement was a tight schedule. In contrast to my surveying experience with Maureen, where we experienced the difficulty breathing through sweat choked respirators, there was no time to step outside for fresh air.

Upon hearing of dusty abatements, managers and even public health advocates were quick to levy blame for 'non-compliance' with asbestos safety procedures on workers who did not fully appreciate the danger of their work. Such responses echo choreographies so often executed in cases of occupational harm where failure to hew to specified safety protocols is narrated as an artifact of masculinized bravado (Cely-García et al. 2016; Markowitz and Rosner 2002). Even if they may have encoded certain gendered and racialized working bodies, in the situations I heard recounted from abatement workers, consuming toxic particulates was never the result of strategic ignorance. Among workers, dust inhalation was understood as necessary to meet the metrics of 'timeliness' and 'efficiency' demanded by management. The stakes of not wearing respirators and other protective equipment resulted from a perverse 'choice' between income and the ability to breathe for decades into the future. There is no clean escape from this sort of double bind[30]. Rayshawn in particular understood how the loss of his job could presage

[30] Industry and libertarian critics disparage 'environmental injustice' on the belief that those affected by harms at work or home should move somewhere else. Such understandings are obviously partial and ignore the uneven

his return to incarceration, a twisted fate that illustrates how heightened environmental burdens concentrate the experience of already existing, strikingly racialized inequalities.

Situations like this emphasize the nested multiplicities of 'critical barriers' within the prescriptive annals of asbestos' regulatory documents. Not only *should* asbestos abatement job sites be ringed by strategically taped sections of plastic, but also human bodies within this constructed environment *should* be ensconced within the protective bubbles of respirators and Tyvek jumpsuits. Simultaneously malleable and durable, flexible and impermeable, plastics molded into "container technologies" (Sofia 2000) of sheeting, tape, clothing, bags, drums, and respirator masks aspire to a sort of sanitary modernity[31]. The requisite, double layers of plastic sheeting duct taped over the openings of buildings like the west side colonial operated like the sandwich bags Maureen used to hold samples of asbestos-laced materials — they separated toxic interiors from cleaner outsides. Nevertheless, as we have seen, plastic dividers essential to containing hazardous dust also conceal abatement workers from the view of those on the other side[32]. 'Critical barriers' that funneled asbestos-laden emissions away onlookers like me were also the precondition for dusty, unventilated spaces in which abatement workers would confront the inhalation of carcinogenic particulate. On the off chance an environmental or occupational health inspector arrived on the scene, there was more than adequate time to shimmy back into protective gear before their prying eyes breached the airlock.

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possibilities for such moves. Nevertheless, they are effective political toolkits for enabling inequitable distributions of toxic harm (Pastor, Sadd, and Hipp 2001).

[31] This is what plastic does as a substance (Miekle 1997). Echoing Heidegger and others, Sofia contends that sociomaterialities of enclosure – ranging from bowls, cups, and bags to buildings and planetary locales – construct environmental relations such that they "define a fundamental aspect of what technology is" (196; see also: Heidegger; Le Guin).

[32] Air quality monitors are an attempt to use a different sense, but those are also easily manipulated.

Drafty Containments

State regulators were not ignorant of situations like those confronted by Rayshawn and other workers tasked with chipping bits of Detroit's built environment from the landscape. Charles, a retired field inspector for the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MiOSHA), recounted what he called "horror stories" to me, including one in which he had arrived at an abatement site where asbestos drywall was being torn from walls by workers without protective equipment. Charles had been clued into this circumstance by a tear in the plastic sheeting that had been stretched over a first-floor window. In another, a demolition crew was in the beginning stages of knocking down a vacant school building that had not been cleared of asbestos-containing materials, including a highly-volatile form of insulation. By Charles' recollection, "there was dust everywhere." News reports buttressed Charles' claims, chronicling a steady drip of fines and work-stoppage notices since asbestos regulations came into effect in the 1970s[33]. In the subsequent four decades, when regulators documented dispersals of asbestos fibers from demolition and abatement sites, it regularly made for front page news.

Though Charles had retired from his position years before I met him, the workflow of asbestos regulators was relatively unchanged. Aided by mandatory paperwork filed in advance of any legal abatement or demolition, employees from state occupational and environmental health offices would poke through a predetermined set of worksites on a daily basis to assess whether they were following federal mandates. Brief reports, usually accompanied by a few photographs, documented whether sites were "in compliance" or "in violation." This binary appears to imply that, upon the arrival of state employees, worksites were either faithful enactments of abstract

[33] Adamo Wrecking Company v. United States. 434 (US) 275 (1978). The company challenged the possibility of regulating asbestos on demolition sites in the US Supreme Court. While the majority upheld the possibility for regulatory action, they

regulatory statutes or not. Yet as I observed, regulators would typically prod work crews to correct what they understood as 'technical violations' in the real time. Concerns like absent reflective safety vests, fewer than the requisite number of field showers, improper respirator labels, and insufficient signage warning onlookers of asbestos were moments in which regulators demanded that demolition and abatement laborers make quick adjustments to their work practices, but also made apparent that these requests would not rise to the status of a formal violation. At the same time, inspectors would reinforce how leniency may not be forthcoming if similar issues were found on subsequent inspections.

Regulators were quick to explain their forbearance in terms of legislative directives to Michigan's regulatory agencies that required regulators to balance 'economic development' with environmental safety and occupational health. Charles, who retired in advance of these directives, gave a somewhat different explanation. As he said, noting his own flexibility when on the clock, "I wasn't there to screw over folks who were making a darned good faith effort to be compliant. At the end of the day, if I shut down a site mid demo or mid abatement for a full investigation of something that would take a minute to fix. The delay [will not] improve the situation." Regardless of the reason, only the most egregious of circumstances, those "horror stories" where asbestos-containing materials were clearly being rendered into dust, appeared "in violation" within the optic of state recordkeeping. Depending on the month, spot checks might produce only a single violation document, in others they were written for fifty percent of demolition and abatement sites visited by state regulators[34].

Regulation is seldom a transparent, panoptic enterprise, even in the most permissive of circumstances (Pachirat 2013; cf. Foucault 1995). Unlike factories, power plants, dry cleaners,

[34] MDEQ reports, 2016-2017. Received under FOIA.

and other installations that remain in relatively the same position, demolition and abatement crews can work in different places from one day to the next. In these situations, the imagined boundaries between 'workplace' and 'environment' that authorize environmental quality and occupational safety regulation are in a constant state of being constructed and broken down. It is remarkable that regulatory reports even captured particulate emissions from demolition and abatement sites. Rayshawn and others' experiences on the inside of an abatement site evince how the flight of scratchy fibers is obscured within the milky confines of opaque plastics. Along similar lines, contractors could list prolonged timelines for the expected dates of abatement and demolition, manipulating regulatory paperwork such that regulators arrived on the scene after all traces of it had been removed[35]. Occluded lines of regulatory sight were compounded by austerity budgeting that had winnowed the number of state employees allocated to inspecting them. During my fieldwork, the State of Michigan employed no more than ten asbestos inspectors statewide, with three to six devoted to abatements and demolitions in Detroit. Unmet demands for increased funding noted that regulators were only capable of visiting ten percent of the thousands of building removals occurring annually in Detroit alone[36].

Despite the many complications of their assignments, state regulators had a knack for locating sites in which contractors were flagrantly violating mandates that they keep asbestos thoroughly wet to prevent any of its fibers from becoming airborne. When Dave, the Detroit Land Bank Authority demolition coordinator, was asked to comment on regulatory allegations that demolitions dispersed asbestos-containing dust, he replied, "We take health and safety very

[35] In an illuminating instance, regulators who drove to an address expecting to find an active abatement site were met with the open hole of an excavated basement cavity. The contractor could not produce paperwork demonstrating that the asbestos abatement had occurred, yet as their attorney reminded regulators, regulators' allegation that the contractor had violated federal regulations could not be substantiated "Without any specific observations [of violations.]" by regulatory staff.

[36] Performance Audit (Asbestos Program, Air Quality Division, Department of Environmental Quality). State of Michigan – Office of the Auditor General, August 2017.

seriously and are working to ensure contractors observe all regulations." Whether this statement is true or not, it manifests the sentiment that bringing things into compliance with regulation is equivalent to the mitigation of toxic harms. Even still, regulatory compliance is a narrow barometer for safety. Consider the demolition I watched with Mike, the pudgy, white owner of a building removal firm. From a porch across the street, Mike smoked as we looked on at an excavator making quick work of a two-story dwelling built in the early twentieth century. The proceedings were distinct from many demolitions you have read about to this point in that the laborer was suited up in a Tyvek jumpsuit and respirator, with the spatial limits of the worksite marked by red tape that fluttered in the breeze. A closer inspection would reveal this to be the same "Danger Asbestos Hazard" tape wrapped around abatement sites and asbestos-containing waste shipments. A column of grey dust issued forth when the excavator knocked through what must have been a load-bearing wall, sending the second floor and attic clattering into what had previously been the front yard. Soon after, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) field inspector who had been surveilling the same scene from a much closer vantage walked over to inform Mike that everything looked to be "in compliance."

Mike took a drag from his cigarette before explaining that demolitions we would watch that day were occurring under an "emergency order" such that they were exempt from all requirements to contain dust or abate asbestos. As promised by declarations from Dave and so many others, all regulations were being followed. The completely legal, if also ominous emission of grey soot materialized how loopholes are grafted into the fabrics of regulatory capture[37].

[37] Single-family home demolitions are typically excluded from regulation altogether. Only because thousands of these structures were being torn down together and paid for by the same federal funding did the EPA and state regulators oversee such removals in Detroit. Privately-funded demolitions can occur for single-family housing containing asbestos. This is explained in the regulatory interpretation letter from Richard Duffy, EPA Office of Compliance, to Robert Hodanbosi, Ohio Division of Air Pollution Control. Dec 22, 2010. https://bit.ly/2OhvwbC

Many scholars have written on the states of 'exception' and 'emergency,' finding that those who declare them do not strive for coherence in their designations (Agamben 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000). Detroit's demolitions confirmed this, with the criteria used to designate empty buildings as 'emergency' never being entirely clear. In public forums, municipal and DLBA representatives would assert that only those buildings "in imminent danger of collapse" could be declared as emergencies. Though some burned out hulks clearly met this standard, others were less apparent. None of the 'emergencies' I would watch removed with Mike listed to one side or the other. We sat unconcerned on their porches, tramping through them unafraid in search of the few metal fittings that had been left behind by previous scavengers.

Figure 20 A news image of an emergency demolition captioned, "Dust envelops a worksite as workers, using protective clothing to guard against asbestos exposure demolish an abandoned house." Observers include a regulatory worker and supervisor from the Detroit Building Authority. Photo by Jim West. Rights Acquired.

Detroiters frustrated by the slow pace of building removals on their blocks speculated that the inconsistent appearance of structures designated as 'emergencies' reflected the algorithmic hierarchy of attention described in Chapter Three. Others hypothesized that public authorities like the DLBA declared buildings 'emergencies' as a way of circumventing the cost of asbestos abatements that could run into the tens of thousands of dollars. No matter the reason, emergency demolitions betrayed an active inattention to asbestos. Dust clouds sprang forth,

bumping up against surrounding buildings and disrupting everyday lives. In one instance, Marta described pitching her granddaughters' birthday cake into the trash after it was covered in ash-colored emissions from a demolition occurring on the other side of her backyard fence. While the celebration had continued in the air-conditioned confines of Marta's Southwest Detroit home, the princess cake and pool party were otherwise spoiled. For Marta, the interruption was hardly surprising. In her words, "Marathon, the highway, pet coke, and this. They don't need to let us know that they might dump a load of dirt into our lungs or on our yards. They've been dumping stuff on us for centuries." Here, Marta positions demolition emissions alongside polluting projects that "they" — a spectral amalgam of industrial tycoons, municipal administrators, and corporate authorities — have organized within her predominantly Latinx corner of the city[38]. Particulates from building removals layer alongside others as part of a historical struggle with unwanted contamination[39].

By contrast, when I asked Mike whether he was concerned about potential fallout from his employees' work, he lit up another cigarette before replying, "Not a bit. We're easily five-hundred feet out of range. All the shit will fall before it gets to us. Then we wash it away. I'd be worried if I lived downriver, but not here on this porch." Here, Mike refers to the requisite post-demolition practice of hosing down the streets and sidewalks to ensure that any 'fugitive dust,' a technical category for particulate that breaches the arbitrary lines of worksites, is flushed down the drain. As he references, the treated outflows of Detroit's sewers pour into the Detroit River that runs past downstream suburbs. Because asbestos threads maintain their shape in water, they

[38] Industry actors maintained that uncovered stockpiles of petroleum coke, a byproduct of refining shale oil, that blew into homes in Marta's neighborhood were 'safe.' It was only after a state legislator trespassed to sample the stockpiles that the refinery acknowledged their carcinogenic character. For a granular history of the intersections of racial capitalism and environmental racism in Detroit, see Rector, Josiah (2017) *Accumulating Risk: Environmental Justice and the History of Capitalism in Detroit, 1880-2015*. PhD Dissertation. Detroit: Wayne State University.
[39] Chloe Ahmann (2018) offers an extended meditation on the temporality of similar claims in Baltimore.

can cause gastrointestinal harm if ingested in suspension, to say nothing about the possibilities of them becoming airborne once more if dried out in the heat of sewage treatment flares[40].

Mike narrates geographies of risk from demolition along two tracks. Potentials for contamination cluster in the vicinity of removal sites before spiking again along the aquatic pathways that demolition emissions can be flushed down. To a certain extent, the routes he traces correspond to the information conveyed in continuing education trainings he attended as part of his ongoing certification to operate a demolition firm. There, instructors from state regulatory offices probably told him of how airborne toxins settle most densely within a few hundred yards of their 'emission source,' as well as of the possibility for dust suppression techniques like water sprays to become their own means of channeling hazardous particulate toward particular locations. At the same time, regulatory operatives were keen to highlight the unknown limits of these channels. An MDEQ representative once made the case for increased funding before a set of staffers for austerity-minded suburban legislators by way of a video clip of a dusty demolition similar to the one that we encountered at the start of this chapter. While legislative staffers watched, the state employee noted, "Just so we're clear, there is no way to make that air stop at the city limits." As the MDEQ employee implied in their attempt to reverse decades of budget cuts, the consequences of drafty procedures could not be contained to the predominantly Black, often poor neighborhoods in which buildings emptied by racialized deindustrialization were being demolished. Prevailing winds would encourage them to seep toward the whiter, wealthier districts where residents like Mike lived at imaginative remove from toxic harm.

Public health scientists and environmental justice advocates attuned to transformations

[40] EPA Should Update Guidance to Address the Release of Potentially Harmful Quantities of Asbestos That Can Occur Under EPA's Asbestos Demolition Standard. Environmental Protection Agency – Office of the Inspector General. 15-P-0168, June 2015.

that materials like asbestos can make across air and water regularly cautioned me to be wary of its boundary breaching possibilities. Even in ideal circumstances, small quantities of asbestos tend to escape even the most well-constructed containments, whether through microscopic gaps in plastic sheeting or by hitching a ride on workers' shoes, tools, and respirators[41]. Charles, the retired occupational health inspector, pounded his fist on the laminate tabletop of the diner in which we were meeting as he practically roared, "People don't understand, this stuff gets out. It gets into the air. Even if you have an entirely wet demolition and put the dust down the drain, that water goes somewhere. This isn't just a Detroit problem, it's an everybody problem."

Charles, like so many others, was unsettled by the possibility for carcinogenic fibers to be swept up into the water or atmosphere before settling miles away without regards to the privileges of location, skin color, income, or health insurance access. Such anxieties underscore the experience of "unprotection" (Tousignant 2018) and are consistent with understandings of the contemporary moment as one of a "risk society" in which the release of hazardous materials into shared environments supersedes existing regimes of spatial and political economic privilege (Beck 1992; Choy 2011). Though one means of inhabiting such a world would be to accept contamination as a foregone prerequisite to being in the world, another might be to plot out the aerosolized and aquatic paths that a material like asbestos could course down in order to agglomerate a public interested in buffering against such movements. And yet, when state employees attempted to enroll suburban legislative staffers in such a project, their efforts to secure supplemental funding were ultimately unsuccessful. Political investments in presenting any latent toxicities sent forth from Detroit's empty buildings as problems unique to the municipality won out over other possible imaginations of their fallout.

[41] Ibid.

Even as particulate blasts appear to contain possibilities for enrolling broad toxic collectivities, we might trouble the flattened view of contamination they presuppose. Scalar geographies of industrial runoff and landfill wastes make apparent how poorer communities and racially marginalized groups are organized as "sacrifice zones" (Lerner 2010) into which harmful effluents of production and consumption continue to be routed (Dietrich 2013; Nixon 2011; Sze 2006). Bear in mind that demolition dusts are most likely to fall close to their origins[42]. Statistically, at least, the sorts of respiratory pain and cancerous lesions that asbestos consumption can wreak upon the human body register soonest on bodies exposed to asbestos more frequently and at greater concentrations. As such, it is primarily people like Marta, Shavon and Rayshawn, people of color, who operate as a sort of 'canary in the coalmine' for the effects of dredging asbestos out of walls, floors, and pipe chases of Detroit's building. Birds whose deaths alerted workers to poisonous atmospheres illustrate how the consequences of uneven redistributions of power, marginalization, and toxicity for the racially marginalized often serve to foreshadow their effects on the racially privileged (Guinier and Torres 2003)[43]. Thus, when fibers are shaken loose from Detroit's buildings and made free to disperse into atmospheric and aquatic tracts, their routes underscore the tension understanding toxic exposure as a generalized condition of contemporary being and efforts to attend to the concentrated effects of toxicity in bodies and locations that have already been marginalized.

Uneven Collectivities

Detroit's buildings — so many of them devoid of human occupants but filled with

[42] In 2014, geological scientists measured fallout from demolitions in Detroit, finding the plumes settled an average of 600 feet from the removal site (Ayodele 2014).
[43] Perhaps in contrast to Rachel Carson's (1962) image of silenced non-human animals as the end of environmental toxicities, we might conceive of contamination as producing active, if not always acknowledged, supplication.

asbestos-containing materials — manifest how toxicities crop up amidst the collapse of structures assumed to be permanent. This chapter has followed asbestos to grapple with the details of a material capable of forming both durable, fireproof protections and clouds of cancerous dust. Though companies who produced asbestos long knew it to be hazardous to workers' health, heralding the substance as an industrial miracle allowed it to be spun into the fabric of so much of the built environment in twentieth-century boomtowns like Detroit. Projects for eliminating buildings that contained a dormant industrial toxin brought with them complex prescriptions for keeping asbestos hazards within airtight channels to the landfill. Recall that asbestos is the only material within demolition heaps that falls 'under regulation.' Yet the layers of plastic, clothing and surveillance wrapped around plasters, floor tiles, insulations are far from perfect. They leak. When they do, their releases are concentrated amongst the people of color who relate to demolition and abatement sites as neighbors and workers. As this chapter has foregrounded, asbestos' tiny threads wind their way through the production of building materials, abatement procedures, and regulatory violations. Along the way, they highlight how emergent exposures to toxic violence collide with existing privileges and marginalities, ensuring their dispersals overlap with jobsite hierarchies and residential segregation.

By way of ailing asbestos workers, dusty abatement jobsites, and particulate clouds emanating from demolitions, we have traced the jagged edges of collectivities stitched together by claims to the presence and absence of asbestos threads. The sometimes purposeful and otherwise absentminded denials of protection from these fibers are unfortunately consonant with the ways in which 'externalities' have been a defining feature of marginality, historically and at present. Workers whose lives could be expended to enrich management (Hecht 2012; Krupar 2013). People of color and working class bodies whose homes and lives could be sited in

wastelands that secured others (Beamish 2002; Dietrich 2013; Pellow 2002). Yet ours is also a moment in which systems for protecting human lives from harm appear increasingly tenuous on a broadly distributed register (Connolly 2013; Haraway 2016; Shotwell 2016). The rearrangement of regulatory infrastructures, welfare states, global climate patterns, and other bedrocks of upon which human orders have been predicated appears sufficient enough to disrupt those of us fortunate enough to be otherwise 'privileged' by skin color, inherited wealth, geography, and other means. For some, coming to grips with their newfound 'precarity' is best done by embracing "indeterminacy […] in all its contingencies and surprises" (Tsing 2015: 46, also 98). Within such a project, asbestos fibers sewn into insulation or blown into lung tissue would be material currents through which people might grapple with the shared necessity of constructing future-oriented lives amidst the deleterious aspirations of the past. Critically, this is a past from which some of us have benefited, always to the detriment of others.

Aspirational optics are tempting. They posit precarity and vulnerability to harm as enabling, rather than foreclosing, collective politics. Yet this move to operate within a shared world of toxic surprise rests upon the notion that we are all contaminated participants of relatively similar standing. If my attempts to stabilize the locations of demolition dusts have shown one thing, I contend it is how seemingly immanent toxicities animate racial logics such that the contamination of already marginalized people is a sentinel for those of us who benefit from structural privilege. In the process, tiny threads of toxic material woven into built environments materialize how a predominantly Black metropolis of color has been left to clean up the accumulated detritus of racist disinvestment. Inspectors, regulators, administrators, and abatement workers may all encounter asbestos as a baseline assumption of their daily work. However, some approach jobs with 'suburb lungs,' while others do so with 'city lungs.' These

embodied distinctions cohere how the tacit privileges of racialized whiteness derive from exclusionary tactics of white supremacy[44].

Given its potential to be both protective and highly toxic depending on its material enactment, asbestos offers an apt standpoint for grasping the fraught possibilities of decomposing modernist projects. Industrial actors who concealed knowledge of asbestos' effects on human bodies provoked regulatory mandatory containment protocols. It was the existence of these regulations that allowed demolition administrators to dismiss Shavon and others' concerns about the demolition of the yellow colonial near their west side homes. Despite the looming dust cloud captured in the viewfinder of Shavon's mobile phone, the presence of documentation stating that asbestos-containing insulation and other components had been removed justified the absence of action. Within the narrow frame of regulatory compliance, this demolition was allegedly 'clean.' And yet, as this chapter has attended to the practices through which regulatory compliance is rendered, it has encountered procedures that are anything by airtight. Cracks and leaks are constitutive of the paths through which asbestos-containing materials are rendered from Detroit into landfills. Whether these dusty escapes are enabled by torn jumpsuits, missing respirators, eviscerated regulatory staffs, or purposeful loopholes, they elucidate how toxic particulates are shunted as much by the flexibilities of plastic assemblages as they are by those of racial political economies. Along the way, these drafts make apparent how disposing of the remains of late industrialism draws differentiated people, materials, and particulate into systemically uneven, if also emergent, suspensions.

[44] Laura Pulido (2000; 2015) captures the nuance with which unacknowledged white privilege extends from historical projects of explicit white supremacy. Regardless of its cause, across this dissertation, I follow Pulido and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, 28) in contending that "Racism [is] the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," irrespective of its origins.

Chapter 6
Empty Lots

"For decades we have seen vacant land as a sign of failure. As something to be avoided at all costs. Because we need to build something new. Vacant land is not a noose around Detroit's neck. It's where we will make a new model for what a city can be!" Maurice Cox, director of Detroit's municipal Planning and Development Department gave this declaration to several hundred planners, architects, property developers, and municipal administrators gathered in an art gallery. The audience greeted his statement with applause that thundered off the concrete interior of the museum housed in a repurposed, early-twentieth-century automotive dealership. After the applause died down, Cox continued, describing how after decades of population loss, industrial contraction, and hundreds of thousands of demolitions, grass-covered, former building sites comprised almost one third of Detroit's 138 square miles[1]. Cox's talk was to celebrate the opening of an installation on "The Architectural Imagination," which featured the proposals that teams of architects made for a few of these sites. He detailed a few of the proposals with colorful slides, including visions for a public square where warehouses once stood, common spaces planted with flowers in place of empty houses, and a vertical botanical garden arranged on the grounds of an unused factory. Before concluding he said, "I want to convince you that vacant land is an unused infrastructure that we can use to build the twenty-first century American city." Indeed, much of the question and answer session entailed Cox reiterating his commitment to finding uses for empty land that did not involve new buildings.

[1] Per city code, sites zoned residential must be planted with grass or clover. Non-residential sites (e.g. commercial, industrial, institutional) may be covered with either gravel, grass, or clover.

Once Cox's presentation concluded, the audience was encouraged to circulate through the installation. In contrast with the planning director's talk, which had focused on non-structural possibilities, most of the proposals installed in the gallery were buildings of some type. They included foam models of a 2.7 million square foot "civic academy" comprised of primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions, as well as dormitories, a library, and medical clinics. Another project replanned an entire 250-block neighborhood. The clusters of forty-story-tall timber housing modules constructed at scale in the gallery seemed to harness 'urban renewal' efforts from the twentieth century[2]. Some were smaller scale, such as a sprawling performance venue and low-rise neighborhoods for refugee resettlement. In contrast with Cox's insistence that land itself was Detroit's infrastructural future, most of the installation's speculative gestures positioned land as a surface upon which to build. Except in a few instances, the elimination of existing buildings was taken as an invitation to suggest ones that might take their place. And yet, none of the proposals made as part of the exhibit would ever be built. The curators' stated goal for the exhibition was "to imagine Detroit as a location for inspiring American architectural practices." Like so many other architectural engagements with Detroit, "The Architectural Imagination" was made to be shown elsewhere, especially at the 2016 Venice Biennale of Architecture. The few weeks it spent in Detroit were only a brief stopover in a world tour.

Even locally, however, the installation's components resembled scale models arranged in developer's conference rooms or projected on the billboards that enclosed construction sites. Architectural renderings are future-oriented devices that make claims to space, even if the buildings they reference are never brought into actual existence (Hoffman 2017; Mack 2017). In the service of capital, they efface their complicity in the production of inequity (De Boeck 2012).

[2] Those efforts, as discussed in Chapter Two, were technologies of racist displacement.

Someone appeared to have commented on this visual resemblance between the museum's architectural installation and prevailing development practices. Visitors to the men's washroom found stickers posted on the walls above the urinals reading:

Detroit is not vacant,
Detroit is not for sale!

Developers out,
Detroit for Detroiters!

When I entered the washroom in hopes of photographing the commentary, a gallery employee was in the process of scraping them from the backsplash with a razorblade. Regardless, the URL listed on the sticker lead to a "digital occupation" of the exhibition by an opaque collective of Detroit-based artists, architects, and activists[3]. It installed images of ongoing social movements in Detroit — including eviction defense, foreclosure prevention, and water shutoff protests — in place of speculative models. The occupation decried the "appropriation" of Detroit as the grounds for yet another exercise in theoretical architecture, and noted how the show's sponsors included firms profiting through the accumulation of empty land and the displacement of predominantly Black and Latinx Detroiters from their homes.

This juxtaposition underscores a common tension of between those who profit from urban development and people who are displaced by their efforts. As anthropologist Eric Harms (2017) observes from Ho Chi Minh City, "spectacles of profit-oriented development emerge out of bulldozed landscapes" (5). Harms illustrates a logic by which demolitions collapse what developers refer to as 'unproductive' buildings in order to clear ground for new rounds of capital accumulation. The exhibition description scrawled on the gallery wall betrayed a similar interest, noting how Detroit's terrain was particularly "inspirational" for its ostensibly "vacant present

[3] Detroit Resists Collective (2016) "Detroit Resists Occupies the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale" https://detroitresists.org (saved to Internet Archive).

and uncertain future." Nevertheless, for those who critiqued the show, these landscapes were not vacant at all. Their digital and actual world interventions cast the city as filled with people struggling against the brutality of financialized systems. It is these people, typically Black, typically poor, who are denied places in visual and rhetorical presentations of Detroit as the vacated model of the urban frontier (Kinney 2016). Like the settler-colonial paradigms they resemble, declarations of neighborhoods or municipalities as 'vacant' opens them up to seizure by the highest bidder (K. T. Jackson 1987; Smith 2005). Testimonies like "Detroit is not vacant" are attempts to counter this evacuation. They also suggest an incommensurability between the categories of developer and city resident[4].

Despite sustained efforts by wealthy developers and anticapitalist activists alike, Detroit remains an icon of urban decline noted for expanses of land disconnected from apparent human activity. As Chapter Three reflected upon, property values have risen dramatically in certain neighborhoods, but they remain low in others. Architectural historian Andrew Herscher (2012) suggests such devaluation produces "unreal estate," in his terms, "property that has been extruded from the free-market economy" (14). For Herscher and others, Detroit's landscape is one that inverts the rulebooks that govern private property regimes. Whether in farms tilled in place houses, artists constructing installations in unused factories, or people taking up residence in buildings without permission, scholars find Detroit to be a place where the status quo of private property regimes has been unwound (Herbert 2018; Herscher 2012; Kinder 2016). This chapter takes on board how the imaginative coupling between ownership and control necessary for bundling together private property comes unstuck in Detroit and other locations of population

[4] There are developers who are also Detroit residents. Though whoever stuck stickers in the washroom might not acknowledge them as such. People who suggest such incommensurability between 'citizen' and 'developer' typically approach empty places as grounds for the construction of anticapitalist commons that seeks to undercut expectations of profitable terrains (Safransky 2017; Starecheski 2016).

loss and industrial contraction. However, it also aims to blur the bright lines suggested by propositions of "unreal estate." We will examine how working-class Detroiters of color marshal the very techniques of real estate — in particular, landscaping — as part of efforts to legally extricate vacated land from the control of absentee development firms.

Our vantage on this process comes through the simple fact that, notwithstanding their rhetorical presentation as 'vacant land' and 'empty lots,' the physical geographies produced by building removal are anything but. Demolitions may present the appearance of clear land, but they tend to leave things behind, including concrete foundations and soils laced with lead, barium, and PCBs. These remainders of past uses occupy the present. In doing so, they demand we take the physicality of land seriously, especially how administrative divisions of territory are worked through accumulations of matter. For developers, the presence of contaminants in the dirt enable demands that Detroit's existing residents shoulder the costs of accommodating wealthy, typically white newcomers. At the same time, the working class, overwhelmingly Black people who already live in the vicinity of demolished buildings find their own uses for their remains. For some, excavating contaminated soils and basement cavities forms the cornerstone of legal demands that seize land from speculative owners. Such 'adverse possessions' allow people to retool systems that otherwise perpetuate racialized uneven development. As they do, they reveal how the construction of antiracist environments rests as much upon questioning territory as an instrument of wealth as it does redistributing the physical grounds of land itself.

Uses

Sarita, a policy specialist in her thirties who worked for the DLBA, was fond of telling me, "Demolitions leave lots clean and green, Nick. Clean and green." The phrase was something

repeated to me by people in positions like Sarita's, and not just in Detroit. At a gathering of land bank employees across the country, an executive of one such organization opened a plenary discussion on demolition by declaring, "We are all here because we are working to make our cities clean and green." Yet for Sarita, the repetition of a clean and green Detroit was a personal matter as much as a professional responsibility. At a summer cookout organized by one of her aunts, I observed a heated discussion Sarita had with several members of her extended family. While Sarita was detailing how building removal contractors were required to grade sites with topsoil and seed them with grass or clover, one of her cousins interrupted, stating, "Oh yeah, they're getting rid of the bad stuff so the property values go up and the taxes go up and they can force us out." An uncle jumped in, "Or they want us to live with all these gardens. We didn't leave Arkansas to come to the city and end up some land bank sharecroppers." Following this point, several shared stories about how they felt compelled to mow the grass on lots following building removals, otherwise it would grow to waist height. For Sarita's family, who traced their lineage through the Great Migration of Black people from the rural US south to northern cities, this was a practice that struck at received memories of exploitative agricultural labor regimes.

The hesitancies Sarita's relatives expressed about the cultivation of greenspace following demolition are reflective of the ways that so-called "green gentrification" has been implicated in the clearance of communities of color (Anguelovski 2015; Checker 2011). As Chapter Three considered, part of the administrative justification for demolition was the notion that reducing empty buildings to 'clean and green' lots would increase property values in targeted neighborhoods. Detroiters were also familiar with plans from the turn of the twenty-first century when practicing architects and urban planners had proposed consolidating Detroit's population to certain sectors of the city and shutting off services in others. Their plans suggested swaths of

forests and ponds in place of majority-Black neighborhoods where people continued to live, dislocations that bore a striking similarity to midcentury urban renewal projects that had evicted some of the same people decades before (Safransky 2014). Nevertheless, both Sarita and those who bristled at her work took for granted that demolitions somehow smoothed over material traces of human presence. Together, they considered building removals to be voids that others, especially wealthy developers would rush to fill. On the contrary, when developers harnessed vacated land within speculative plans, they did not scrub them clean of the past. They profited by demonstrating how historical uses lingered in the soil.

Figure 21 A lot that appears "clean and green." Photo by author

If you look at the image above, you will see what the idealized endpoint of building removal is imagined to be. The lot appears empty, save for an open expanse of freshly-cut grass. Clean and green, as Sarita put it. But digging below the surface complicates this view. Ben, a soft-spoken white man in his sixties regularly dug into lots like this as part of his job as an environmental services contractor. As he described it, “When people want to build something, I tell them what’s in the ground or could be in the ground.” A non-profit development corporation

had their eyes on a two-acre cluster of parcels, including the one pictured above, as the site for a landscaped park, complete with children's play area. The development firm was already at work renovating dwellings in the surrounding blocks, and proximity to the proposed park featured in sales and rental guides. After hopping out of his truck, Ben donned nitrile gloves and grabbed a handheld auger. From each lot, he took five cores, amounting to a few palmfuls of dirt, and deposited the sample in a plastic bag. I followed along behind Ben, labeling each sample and logging its approximate location on a map of the block that I carried on a clipboard.

Had I not been with him, Ben would have carried the map himself. But not having it close at hand did not seem to impede his ability to navigate a part of the city he claimed to have never visited. We began at an intersection, with Ben pacing out a quick grid and stooping to load dirt into sample bags. The map described each lot as a residential parcel measuring approximately fifty by one-hundred feet, but Ben did not measure or the expanse, even though he had a walking measuring wheel in the back of his truck. When I asked if, perhaps, he was aware of his stride length and used that to approximate where each lot might begin and end, Ben shook his head in disagreement. Instead, he pointed out how, despite the removal of dwellings from the landscape, short stubs of walkway still made perpendicular runs between the street and the sidewalk. Given that these once continued to the stairs of front porches, Ben worked from the assumption that they marked the approximate midline of each lot. He also pointed to slight depressions in the terrain that ran parallel to these sidewalks to nowhere, stating matter-of-factly, "There were probably fences there." We sampled the parcels in early spring, but Ben surmised that if I returned to the spot a few months later, there would be clusters of perennials marking the edges of demolished dwellings and fence lines. Indeed, in summer, I found bright orange daylilies running at angles across the lots.

Attuning to the previous uses of cleared ground did not always require such a careful view. Ben and his colleagues regularly came across locations where demolition contractors had "backfilled" basement cavities with large chunks of concrete and brick or covered them with sand. The grass seed spread over the top of these sites typically failed to take root, resulting in a light brown rectangle offset by a field of green. In another instance, Ben was tasked with surveying what municipal property records described as a former machine shop spanning a few acres. The site was owned by the DLBA, and Ben's workorder described their intent to market it for sale. On our drive there, Ben described how he expected to find evidence of petrochemical storage tanks lurking below the grass. Perhaps there would be a depression where a tank had caved in or, more likely, we would trip over small stumps of metal and concrete where access points had been capped off. Instead, we arrived to what appeared like a swamp, with cattails and other grasses rising above my head. Ben immediately began laughing and exclaimed, "I've never seen one this big!" While the swampy landscape would have been expected in the parts of the city that hug the Detroit River and its various tributaries, this parcel was on relatively high ground. Using a shovel, Ben dug at the point where the grasses began. A foot or so later, the metal edge clanged against concrete. After photographing the site, he described how whoever had demolished the machine shop had left its basement entirely intact and covered it with dirt. Without any real drainage, the buried chamber easily sustained a rectangular swamp.

The group of residential lots proposed for reorganization as a park did not have such obvious traces of their previous occupants, but they were there all the same. After collecting the soil samples, Ben mailed them to a laboratory. There, technicians would have used microscopes and chemical tests to parse the jumble of contents that appeared as brown dirt to the naked eye. A few weeks later, one of the lab techs emailed Ben a copy of their report describing the results

of tests they had run on each sample. Ben did not forward the email to me, but described it in a text message, "Pretty clean report. three of eight out of bounds for Pb. Another has asbestos and is on the margin for PCBs." As this message implied, having lead, asbestos, or polychlorinated biphenyls mixed in with clay and loam was an expected result of soil testing, even on residential lots where houses had been removed some ten and twelve years before. Large-scale soil sampling in Detroit shows the grounds of most demolition sites contain lead, asbestos, PCBs, and heavy metals broken free through collapsing building materials[5]. Almost a third of former residential building sites in Detroit have lead concentrations that rival industrial waste sites[6]. Chapter Five highlighted how demolitions send the material components of buildings airborne. It should come as little surprise that those components settle down into the earth. Once there, they do not decompose, but endure as testaments of the structures in which they were embedded.

In the aftermath of the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan, lead molecules have become a particularly vexed matter of concern. These molecules formed the key ingredients of paints and plumbing for much of the twentieth century (Markowitz and Rosner 2013). Consuming lead is linked to all manner of physical health problems, including tremors and kidney failure, as well as developmental difficulties in children (O'Neill 2017; Warren 2001). Given that most buildings in Detroit were constructed before 1978, the year the US EPA banned lead paints, lead precipitates with nearly every demolition[7]. Dust control practices on building removal sites, including massive water sprays, only serve to reduce the aerial range of fallout, concentrating it within the immediate proximity of the demolition[8]. It was for this reason that the non-profit seeking to build

[5] See: Ayodele 2014; Herrick Robert F., Lefkowitz Daniel J., and Weymouth George A. 2007
[6] See: Howard, Dubay, and Daniels 2013
[7] "Partial Deconstruction Pilot Project: A Hands On Report" (2014) accessed via https://www.deconstructionproject.com, saved to Internet Archive
[8] Ibid.

a playground on what appeared to be a 'clean and green' location had contracted Ben to analyze the dirt in which the grass grew. One of the philanthropic foundations sponsoring the park agreed to increase the budget by $125,000. These funds were directed to a construction company whose crews used excavators to remove the top foot of dirt from the site. This dirt was loaded out to landfills, after which crews spread a fresh layer of soil across the site. As a contractor invoice attested, the new dirt was prescreened for toxics. It took several weeks for this effort to be completed, and only afterwards were the park's landscaping and jungle gym put into place.

Within this particular park project, developers justified the increased cost of removing toxic soils by noting the possibility that children who might play there could ingest polluted materials. Yet this same process was standard across efforts to construct new buildings on parcels where ones had previously stood. Developers regularly submitted proposals to Detroit's municipal government requesting subsidies to offset the costs of replacing hazardous grounds with clean fill dirt. Their contents followed a common script, which we can find in one project that sought to build 149 apartments and a 600-square-foot commercial space on a set of residential parcels just north of the central business district[9]. A soil properties report listed analyses showing concentrations of lead, PCBs, chromium, mercury, arsenic, and other heavy metals on the site. It further described, "The area is assumed to have been a former building footprint that has been backfilled. The placement of fill material and soil onto the subject property from unknown sources is considered to be a likely source for a release. The nature of the fill is unknown." This project was awarded $3.04 million in public funds to pay the costs of replacing this contaminated soil of indeterminate origin.

[9] Brush Park South Redevelopment Plan Report (2019) City of Detroit Legislative Policy Division. https://tinyurl.com/rt5pdut, saved to Internet Archive

At first glance, demolition appears as a cleansing force, one that clears away the remains of previous lives in order to unlock future-oriented opportunities. For proponents of building removals like Sarita "demolition means progress" (Highsmith 2015). Even for people who are troubled by the potential downstream effects of demolition, these actions are necessary steps away from the settled realities of past occupations. But past uses are not easily dragged away. Structures linger. They continue to mark the present, whether in the form of basements that enable swamps, or uprooted fence lines marked by flowers, or toxins that have been deposited in the dirt. Even as demolished landscapes deviate from promises that they are "clean and green," they do not impede future. On the contrary, attending to the enduring presence of historical occupants is precisely what enables developers to demand returns on their investments.

Possessions

Despite an estimated two hundred thousand empty lots in Detroit, urban development practitioners complained regularly that there was not adequate territory in the city for their purposes. As Roger, a Black developer in his fifties, put it, "There's all of this vacant land, but none of it is owned by the same person in the same place." To illustrate this for me, Roger drove me to a snow-covered, one-acre plot on the central east side where buildings had been constructed there around 1912 and demolished a century later. He described how, for several years, he had been working with a network of food justice activists seeking to build a cooperative grocery store on the site. Their renderings proposed "a food commons serving an urban, predominantly African-American, low and moderate-income community," and the proposal was the outgrowth of longstanding networks of farms and small producers that catered to Detroit's neighborhoods that were otherwise ignored by national chain grocery stores. As we

paced through the snow, Roger discussed how the acre was comprised of three different parcels controlled by three distinct owners: the land bank authority and two limited license corporations. The DLBA had promised to transfer its half-acre site to the cooperative on the condition that they could acquire the other two lots from private owners. The cooperative had been able to buy one at a cost $1000 and were in talks to acquire the other for the same amount. However, when that owner — who had purchased the lot for $500 in an online auction a few years before — got word about their plans, he requested $15,000. Roger and his fellow coop members were fundraising to meet the demand. While the cleared site allowed them to imagine the food commons touching down, building the structure would require complete physical possession.

Situations like this were not limited to endeavors seeking to serve Detroit's majority-Black populace. Consider a modernist midrise proposed not more than a half mile walk from the possible food coop. At a reception that distilled the racial orientation of redevelopment in Detroit, a member of the development team did not hold back when addressing what appeared to be an entirely white crowd, "We're excited that this project will help bring more people like us back to Detroit." That reception had been delayed for almost five years as developers negotiated for a fifty-foot-wide sliver of the one-acre project. While the parcel's owners initially sought $10,000, the final sale price was $375,000. Speculative endeavors like this one are commonplace in Detroit, where property deeds can be acquired by the thousands in online sales, whether in the form of county tax foreclosures or ebay auctions. Average prices in these auctions hover around $1,000, and investment groups acquire parcels in scattershot formations across the city. Corporate shell games often obscure the human beneficiaries of these sales, but when reveals are possible, they show predominantly white bidders based in the Metro Detroit suburbs (Akers and Seymour 2018). Not all acquisitions ever produce the spectacular profits of those I have

highlighted here. Yet their routinized occurrence betrays a hope that, at some point in the future, a stray parcel will be worth just a little bit more.

It should come as little surprise that anonymized speculators demanded greater ransoms of the condominium project pitched to Detroit's predominantly white newcomers when compared to a grocery store aiming to reach the city's existing Black residents. Real estate is predicated upon the construction of whiteness as the apex of desire and, with it, property value (Bhandar and Toscano 2015; D. Suzette. Harris 2013). Even though property ownership may be a process that only "gathers things momentarily," (Strathern 1999, 177), the "property interest in whiteness" (C. Harris 1993) also forms the durable foundation of contemporary capitalism. Racist allocations of territory are seemingly integral to systems of private property (Lipsitz 2011). Consider what happened when a wealthy, white businessman proposed purchasing 180 acres of publicly-owned land in order to establish a tree farm on Detroit's east side. The parcels sat within overwhelmingly Black neighborhoods, and some residents objected to the sale of land for which they had found collective uses, including subsistence agriculture. Notwithstanding their protests, which aimed to situate public land as a common rather than saleable good, the sale continued. As one municipal official commented to me at the time, "I don't want to sell to this white guy. But if Black folks want to preserve Detroit for ourselves, we're going to have to cough up five hundred grand [the sale price]." Even for a sympathetic observer, it was impossible to think outside the prevailing commonsense of land as belonging to whoever could pay top dollar.

For observers of land struggles, the endurance of parcel boundaries and profit motives erodes anything but the imagined possibility of extracting territory from the racist strictures of private ownership (Safransky 2017). Turning imaginations into actually existing realities

requires denaturalizing the legal and symbolic systems that stabilize property as an object (Rizvi 2019; Wolford 2010). With this in mind, my aim is not to suggest that Detroit's vacated lots, by dint of the elimination of physical structures, offer a sort of terra nullius upon which claims to possession can be made outside the strictures of real estate (cf. Herscher 2012). Quite the opposite. Even though the lines of parcel boundaries may have been obscured from physical view, they endured within municipal registries such that construction permits would only be issued to those with a documented claim to ownership.

At the same time, the strictures of real estate that govern so much of the occupation of physical space are not hermetically sealed. They have room for motion that allow ground to be claimed on the basis of routinized use rather than cash transfer. Consider the movie night I attended in a verdantly landscaped patch of Detroit's west side. A white sheet was suspended from the eaves of a 1912 colonial home clad in red brick, and a crowd of twenty some people was anticipating a showing of *Smurfs: The Lost Village*. Adults reclined in their lawn chairs. Toddlers and school-aged children scooted around after fireflies. While two of her teenaged grandsons connected a projector and stereo, Lenora, the eighty-five-year-old Latinx woman on whose home the sheet was hung stood up from her chair. She exclaimed, "I know we've been doing these things for years now, but this one is real special. Cause we're celebrating that this yard here is finally all ours. We got the possession papers from the register yesterday!" Many of those gathered started clapping, with several letting out loud whoops. The papers Lenora referenced were a deed agreement that transferred the parcel adjacent to her house into her name. There was no financial cost associated with this transfer, and the text was marked as an "adverse possession."

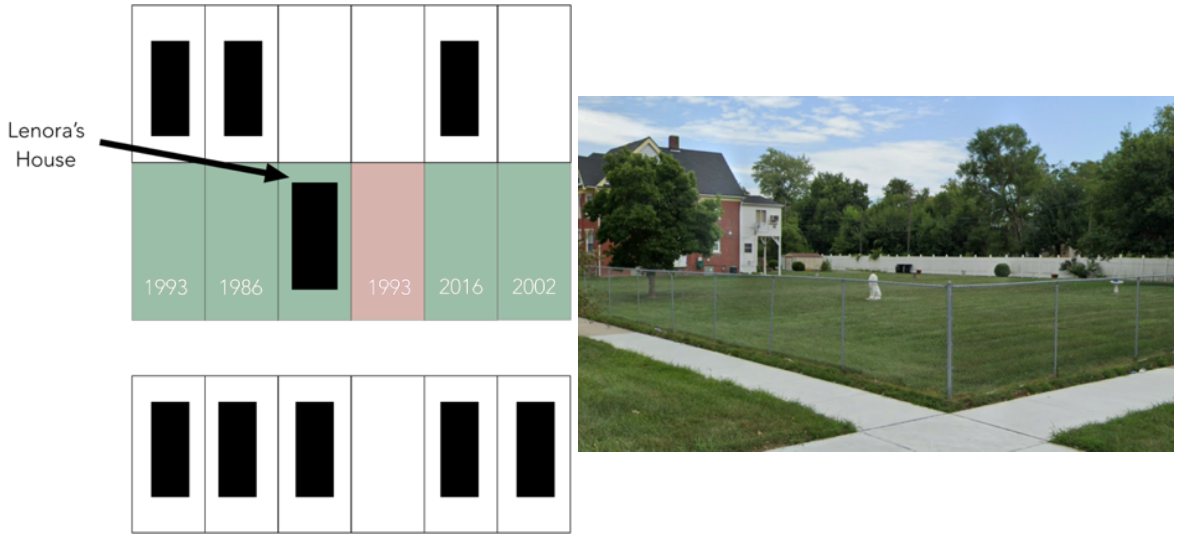

Figure 22 Lenora's possessions. On left, green lots were acquired through municipal 'sidelot' sales. The red through adverse possession. Dates signify when structures were demolished. Black rectangles are buildings in 2018. On right, a shot of the yard.

Lenora had lived in her house for almost her entire life. Her parents had purchased it in 1932, a decade or so after they moved to Detroit from south Texas. When they moved in, it was the fourth structure from the nearest street corner, with two dwellings separating it from a small strip of small enterprises — a corner store, laundry, and lawyer's office — with upstairs apartments. Walking in the other direction, you would have passed almost two dozen dwellings before arriving at another commercial strip that marked the end of the block. Like anywhere, the neighborhood had changed markedly over Lenora's lifetime. At the time of her birth, most of her neighbors were descendants either of Polish immigrants, with a small number belonging to the city's longstanding Mexican-American community. When Lenora's first son, Jimmy, was born in 1953, the majority of those living on their block were Latinx, joined by an increasing number of Black families. As Lenora recalled, the last "white white" family — that is, non-Hispanic white family — to move out did so in 1960, the same year Paul, her third son, was born. Their house was also the first one to be demolished. After the family left, their former home sat empty for several years. Termites in a support beam resulted in a collapsed rear addition, and a crew from the municipal public works department was mobilized to raze the structure.

Between 1960 and 2020, twenty-eight of the forty-nine buildings that faced onto Lenora's block were demolished. In the years after the deaths, evictions, foreclosures, and disappearances of their previous occupants, eighteen of the removals had occurred on Lenora's side of the street. When the house to one side of hers was knocked down in 1986, Lenora and several neighbors turned the plot into a small vegetable garden. They grew tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and a variety of greens. By the time I met her, Lenora's house was the sole structure remaining in a swath of six lots. Jimmy, who lived in Lenora's home with his partner and several children, had paid to surround the plot with a chain-link fence. This enclosure was not to keep others from using the space, but an invitation for them to do so. Decades of municipal budget cuts had left the nearby public park in disrepair. Parents feared allowing their kids to play on rusted metal playscapes or run around in a location known for sex work and drug sales. But the fence that surrounded the lots around adjacent to Lenora's house offered a wide-open place for recreation. After school or on weekends, the yard and vegetable garden — which had been expanded to cover two lots — were frequented by the children, grandchildren, cousins, friends, of people living in the surrounding blocks. People also used the space as an off-leash dog park, though Jimmy was known to dress down those who failed to pick up after their pets.

Lenora had gained legal title to four out of five lots through a municipal program that transferred publicly-owned land to adjacent homeowners for between one and three hundred dollars. The DLBA had continued this program when it took over ownership of municipal lands. However, as even land bank administrators were keen to note, the program was premised on a limited understanding of responsible stewardship that privileged only those people who owned property directly adjacent to the site in question[10]. It denied access to renters or people like

[10] With this in mind, it was never clear to me how Lenora had managed to gain title the lots beside the one she acquired through adverse possession, since that lot would have prevented her from demonstrating adjacency. It is

Lenora's neighbors who might live across the street from, but not directly next to places they might use on a regular basis. In this particular case, Lenora used her adjacency as a means of securing use for a broader public. But I also encountered instances where neighbors raced to the DLBA office immediately after a demolition in attempts to edge each other out of access to the vacated land.

While Lenora and those around her were able to effectively make common use of land that was solely Lenora's possession, they did confront other difficulties. The two-family dwelling directly next to Lenora's house had been removed in 1993, but the municipality had never filed paperwork to seize the plot of land from the ownership of a property management group headquartered in a far-flung suburb. For more than twenty years, the management group had continued to make regular tax payments. This included the period when Lenora and others had come to use the spot for supervised childcare and movie screenings. But, other than these financial transfers, the parcel's formal owners showed no sign of interest in the property until 2015 when sales values began rising in Lenora's neighborhood, an increase attributed a nearby hospital that began subsidizing employees who bought property there. Soon after that program was announced, the management company listed the lot for sale, with an online description reading, "Own in an up and coming neighborhood!" Their $125,000 asking price included plans for a four-bedroom, three-bathroom dwelling. One of the firm's partners, who Lenora recalled as a paunchy, clean-shaven white man in a suit, came to plant a for sale sign in the ground next to her home. He was rebuffed by the chain-link fence, and knocked on her door to inquire about why she had built a fence around something owned by his company. Lenora brushed him off,

possible that, in their rush to offload responsibilities for mowing grass and shoveling snow, municipal employees overlooked the fact that Lenora did not, in fact, own the lot next door.

and a few weeks later received another knock at the door from a process server who delivered a notice of a civil suit demanding she remove the fence immediately and pay $10,000 in back rent.

Lenora, Jimmy, and their neighbors were somewhat shaken by the demand. As Jimmy put it to me, "So this guy hasn't come round at all in my child's lifetime. But as soon as he thinks it there might be some green in it for him, here he is." Although Lenora was inclined to remove the fence, she did not have money to meet the request for back rent. A woman she frequently saw at church urged her to contact a housing clinic that specialized in tenants negotiating with absentee landlords. Indeed, when an attorney in the clinic heard about the length of time Lenora had been using the lot for, she hastily drew up a motion to dismiss the management company's legal claim to the parcel and transfer it into Lenora's name. The motion was accompanied by receipts for fencing and gardening supplies, as well as sworn statements from neighbors that Lenora had been using the lot for more than two decades. The motion was packaged with evidence and submitted for consideration by a circuit court judge. Months passed, and in them, Lenora received a series of letters from the management firm suggesting they would waive the demand for rent if she removed the fence and allowed them access to the parcel. The legal clinic attorney advised Lenora to ignore the letters.

On the morning when a judge was scheduled to render a decision, Lenora, Jimmy, and a dozen of their neighbors filed into the courtroom. Seemingly for our benefit, the judge defined the process of 'adverse possession' as one where someone who does not own property takes it for their own exclusive use. In Michigan, if that use continues uncontested by for a period of fifteen years, then the location becomes the property of whoever is using it rather than whoever is the documented owner. There were tears in Lenora's eyes as the judge gave a brief summary of his ruling, "[Lenora's] use meets the statutory parameters for adverse possession for more

than the requisite period. Title to the parcel in question is hers by adverse possession." Often, people seeking to make adverse possession claims upon wealthier landholders have difficulty establishing the continuous and uncontested status of their occupation (Starecheski 2016). Unlike these cases, Lenora had a reserve of evidence to draw upon that the lot had been out of the control of the property management firm for some time.

Even in the name, adverse possession might seem to be a radical intervention in private property systems. It opens a possibility of recognizing ownership on the basis of care and use rather than capital. But Lenora's ability to extract a parcel from the clutches of a wealthy property management firm did not occur due to some shredding of legal precedent and the unraveling of prevailing systems (cf. Herbert 2018). As legal scholar Carol Rose (1994) suggests, private property systems are organized by claims to possession, not those of financial exchange. These possessions are not typically liberatory. Consider how the juridical precedents that codify adverse possession in Michigan allowed a railroad operator to avoid paying to acquire land and mining firms to extract resources rent free[11]. Similar arguments undergird the routinized theft of land and labor under settler colonialism (W. Johnson 2020). The parcels around Lenora's home would not have been kept open for common use had she not had a fence that appeared to indicate the expanse was Lenora's alone. In this instance, enclosure did not signal the death of the commons, but a means of preserving it.

[11] *Lang* v. *Osceola Consolidated Mining Co.,*145 Mich. 370 (1907); *Rozmarek v. Plamondon* 419 Mich. 287 (1984)

Hazardous Grounds

The lot adjacent to Lenora's home is not the only attempt by working class Detroiters of color to gain adverse possession from mostly white absentee owners. But successful claims to possession in this way are rare. In part this is because entities like investment firms apply the full weight of private property regimes in attempts to maintain their control of physical space. At a drop-in center for unhoused people in Detroit's Midtown neighborhood — a focus of urban redevelopment schemes since the 1980s — many of those who made use of the center as a mailing address and location for regular meals and showers slept in tents on the empty lot across the street. A multistory apartment building had been removed from the lot in the 1990s, and a paralegal who volunteered at the drop-in center had been maintaining records of people sleeping there. Representatives from the development company learned of these records when they inquired about acquiring the drop-in center as part of their plans to construct a set of 'mixed-use' buildings with ground-floor commercial spaces topped with several stories of luxury condominiums. Seemingly afraid of a potential adverse possession claim, the firm hired contractors hired to remove people from the land the following day. They also erected a fence to prevent further use, leaving those who had been camping on the lot to pitch their tents on the sidewalk.

Highly-capitalized firms also attempt to use adverse possessions to bring their own long-range speculations to ground. After the private owners of a bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario were denied permits to expand their crossing, they fenced off a section of the public park that stood where they wanted to construct a second span. At regular intervals, the fence was posted with signs reading, "Warning: Due to Homeland Security, No Trespassing. Violators Will Be Prosecuted." The barriers remained in place for more than a decade, until a Customs and

Border Patrol agent whose regular beat involved driving through Detroit's waterfront neighborhoods, tipped off people living near the foot of the bridge that the federal Department of Homeland Security had issued no such order closing the bridge. Soon after, several dozen people wielding bolt cutters tore down the fences and "liberated" the park. For their part, the bridge's owners responded by sending environmental contractors to take soil samples from the park. They returned analyses like those Ben had relayed to me, suggesting that hydrocarbons, lead, and other heavy metals were present in the dirt. The presence of the contaminants was linked to a gasworks that had refined petrochemicals there until it was demolished in 1979. Following the demolition, the site had been transformed into a park. New fences went up with warnings that passersby should keep out due to environmental contamination. The municipality subsequently transferred control of the parkland to the bridge company for $3 million on the condition that the company not request subsidies for decontamination.

Covering over industrial terrains with grass gives the appearance of cleaning them up, even as hazards lurk beneath the surface. For people and entities who profited from the production of toxicities like those buried in Detroit's riverside park, such plantings are means of shedding responsibilities for the long-term fallout from their projects (Beckett and Keeling 2019; Krupar 2013). Even though it was ultimately a wealthy logistics firm that bore the financial costs of removing hazardous grounds, they did so in the service of a bridge that would intensify tailpipe emissions that wafted over the Black and Latinx people who lived in the shadow of the crossing. Nevertheless, shifting the relations of soil can also produce what anthropologist Stacey Ann Langwick (2018) refers to as "a politics of habitability." Langwick and others take note of composting practices in which people strategically align their labors with those of plant and animal companions in order to alleviate the toxic scars of past use (Haraway 2016, 33; Lyons

2016). Adverse possessions articulate similar politics, but do not stop at subsuming toxicity into the ground. Rather, they also make visible alternate routes for setting buried contaminants into circulation.

Aubrey and Jay, a couple in their late twenties, were two of the people who attended the screening of *Smurfs: The Lost Village* projected on the side of Lenora's house. Lenora was Aubrey's great aunt, so even though they lived a few miles east, the pair were regular visitors to the house. With the movie flickering in the background, Jay explained how Lenora's success at claiming adverse possession of the ground on which we sat had inspired Aubrey and him to make similar moves on a parcel across the street from their home. Their three-bedroom, one bathroom, Second Empire style dwelling nearly filled the thirty by one hundred foot lot on which it had been built in 1888. The structure left little room for planting a vegetable garden, something both Jay and Aubrey they both wanted. The couple had previously attempted to acquire the empty lot next to their dwelling from the DLBA. But they were deemed ineligible for the agency's sidelot program because they were in the process of acquiring their home on land contract. Unlike a mortgage, in which a deed is recorded at the time of sale, the deed to Aubrey and Jay's house would only be transferred to their name after they had paid in full. That meant making $1,140 payments each month for four more years. Those payments seemed feasible, given Aubrey's job as an administrative aide at a charter school and Jay's steady work as a mechanic. However, until they had the deed in hand, their sidelot applications would only be rejected.

While the couple considered building their garden on DLBA land and waiting for their official deed to come through, they settled on the parcel across the street because it got better sunlight. Figure Three offers you a schematic look at the lots surrounding Jay and Aubrey's

house. You will see that, in 2005, a building was removed from the lot they staked out for their garden. Neighbors suggest it had been a standard, wood-framed bungalow. Municipal records show that shortly after the demolition, ZoLo LLC paid $500 a piece for the lot and the one next to it as part of the county's annual tax foreclosure auction. The same LLC was listed as the owner of several other lots nearby, having picked them up for an average of $1000 each between 2004 and 2018. Aubrey and I searched online for information on the LLC, turning up the mailing address that matched a development firm headquartered in Birmingham, an Oakland County suburb. Aubrey and Jay had no interest in alerting the corporate owner to their actions. Aubrey recounted for me how one of her coworkers had attempted buy a sidelot owned by an LLC headquartered in Illinois. When they dialed the phone number listed in public records, the disembodied female voice on the other end of the line said the LLC would be happy to transfer the deed "at the cost we paid, a low price of $2,500." Publicly available tax information showed the LLC had acquired the lot for less than half of that.

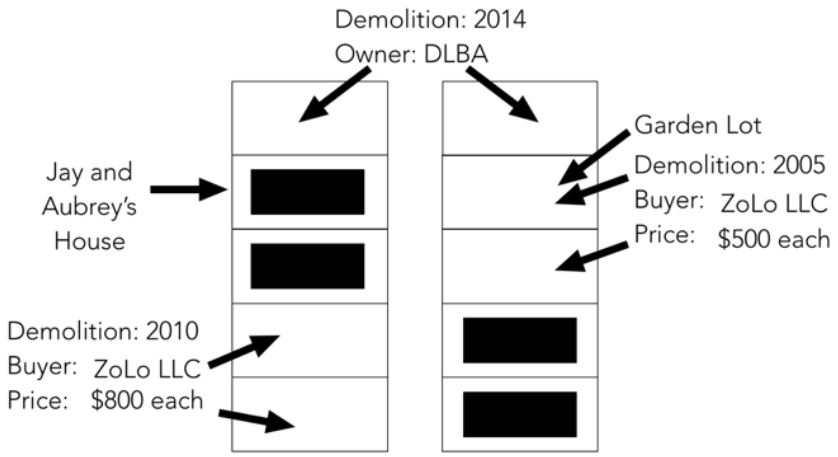

Figure 23 Jay and Aubrey's block with structures and lot ownership

Jay and Aubrey were set against playing into anyone else's speculative trap. They planned on remaining in their home for the long-haul and were not concerned about staying put for the fifteen-year time horizon required for adverse possession. If the LLC noticed and booted

them from the lot, they hoped the land bank-controlled parcel next to them would still be available. But for the time being, they set about planning for their garden using a guide published by the state agricultural extension[12]. "First step," it began on page one, "Consider your soil. Soil contamination is common in urban areas. Soil contamination is a concern both for direct contact between people and soil and also for movement of chemicals into plants that are grown in soil." One suggested possibility for mitigating these transfers was to only grow plants known not to take up contaminants, including tomatoes, peppers, okra, and squash. But this excluded beans, peas, potatoes, and leafy greens, all of which Jay and Aubrey hoped to grow. Instead, they followed the guide's advice to "know your soil" by submitting samples for laboratory analysis. Suggested assays included those for lead, aluminum, mercury, cadmium, barium, iron, phosphorous, PCBs, vinyl chloride, and asbestos, among other things. Each substance listed had known health consequences when ingested by human bodies.

Soil analyses can be costly. Even with discounted rates available through state laboratories and public university extensions, basic testing for pH and heavy metals can run $125 for a small garden plot. The full battery of tests for Jay and Aubrey's selected lot cost three hundred bucks. They sprung for augmented analyses because at the time of garden planning, Aubrey was about four months pregnant. The consequences of consuming toxic molecules are of heightened concern for children, whose small bodies magnify concentrations of substances they consume, whether from the dirt or things planted in it. As Aubrey put it, she and Jay resolved to "Do it right. If there's something in the lot, we don't want to give it to our kid." A few days later, Jay and I pulled a set of fifteen samples from the lot. We did not have professional equipment like the augers Ben used, but the testing directions Jay received from an extension lab offered

[12] Urban Agriculture in Michigan: Things to consider about soil and water (2016) Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. https://tinyurl.com/vhaeyrq, saved to Internet Archive.

schematics for using a standard handheld shovel to remove earth from depths of three, six and twelve inches. We wore gloves as we loaded soil into plastic sandwich bags, boxed them up, and shipped the package to the address requested by the lab.

A few weeks later, Jay's email pinged with a soil testing report like those routinely submitted by developers requesting public subsidies for decontamination. A brief abstract described what he and Aubrey already knew from city and county records. The lot was a residential parcel, a dwelling had been constructed there in 1923 and demolished in 2005. Below this was a signed message from a lab technician listing what they identified in the soil. It began, "The submitted samples contain significant hazards. You should not plant directly in this soil." In the forty-seven pages to follow, the report would go on to describe various testing protocols and their results. Nevertheless, Jay and Aubrey did not need to read beyond the first page to know that the dirt Jay and I had dug out of the ground contained significant levels of lead, arsenic, mercury, barium, and vinyl chloride. As the report noted, elevated levels of lead and mercury were common on residential sites. But the presence of other materials suggested that the dirt spread across the lot following demolition had layered additional toxins into the mix. Municipal ordinances may have required demolition contractors to use 'clean fill,' but it was not uncommon for them to substitute contaminated dirt excavated from construction sites. When this happened, hazards pulled out of the ground as part of projects oriented to drawing new people to Detroit's central districts were reinterred in the city's neighborhoods that were largely home to working class people of color.

Aubrey and Jay were prepared for the revelation that the lot was not suitable for direct planting, and it did not impede their garden plans. They purchased lumber and impervious fabric to construct rectangular raised beds. Such beds are a common feature of consumable gardens in

Detroit and other late industrial locations. Once put in place, they float pockets of cleaner soil atop landscapes of compounded toxic residues. In total, Jay and Aubrey built sixteen beds that were four feet wide, ten feet long, and two feet deep, arranging them in a grid across the lot. I arrived to help shovel them full with store-bought soil and compost. We were midway through this process when a minivan stopped on the street and the driver began taking a picture of us using a smart phone. When Jay, Aubrey, and I approached the car, the driver's window rolled down to better reveal two white men. Both were bald, but the driver appeared to be in his sixties, and his passenger much older. The driver explained how they had driven to Detroit from Livonia, a Wayne County suburb, in search of the home his father had grown up in. The elderly man waved from the passenger seat and described how he remembered the house being near this spot, but it looked like it had been demolished. His son added, "But I'm so happy to see that you're taking care of the place where his house was." At the son's request, the Jay and Aubrey gathered for a photo with the old man in front of their garden beds.

Figure 24 Raised Beds. Photo by author.

After the minivan pulled away, Aubrey joked about how she had at first thought the pair could have been from ZoLo LLC, there to demand they pull up their garden. “We would have lost our possession before we could even make it,” she remarked. Jay mused in response, “But really, think about it. What even happens if we can someday file a possession and get this spot? We get a bunch of toxic dirt.” He pointed to the ground, continuing, “I’d really like to be able to take this dirt and give it to the people who made it. Maybe trade it out with those folks living out in Livonia or Birmingham. Wouldn’t that be some shit? Make it rain barium in the suburbs!” The three of us nearly fell over laughing at this prospect before continuing to shift dirt into the raised beds. When we finished for the day, Aubrey filed away the receipts for lumber, fabric, and topsoil. They were folded up within a printed, date stamped printout of the soil testing report. Later, receipts for seeds and plants would be added to the file. These documents would become essential if it ever became possible to make a claim of adverse possession.

While the implications of Jay’s comment about raining barium in the suburbs passed unsaid in the moment, they are worth taking seriously. As a practice, adverse possessions offer opportunities to upset the possession of private property. For people like Aubrey and Jay, cultivating gardens on parcels they do not own is justified specifically because of the absentee character of speculative ownership. And yet, seizing grounds made by demolition transfers control over polluted places that capture the multiple registers through which racialized uneven development has been driven into the dirt. Substances like lead, mercury, barium, and vinyl chloride that turn up in soil testing reports linger. They do not decompose. Put simply, even as Jay and Aubrey strategically combine their labors with plants and other beings, the habitable landscape they produce can only ever be superficial. Actually addressing the contamination

deposited through cycles of construction and demolition would require much farther reaching — if no less strategic — shifts in the terrain.

Speculative Redistributions

By way of conclusion, let's come back to the art gallery where Maurice Cox, Detroit's planning director, aimed to convince a crowd of design professionals that "vacant land [in Detroit] is an unused infrastructure that we can use to build the twenty-first century American city." For Cox's part, the possibility of considering land as an infrastructure was that it could be landscaped to make a city interspersed with parks, gardens, and other green spaces. He sought deliberately to offer a different logic for speculative development in which demolitions could give way to something other than the construction of a new building. This idea for an alternative model — not just of Detroit, but of the city itself as a conceptual entity and physical form — did not catch on with the architects, urban planners, and development specialists that Cox aimed to convince. Even in the exhibition of "The Architectural Imagination" for which his talk was organized, the majority of those imaginaries relied upon new structures rising on sites where old ones had been cleared away. It was only a year or so after his talk that Cox, who had initially moved to Detroit with public promises of never leaving, took a new posting as planning director for the City of Chicago.

Despite the seeming opposition between Cox's propositions and the status quo of planning and development, there is remarkable consonance between the two. For Cox and others who contributed to "The Architectural Imagination," Detroit's landscapes offered a reserve of creative energy to harness specifically because they had been emptied of the buildings that once sat atop them. Such a view is consistent with how urban development paradigms are predicated

upon the articulation of 'urban frontiers' that evacuate living people and ongoing processes from view (Harms 2011; Safransky 2014). As others have argued, discursive presentations of land as empty following demolition obscures the people who continue to make use of it (Herstad 2017; Kinney 2016). It is this reading of their environment that activists worked to disrupt with their assertion that, "Detroit is not vacant, Detroit is not for sale!" While I am sympathetic to this reading, my efforts have focused instead on the ways that demolitions never render terrain entirely vacant. On the contrary, different possibilities could be brought into view precisely by attending to everything that remains embedded in place.

Over the course of this chapter, we have observed how efforts to gain possession over nominally empty lots rely on harnessing the lingering presence of things like abstract parcel divisions and hazardous materials that sediment through the demolition process. Focusing on the distribution of toxic sediments through the ground allows developers and investment firms to routinize demands subsidies from Detroit's municipal taxpayers. It also allows speculative demands for profit to crowd out other possible futures. At the same time, similar patterns of attention to the composition of vacated geographies also allow working class Black and Latinx people to subvert the claims of white-controlled property investment groups. Altering the material substrates of lots offers evidence of care that allows for the preservation of otherwise speculative possessions. As this occurs, it has bearing for anthropological approaches to land, which as Tania Murray Li (2014) notes, "is a strange object. Although it is often treated as a thing and sometimes as a commodity, it is not like a mat: you cannot roll it up and take it away" (589). For Li and others, the strange character of land lies in its fixity. Rendering landscapes into possessions that can circulate requires the codification of sociolegal systems, including but not limited to private property (Blomley 2016; Tsing 2004; Raffles 2002). I am not trying to

undercut such arguments. However, as this chapter notes, the sometimes-toxic aggregates that make land physically possible can be rolled up and taken away. Dirt moves — provided you have the necessary equipment, somewhere to dump it, and replacement fill.

Taking the material character of terrain seriously offers a standpoint from which to revisit Cox's opening demand to use the grounds left after demolitions to imagine "a new model for what a city can be." In particular, we might wonder whether clearing away buildings left empty by the ravages of racist population flight and disinvestment actually makes way for a less unequal mode of existence. Henri Lefebvre's (1972) "le droit à la ville" (the right to the city) has been the calling card of progressive social movements and theorists in their attempts to interrupt the spatial reproduction of structural inequities, including racial capitalism (R. Baker 2020; Harvey 2008). They suggest this is possible by guaranteeing all people, beginning with those who have been historically oppressed, equitable access to the physical landscapes of urban life. Jay's provocation to "Make it rain barium in the suburbs!" underscores how such suggestions are only partial measures. While Lenora and others may be able to rebundle land into something other than an instrument for capital accumulation, they are gaining rights to polluted places. As such, rather than merely considering inequitable systems as symbolic structures that can be pulled from the ground, Jay speculates that they might be materially deposited elsewhere. Producing a racially-equitable landscape requires not letting the residues of past lives linger in place or seeking to easily cover over their damage. Instead, the fungibility of dirt raises the possibility of dredging up polluted grounds and redistributing them among those people who benefited from their production.

Conclusion
Moving Forward

The Introduction, Conclusion, and sixth chapter of this dissertation were cobbled into their final forms in the midst of a pandemic that has disrupted lives worldwide. But even in this global event, Detroit has become a case study of how processes nominally affecting 'all of us' do so in highly unequal ways. They collide with and layer atop existing inequities such that 'we are all in this together' only to the extent that some of us will live and others will not[1]. Between March 10 and April 20, 2020 than thirty thousand people in the State of Michigan tested positive for the SARS-CoV-2 virus and 2,391 deaths were attributed to these infections. Of these, 7,604 positive tests and 609 deaths occurred in Detroit, a city that accounts for less than seven percent of the state's population. Over the past few weeks, I have received word of dozens of friends, interlocutors, and their kin who are ill with symptoms associated with Covid-19. Some are in the hospital. Happily, a few have recovered. As everywhere, many of those who have fallen ill are 'essential workers,' those people whose cooking, care work, cleaning, and related labors actually keep our collective world afloat — even as their wages, benefits, and working conditions typically do not reflect it. For the purposes of this project, it is worth noting that several demolition firms deemed their workers 'essential,' such that they were required to report to job sites until a health department directive forced them to close down. More distressingly, six people I became close to in Detroit have died. I knew them as Isaac, Rayvon, Jeremiah, Jason,

[1] Wallace-Wells, Benjamin (2020) "Coronavirus and inequality meet in Detroit. *The New Yorker*. April 7. https://tinyurl.com/uh2fybz, saved to Internet Archive

Ms. Grace, and Shantée. You know some of them by the pseudonyms we agreed upon. I leave this here as a small way of testifying to the influence they had in my life and on this work.

These premature and preventable deaths weigh upon my writing of this conclusion and the impossibilities of revisions. My feelings are a mix of sadness, anger, and helplessness. That is because the path the Covid-19 pandemic is cutting through our world illuminates the very type of systemic vulnerabilities and privileges that I have worked to show in the preceding chapters. Forty-one percent of those deceased in Michigan identified as Black, despite people identifying in this way comprising only around fifteen percent of the populace. Meanwhile, white-identified people account for seventy-six percent of the population and thirty-two percent of deaths. In national and international media, Detroit is presented as a microcosm of disparities observed broadly across the United States. Explanations for these disparities commonly include a version of the following, "Black Americans have increased rates of high blood pressure and diabetes, conditions which seem overrepresented in covid-19 patients who grow critically sick, and in pockets of concentrated poverty [like Detroit] those rates can be higher still"[2]. Like national public health authorities, media suggest the bodies of Black Americans are especially 'vulnerable' due to illness and death due to individual 'health behaviors'[3]. They ignore how demographics like race and wealth are not mythical forces that determine health. Identity categories alone do not produce disparities in life chances. Those disparities stem from the aggregate weight of antiblackness and white power, weights that cohere in racialized allocations

[2] Ibid.

[3] Consider how on April 10, 2020, the US Surgeon General singled out the need for Black and Latinx Americans (but not others) to abstain from smoking and drinking during the pandemic. As he said, "If not for yourself, then for your abuela. Do it for your grand daddy. Do it for your big mama. Do it for your pop-pop."

of care and disregard, of economic investment and predation, and of environmental protection and contamination[4].

I also feel a bit selfish to be typing away at home, protected by physical distance, by relatively secure employment, by food and health infrastructures committed to keeping me well through as little contact as possible. The ivory towers of academic institutions may be antipolitical and ungenerous by design, but we do well to remember the measurable degrees of privilege they confer to those of us permitted to shelter inside. Sheepishly, I must also admit that my physical remove from the urgency of my interlocutor's situations has helped me clarify the stakes of this project. Because even though this dissertation does not offer an examination of health in the clinical sense, it accounts for racist technical systems that drive forward racially-differentiated life chances. These systems — including the logics of place, political economy, and toxic harm — physically construct racial capitalist interfaces within bodies and landscapes. By attending to their systemic operations, we have found handholds for grappling with the ways that accumulations of wellbeing among the already privileged are predicated upon the accumulation of harms among already oppressed.

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Demolitions knit together the uneven realities of administrative, political economic, and environmental systems. We have encountered moments in which people express outrage at these realities. By way of conclusion, I would like us to spend time with one further attempt to make the unjust outcomes of building removal otherwise. It is a legal suit that Daniel Murray filed against the Detroit Land Bank Authority, a demolition contractor, an excavator operator, and a

[4] One facet of this are medical establishments that simultaneously deny care to nonwhite patients and rely upon their bodies as a reserve for experimentation (Owens 2017; Washington 2008). Cast in this light, it is unsurprising that the City of Detroit was selected as the location for recruiting a 3,000 person clinical trial of Hydroxychloroquine, a risky, unproven treatment for Covid-19 lauded by the US president.

laborer following the demolition of his lifelong home[5]. The building in question, a small bungalow with white siding at 15745 Quincy, had been purchased by Murray's parents in 1961. Murray had lived in the house since that point, and made regular tax payments after his parents passed away. However, he was unable to continue making these payments in the mid-2000s following the loss of his job at a grocery store. In 2011, the county treasurer seized the dwelling for non-payment of taxes, transferring legal ownership to the City of Detroit. The dwelling became part of the DLBA's inventory in 2013 when the authority assumed control of municipally-owned property. Murray remained in the home throughout this time. Without regular income, he lived with sporadic utility access, and was out of the house visiting family when contractors arrived to do an asbestos survey in early 2016. The contractors broke down the front door to gain access to the structure, with the photographs in their sampling report documenting Murray's spare belongings. Murray repaired the door, but a few months later, as he was babysitting his grandchildren in a nearby suburb, a demolition team leveled the dwelling with his possessions inside.

DLBA call logs show that, in the few months between the asbestos survey and demolition, Murray made repeated attempts to stop the proceedings. For their part, authority representatives claimed that without utilities, it was unsafe for Murray to reside in the dwelling. They also asserted that Murray was trespassing, and that as the legal owner of 15745 Quincy it was the authority's right to demolish the structure in which he lived. Following the demolition, Murray rotated between the houses of his children and friends. A group of tenants' rights activists got word of his situation, and fundraised to support Murray as he pursued a case for wrongful eviction. Unlike DLBA officials, and even Murray himself, who sparred over the right

[5] Murray, Daniel v. Detroit Land Bank Authority et al. Third Cir.Ct. 16-009806-CH. The details here are drawn from publicly-accessible case files.

to removal as a question of ownership, the case filed on Murray's behalf marshalled statutes protecting renters from being tossed out of their homes without the fig leaf of thirty days of written notification. As Murray's attorney contended in court, "The defendants can't give Daniel his house back. But they could attempt to make him whole." The attorney demanded the DLBA and others involved in the demolition share the costs of providing Murray with a new place to live, as well as $25,000 to replace his lost possessions, including furniture pictured in the asbestos survey.

To be sure, claims for monetary damages flatten the complexity of injustice. But in the absence of robust infrastructures for social care, in places like the United States civil suits are often the only means available for people to demand accountability for structural harms[6]. Despite the urgency of Murray being precariously housed, the case has dragged on for more than four years at this point. Concerted efforts by attorneys for the DLBA and demolition contractors to have it dismissed have seen it ping across various realms of civil procedure, circuit courts, appeal hearings, and settlement conferences. Yet I do not center Murray's case here to critique his methods of struggle, or those of the activists who supported him. Rather, I raise the proceedings because it opens a window on steadfast refusals to recognize individual and collective contributions to the distress of others. In courtroom arguments reflecting on this length of time, an attorney for the DLBA stated, "We are of course sympathetic to the difficulties [Murray] has faced. But we do not see how the DLBA or [its employees] are responsible for those difficulties. The DLBA has changed its procedures to make sure similar circumstances do not arise moving forward. It is time for all of us to move forward." Even as alternate systems were put in place to

[6] While some anthropologists have fetishized legal victories as the epitome of justice, others have picked through how legal concepts make systemic harms illegible (Blackburn 2012; Molé 2013; cf. Kirsch 2014). In the US context, anthropologist Lochlann Jain (2006) argues this results from an "American injury culture" that responsibilizes individual human actors for their oppression at the intersections of racism, sexism, and capitalism.

ensure further occupied structures were not demolished, the authority maintained nothing was out of place in the removal of 15745 Quincy. “Difficulties,” which here included the exigencies of being a working-class Black man in the United States, apparently mitigated any contribution that the DLBA or any of its contractors or employees could have made to leaving a man homeless. Here, to move forward from harmful circumstances is to acknowledge the existence of injury without doing anything to remedy it.

As the process of eliminating 15745 Quincy distills, demolitions do not make the racialized environments of late industrialism disappear; they transform them into newly unequal assemblages of people, technology, and matter. Like *Restructured City*, Murray’s experience illustrates how the momentum of progress differentially crushes people and places. Across this dissertation, reckoning with building removal not only reveals the snowballing effects of structural violence, it elucidates how structures that are the sites of racial oppression also motivate racial privilege. We began by examining how Detroit’s empty buildings have been produced as the effects of property relations that have benefited white-identified property owners since the colonial period. Then, the identification of empty buildings as ‘blight’ allowed us to trace how quasigovernmental authorities assemble territory beyond the reach of Detroit’s majority-Black residents and their public government. Dissecting the algorithmic modalities by which only certain empty buildings are identified for removal showed us how demolitions encode assumed links between property value and white desire into urban space. Furthermore, removals were also opportunities for construction firms owned by white families to combine grapple-bucket excavators and precariously employed men of color into a profitable demolition apparatus. Their organizations make apparent how racist means of production that powered mass production also animate mass disposal. Attempts to keep mechanized demolitions from sending

asbestos-containing materials airborne directed our view to the ways their drafts and containments imprint antiblack disparities in economic opportunity into the bodily experiences of Black laborers. Even after buildings are removed, the toxic sediments and parcel boundaries they leave behind become the stuff of speculation, both for firms seeking to capitalize on absentee holdings and of working-class people of color who undermine their claims.

In total, this dissertation looks to the constituents of demolition to suggest that structural inequities endure as technical assemblages that are always embodied and emplaced. Empirically, the locations from which I know these inequities is one that has been cast through the crucible of racial capitalism. Whether as the object of production or destruction, Detroit exhibits how it is racially-unequal circumstances that drive capital. At our current historical conjuncture, the coupling of antiblackness and white power also enables the ongoing existence of the United States as a settler colony. Thus, even though this work has been rooted empirically in one city on the North American continent, my analytic aims have been oriented more broadly toward the reproduction of structural inequities. In particular, building removals and their fallout clarify how privilege and oppression cohere only in relation to each other. To inhabit a position of privilege (racially or otherwise) is to inhabit the source of others' oppression and vice versa. The processes that transform empty buildings into empty lots offer a robust view of the ways these structural relations do not necessarily accrue through discrete spatial, financial, conceptual, environmental, or political vectors, but at their intersections. But simply observing these coincidences does little to interrupt their reproduction. As such, *Restructured City* has dwelt upon the material and technical engines that drive inequities — including but not limited to racism — through time and space as part of an effort to grasp the ways people imagine and construct possibilities for repairing the unjust circumstances in which we are all implicated.

From the sidelines of demolitions in Detroit, this dissertation contributes to bending ethnographic and anthropological attention away from categories of racial identity and toward examinations of racist structures. The concept of race is arguably foundational to the discipline of anthropology. It was early anthropologists who both made racism a scientific project and struggled to undermine that project (Baker 1998, 2010). And yet, despite these contributions, much of the discipline's twentieth-century has been spent attempting to codify race as a fungible category of identity rather than racism as an interlocking set of systemic relations (M. Anderson 2019). While this orientation to racial identity has authorized liberal politics of multicultural inclusion, it has also left the discipline flat-footed and ill-equipped to grapple with the elaboration of white supremacy on a global scale (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020). The absence of structural attention to racism is notable given the anthropological practice of offering grounded analyses of uneven development. Shifting focus to racist structures rather than racial categories demands approaching how white privilege and antiblack oppression are not artifacts of capitalism, empire, and other systems of domination; on the contrary, they are the footings upon which those systems are constructed (Alves 2018; W. Johnson 2013; Robinson 2005). *Restructured City* pushes this intervention forward by examining how disposing of the physical structures that enable racist outcomes is, on its own, not a sure path to equity. Demolitions may clear the material remains of privilege and oppression away from certain lots and balance sheets, but their interventions tend to maintain rather than eliminate the status quo.

Furthermore, as Detroit's buildings are broken open and their components transferred elsewhere, they compel us to shift our anthropological viewfinders from race as a social construct to racism as a set of durably sedimented technical projects. To be sure, racial categorizations are merely social facts. For anthropologists and our allies, attending to the ways

rhetorical practices and social imaginaries produce hierarchies of racial bodies has been integral in denaturalizing taken-for-granted assumptions about the antiblack skew of life chances, whether in the United States or elsewhere (da Silva 2007; Saraswati 2013). Dana-Ain Davis (2019), for instance, analyzes how medical practitioner's ignorance of middle-class Black women's experiences contributes to their elevated rates of birth complications when compared to low-income white women. At turns, *Restructured City* has featured how racism is routed though individual attitudes and institutional practices. However, more often than not, the uneven sedimentations of wealth, power, and contamination that we have observed are structured by the routine operations of excavators, algorithms, parcel boundaries, labor regimes, plastic sheeting, and other things. Deliberately racist people do appear, but they are only one set of actors among many. To this end, building removals have offered us a vantage for analyzing how racist outcomes are maintained through material distributions that operate at a remove from individual or institutional beliefs.

Approaching inequities like racism by way of their technical and material systems allows *Restructured City* to parse human complicity in the operations of structural violence as a product of existence rather than intentionality. Structural violence, that suffering which "may be seen as about as natural as the air around us" (Galtung 1969, 173) is central to situating processes like racism and class hierarchy as diffuse formations of harm (Appel 2012; L. J. D. Wacquant 2009). In the hands of anthropologists and allied scholars, this concept has been key to interrogating suffering that is routinized through poverty, environmental conditions, bureaucratic procedures, and infrastructural pathways, all without discrete human authors (Davies 2019; Nixon 2011). Almost by definition, responsibility for structural violence is assigned to systems, especially those identified as 'the nation' and 'society' writ large (Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969; Gupta

2012). The empty buildings, quasigovernmental organizations, asbestos plumes, algorithms, and other things made through demolition are cases in point of structural violence. But following their material pathways in and out of building removal has also revealed how the dispossession, hazardous conditions and precarious work experienced by typically Black people never exist as ends in and of themselves. They are connected to property ownership, profit, cleaner air, less polluted soil, and related assistance that accrues to wealthier, typically white people and geographies. These privileges are largely unsought and unintended, but they exist all the same. In so doing, they illuminate how complicity in structural violence does not merely condense in the whims of those entities positioned in control of 'the state' or 'the economy' (cf. De Leon 2015). Instead, privileged bodies and places — including but not limited to those of white racial privilege — are always artifacts of the suffering of others.

Figure 25 Tearing Down Racism. At left, a progressive Christian congregation notes that it is "working to dismantle racism." Photo by author. At right, a protest sign more explicitly encourages viewers to demolish the interlocking walls of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, capitalism, et cetera. Photo by Jean Hardy. https://tinyurl.com/uqgbj3l. Saved to Internet Archive.

As this happens, demolition offer cautions for political struggles animated by calls to dismantle racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and their intersections. These calls are pressing, and not just because self-identified white supremacists have seized hold of popular debates in our contemporary moment (cf. Stern 2019). The devaluation of nonwhite, especially Black lives and worlds is the authorizing force upon which centuries of globalized political economic orders

have been built. Conjoined forces of white supremacy and antiblackness form the bedrock of our world at a planetary scale, not just its emergent layers (Yusoff 2018). And yet, to look across the technical systems and environments made possible by building removals in Detroit is also to grapple with the reality that leveling the scales of white supremacy requires more than collapsing the structures in which it is embedded. Demolitions may be opportunities for people and localities to 'move forward' from past events, especially the cumulative effects of uneven development (Highsmith 2015; Ammon 2016). Cleared land is certainly experienced as the equivalent of progress away from historical circumstances (De Boeck 2012; Harms 2017). But even as the people and places we have come to know in the preceding pages move forward following demolitions, they still do so on racially-unequal terms. We have observed how leveling the structures made by white supremacy can redistribute, rather than abolish, the inequities that sustain white privilege and racial capitalism.

When Detroit's empty structures are brought crashing to earth, they crystalize how the abolition of white supremacy will never be achieved by attempts to ignore or even landfill the debris it leaves behind. The costs and benefits of antiblackness are intergenerational. Even as historical processes are brought to an end, they mutate into subsequent forms of violence. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman (2008) considers the lingering specter of chattel slavery in the United States when she speculates that ending its reproduction would "have everything to do with making good on the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is our only way to honor our debt to the dead" (170). As a start, to make good on the promise of abolition would be to make good on the promise of reparations, those transfers of land and wealth that were promised to formerly enslaved people, but ultimately denied (Du Bois 2007). Outside the United States,

struggles for such transfers have redistributed the ill-gotten gains accrued through racial capitalist modes of production (Moore 2005). But the suspensions of people, neighborhoods, excavators, buildings, toxins, and other matters brought into being by demolition are indicative of how the structures of white supremacy have rippled far beyond stolen land and labor. Conceptual and political economic hierarchies have been made physical through unevenly constructed bodies and environments. These landscapes offer guides for considering how abolition, as a project of accounting for the past by redistributing the present, will require more than altering the systems that maintain capital. Establishing equitable possibilities for moving forward demands attention to other, differently material landscapes through which racial disparities are entrenched and preserved.

From people and structures implicated in Detroit's demolitions, *Restructured City* has captured how technical systems conserve the coupling of antiblackness and white privilege. Even as the existing state of affairs is seemingly rendered into dust, it rides atop the same infrastructures that produced the racially-differentiated outcomes upon which racial capitalism relies. These gatherings condense in all manner of materials — buildings, bank accounts, property portfolios, equipment yards, lungs, dirt. But their accumulations are not intractable. We have caught glimmers of alternative distributions, including in efforts to maintain dwellings as homes for extended kin rather than as financial instruments, as well as those to recapture land from speculative capital. Struggles like these may only ever carve out partial victories within the straightjackets of unjust systems. But even when temporary, fleeting, or even just imagined, they reveal how systems that are antiblack and prowhite by design can be turned toward other ends. All the same, the lingering toxicities dredged up by demolition also expose how the outstanding debts of white supremacy will not be settled by only recasting concepts, control over space, or

means of production. To wrench racist structures into antiracist alignments would be to undermine the full complement of privilege, including by returning the stuff of oppressive harms to those people and locations that have been sheltered from their damage.

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