

Writing of and on the City: Streetwork in Detroit

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This article nods to a writing project in a Detroit Metro area writing class where students were challenged to take a metaphorical walk inside the walls of inner-city Detroit. Modeling the intersection of theory and practice embedded in this method of seeing the city, it introduces terms from compositionists and other scholars who write about place theory. It suggests that the development of vocabulary for seeing and re-seeing a place can help writers, who are also citizens, interpret the material world around them better and, in the best case, invest or reinvest in their communities. Readers are also asked to consider what Detroit “streetwork” can teach them about consuming and producing text twenty-first century style.

At the beginning of the ancient Greek text Phaedrus, Phaedrus tells Socrates that he is going for a walk outside the city walls because of their common friend Acumenus’ observation that “a country walk is more refreshing than a stroll in the city squares” (Hamilton 27). I wonder how Phaedrus would regard a walk inside the city walls of Detroit,



A shot of Detroit's signature building, The GM Building, formerly known as the Renaissance Center. (Photo: Liz Rohan)

Michigan where he might experience both urban and country life simultaneously as the city shrinks in population but not in size, and as nature overtakes streets and buildings to the extent that trees are growing on and in its vacated buildings.

For some, Detroit's spaciousness encourages a sense of agency that might be associated with gazing across a pasture in a rural environment, not a city. As Detroit advocate and Detroit creative Toby Barlow has described driving down Detroit's very wide, car-friendly streets that are often nearly carless and sparsely populated: "There's a physical emptiness [but you have a] sense of your own voice, your own physical presence and your own possibilities" (qtd. in



This is a street on the city's east side a few blocks from the Detroit River. A beautiful setting, the east side is among the most depopulated sections of the city. (Photo: Liz Rohan)

Detroit Lives). While a space that encourages voice and possibilities might sound like a rhetorician's paradise, opportunities for agency in Detroit by Detroiters and nearby suburbanites are made of course complicated paradoxically by the emptiness that Barlow finds empowering. As the city empties its people, its decaying buildings proliferate, as does its garbage. Its estimated 25,000 to 50,000 stray-dog population (Hicks) is only one horrifying example of what has gotten left behind, particularly in the last decade when Detroit lost approximately 200,000 people leaving a population of 713,000 in a city that once held 1.8 million people in the mid-1950s ("A Smaller, Stronger Detroit"). This proliferating decay and abandonment symbolizes for many a horrifying apocalyptic scene, intimidating

at best and nightmarishly terrifying at worst. Not to mention that for the people who live in the city, resources are scant: schools are struggling, public transportation is fragmented, police protection is spotty, and crime is high.

Amidst these tensely contradictory narratives, Detroit as a site for creative production where some find a voice and Detroit as a frightening apocalyptic wasteland, I have developed a writing course that encourages my mostly suburban Detroit students to withhold from embracing, at least for a semester, the much described latter narrative to consider the former. While doing so, I invite these students to engage in what Nedra Reynolds describes in *Geographies of Writing* as “streetwork.” To borrow Reynolds’ terms, cultural geographers engage in streetwork by, in most cases, crossing borders to interact physically and rhetorically with places and texts outside of their comfort zones. They “dwell”—if briefly and even in “no go areas” across these borders. They also develop vocabulary to better interpret and engage with places as *subjects* to extract meaning from, rather than *objects* to critique. Dwellers crossing borders are also invited to self-reflect on their prejudices about places where they would otherwise not go, and where there are people who are threatening to them because of their socio-economic class and sometimes because of their race. In this article, I am going to both nod to a writing project in this class when I challenged students to take a metaphorical walk inside the walls of inner-city Detroit while showing the intersection of theory and practice embedded in this method of seeing the city. I suggest that the development of vocabulary for seeing and re-seeing a place can help writers, who are also citizens, interpret the material world around them and, in the best case, invest or reinvest in their communities. As I unveil some of this vocabulary and its application, I also ask readers to consider what Detroit and its people can teach us about what it means to both consume and produce texts that are not only visual but also 3-D, and twenty-first century style.

Contexts for Composition Studies Meeting Geography in Detroit

Avoiding critique as a default method of interpretation for a place like Detroit can be tough if not impossible. Consider that most of the interpretative work about Detroit in the mass media takes advantage

of and manipulates the most negative images depicting the city. This process is known cynically among Detroiters as “parachute reporting,” when a reporter or photographer from outside the city “parachutes” in and out of the place, grabs a story and takes off with little time spent “dwelling” with the people and listening to the city’s spirit. The most-often and stereotypical product of a parachute reporter: “ruin porn.” Ruin porn depicts Detroit’s physically abandoned structures as its default *topoi*, a suitable topic for sure that I will engage in myself somewhat in this article, but also a tiresome one. Geographer Richard Meegan suggests that such “place marketing” (86) by mediating agents, outsiders and insiders alike, can be persuasive even if the marketed images compete with individuals’ personal experiences with or emotions about a place. Although many Metro Detroiters value their identity as Detroiters, even if they don’t live in the city (otherwise known as “Motor City” pride), and might have pleasant memories of the city when visiting it for a ballgame, and/or living in the city as children, their positive first-hand experiences can be overshadowed by other storylines. Citizens also might not have the tools to interpret this place in context as a shrinking city among the approximately 370 cities worldwide and 25 cities in the US that are also shrinking (Collins). These citizens are set up for ongoing cognitive dissonance when considering the complicated conflict between popular narratives about the city, what they experience first hand in the city, and what they remember the city to be years prior when it was better populated. As a result, “Detroit” becomes a kind of “discordant, schizophrenic ‘imagined place,’” (86), phraseology that Meegan uses to describe Liverpool, England, another depressed city with an ongoing image problem.

The demonization of cities and its people is also as old as American cities themselves. Victorian disdain for the dirt and crowds of American and British cities, mediated then also by writers and journalists, encouraged the first American suburbs when Victorians, aided by evolving rail transportation, invented the American dream as we know it, imagining the ideal home for raising children as a “cottage” in the country, not an apartment in a crowded, dirty city (Stilgoe, Wilson). As Elizabeth Wilson describes the press’s longtime role in propagandizing images of the city: “Much Victorian journalism was a literature of voyeurism, revealing to its middle-class audience a hidden life of the city which offered not so much grist for



The oft-photographed abandoned Detroit train station has come to symbolize Detroit's decay and the building itself is Detroit's trademark "ruin." (Photo: Debbie Merlo)

reform as vicarious, even illicit enjoyment of the forbidden 'Other' that was so close to, yet so far from Victorian bourgeoisie" (27-29). Contemporary ruin porn is the new "voyeur" journalism with Detroit as its quintessential target. As a Metro Detroiter who grew up in the suburbs three miles from the city border, I have learned to recognize and confront my schizophrenic attitude toward the city as a real place that I experience with pleasure, curiosity and most often enjoyment, and an "imagined place" I fear, usually at the same time (a point I will return to later when considering the self-reflective component of the writing class and my personal stake in this pedagogy.)

Overall, the role of narrative in engaging with, dwelling and interpreting a place draws attention to the intersection between writing studies and geography, and further highlights writing's interdisciplinary nature. As Reynolds puts it, "[w]hile not all of us in composition studies or literacy studies are interested in transforming neighborhoods or urban planning, reform and change begin with learning to see" (76). Seeing is one product of engaging with place

theory. *Inventing* new language for seeing a place is another, and embodying or dwelling in a place can also become an impetus for production. Ilene Whitney Crawford, for example, argues for physical “moving” as both a requirement and also a metaphor for rhetoricians. Developing “routes,” she argues, is “necessary to find the languages, the pieces and forms” (84) for producing rhetoric, and in her case, “feminist rhetoric,” that works to better represent Others. Observing that urban planners have become more conscious of how rhetoric shapes conceptions of place, Richard Marbuck similarly claims, “[a]ttending to . . . uses of rhetoric and literacy in urban planning can be borrowed back to extend the insights of composition studies into both the spatial significance of rhetorical practices and the rhetorical significance of spatial practices” (53). Compositionists can use the tools of urban planners and geographers as heuristics to better see places as texts. Meanwhile, dwelling in places requires us to invent language for the sake of managing our experiences that are most often local, for which other existing narratives are incomplete, and for which status quo *topoi*—as with “ruin porn”—are insufficiently persuasive.

The role of dwelling as a companion to invention is particularly acute in Detroit where sensitivities are high among residents and even non-residents living in the suburbs with even tenuous ties to the city. Writers who haven’t done their homework, lack the ethos of insiders, and resort to default narratives about the place, will be called out. A tough topic and a tough city, Detroit is also a tough writing teacher. So while modeling how compositionists can borrow from place theory, I also make one type of self-reflection concrete here by highlighting what the legwork of border crossing might look like (although we Detroiters don’t walk, we drive—another point I’ll get to). It may be too true that the rapidly shrinking inner city of Detroit, and the extremely racialized and socio-economically divided Metro-Detroit that cradles it, a phenomenon otherwise known as “the donut,” might encourage unique exigencies for border crossing as well as the expression, production and interpretation of texts – for good or for ill. Yet these methods of seeing and dwelling in Detroit that I outline next are ideally transportable to similar contexts where the landscape is literally trying to tell us something. But first I’ll need to share more bad news and also some good news.

Bad News and Good News About Detroit

The population decline in Detroit has been described as a “slow motion Katrina,” in reference to the 2005 hurricane that nearly wiped out the city of New Orleans. Detroit has suffered another type of perfect storm that has become more severe in the past decade, particularly as the state of Michigan became more depressed. The quest for the American Dream that helped build Detroit also had a hand in dismantling it, if over time, when the first highways, malls and 1950s “sit com” suburbs were built on the outskirts of the city. Racial tension before and after the particularly violent 1967 riot, and the lure of cheap homes and lower taxes in the suburbs, put white flight on steroids in the city over these past fifty years. Not only did Detroit grow fast in the first place when much of its sections were annexed in the 1920s, but the metro area did as well after World War II, and the area became a sprawling metropolis of single family homes, not apartments (Sugrue 21-22). The city is also huge geographically and could fit all of Boston, Manhattan and San Francisco inside its borders.

The results, to the naked eye, can be pretty frightening. Encompassing over 138 square miles, reportedly more than one in five houses, or 22% of its houses, are unoccupied, one result of a massive foreclosure rate of an estimated 57,800 homeowners since 2005 (Gallagher). Those left behind in the city are largely poor, and the literacy rate in the city is a reported 47% (Detroit Literacy Coalition). As mentioned, the city lost almost 25% of its population in the past decade as the recession, a corrupt mayor, and dwindling and incompetently used school funds, encouraged not white flight this time but black flight, too—otherwise known as “green flight.” Those with resources to do so can and do leave the city for the suburbs or places outside of Michigan. Common lore cites \$30,000 as the magic number; once families or individuals have enough income to get out, they do (Boyle).

At the same time, young artists and entrepreneurs living in and moving into the city have observed the city to be a place of “creative revolutions” (qtd. in Chou) where affordable and ample space as well as a cooperative and tight community generate an environment to productively make art and do commerce. In fact, the artist and musician Patti Smith, who is a former Detroiter and current New

Yorker, has been encouraging New York City artists to move to Detroit because of its affordability (Kusisto). The hub of artistic activity in the city might be the Russell Industrial Center, a repurposed factory where artists and small business people can affordably rent space while also rubbing elbows with one another. With virtually no commercial chains, including not one chain grocery store, a mom and pop operation has a shot at survival. Detroit also needs more college-educated people. The city would need 50,000 households with young college graduates to have roughly the same distribution of college grads in Minneapolis, for example, which is a much smaller city geographically (Holcomb 1).

Young people who are moving into the city, and opening small businesses, such as a new art theater repurposed from a former elementary school, and a bicycle shop, are mostly white, and their border crossing requires reflecting on whiteness and race in general. While of course not all Detroit's up-and-coming movers and shakers are white, conversations among entrepreneurs, business people and activists working in Detroit echo that newcomers must also resist a "missionary" mentality when opening a business that might "help Detroit." Taking on a Do-it-Yourself career, crossing racial borders, and reflecting on one's race privilege is not for everyone, but the long recession in Michigan necessitates moving and shaking for college-aged students. In fact, when former Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm visited our university a few years ago, she relayed a message to our students: they needed to create their own jobs. Since many young Detroiters are doing just that, and Detroit needs people, particularly college-aged people, much is at stake with a place-based pedagogy at this time and place. This pedagogy requires participants to reflect on their race, to consider their fears, and—in some cases—to challenge their parents who have taught them to be afraid of the city, an understandable fear when considering that the landscape is intimidating and crime is high. Hence, I established a writing class to help outsiders and insiders alike to develop vocabulary and methods for seeing or re-seeing this place.

Spatial Practices

Spatial practices in my course has meant that Metro Detroiters should be self-reflective about where we live and where we travel wherever

we might go in the Metro area and that we need some help with battling deeply embedded stereotypical narratives of Detroit when looking at and visiting the place. Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, fathers of the spatial-practice concept, Reynolds describes the concept in part as such: “Lived, perceived, and conceived space fold into and spin across one another, working together to accomplish the production of space” (16). That is, what constitutes a space and place is co-constructed with the dweller; the understanding and depiction of place is a dynamic process. Furthermore, when observing and describing a place, dwellers might consider how places themselves are co-constructed, and over time, by human and natural design, both intentional and organic. For example, any space, natural or manmade embodies layers. Reynolds claims that “the accumulated history of place. . . . [is] the product of layer upon layer of different set of linkages, both local and to the wider world” (156). The layers of a place connect us to people and histories beyond the present and beyond our personal identities and experiences. Acknowledging layers might not only distract dwellers from knee-jerked reactions to a strange place, but can humble them by circumventing a narcissistic judgment of a subject for which they lack information and perspective, particularly if they are outsiders. The layers of a place connote stories and memories of imagined others, which de Certeau, in his much cited essay, “Walking in the City,” associates with palimpsests, traces of narratives embodied in a space (108). Geographer Doreen Massey similarly considers layers, represented by the intersection of the global and the local displayed by and embedded in geographical and material space, an intersection that challenges rudimentary conceptions of physical borders (20).

If places are inevitably layered, if they embody stories and narratives of real and imagined others, and if they are furthermore linked to relationships with people and places elsewhere, prosperity, or let’s call it tidy revision, might literally hide the layers of a place and the discourses and rituals that have shaped it and made it meaningful over time to an evolving citizenship. I was only able to see the layers of my childhood adolescent hangout, the deli and party store, Buscemi’s, when it recently was under construction to become a pizza place and after the building’s in-between stint as a Blockbuster video store. None of my childhood friends could remember when this building was a liquor store, the Wine Steward. Its history as Buscemi’s has

been erased entirely from the built environment. The building's role as an adolescent hangout lives on only in the collective memories of my childhood associates. Back in the day, this parking lot was always full of adolescents in search of love interests driving in other cars. Now the parking lot is mostly empty and seems too big for its current business of take-out as it did also when a Blockbuster (see photo p. 50).

In Detroit, on the other hand, for better or worse, palimpsests are more visible which, perhaps ironically in a city that symbolizes so much loss, can also preserve memory as it does for members of Decatur, Georgia, passing by or visiting the Iberion Pig restaurant (see photo p. 51). Place is both a mnemonic and a site for composition as in these three examples in Detroit when buildings are repurposed as parchment. In the first case, an abandoned building is repurposed both as a billboard advertising a new housing development and as a neighborhood sketchpad. As a mnemonic it reminds its citizens, passersby and dwellers what once was: a neighborhood medical clinic, a symbol and reminder of dwindling resources to the inner city that might otherwise be forgotten or erased in a more prosperous municipality where space is at a premium and where buildings are either immediately repurposed or replaced. (In fact, in the more prosperous Detroit neighborhood near Wayne State University known as Midtown, the artwork of renowned British graffiti artist Banksy was cleaned off a building by its owner.) In this second case, place acts as another kind of mnemonic and sketchpad, a memorial for a deceased and missed member of the neighborhood. The building reads in part, "RIP: Da Hood Gone Miss You 4ever." In the third example, a Detroitier has used a building as a billboard to make a statement about safety in the neighborhood and also about money spent on war asking, "Why not deploy 20,000 troops to protect our own children[?]" Its context, an abandoned home, certainly punctuates the sign's message, especially when considering the relationship between abandoned homes and criminal activity, particularly in depressed neighborhoods. The statement also reinforces Massey's observation about the intersection of the local and global embodied by place. US funds spent on rebuilding communities overseas depletes resources that arguably could be used to rehabilitate inner-city US neighborhoods where another kind of war is taking place. No place exists in isolation from other



This building was once, apparently, a liquor store, The Wine Steward (above); then it was a deli, Buscemi's, then a Blockbuster video store, and now it's a Happy's Pizza restaurant. (Photos: Liz Rohan)



This restaurant in Decatur, Georgia, for example, actually emphasizes its layers, and the palimpsest that represents these layers, as an aesthetic. We can see the building had once been a family owned shoe store. (Photo: Liz Rohan)

communities, geographic, real and imagined; its layers tell the story. Layers can also encourage a communal memory of a place, which, in the best case, as Massey suggests, undercuts perceived geographical divisions.

The Palimpsest, Reuse and the Blank Canvas

Partly as a result of so much space in the city, both natural and man-made, artists are calling the city a “blank canvas.” The “blank canvas” idea connotes the space that is available in the absence of people, the material structures that have been torn down and or decayed and also a process of reusing raw materials that are just lying around. The layers of the place, as well as initiatives to reuse and repurpose items in the built environment, act as de facto as well as conscious resources among Detroiters. Art historian Melanie Sobocinski, who has compared the depopulation of Detroit with the depopulation of ancient Rome, advocates reuse of buildings as a key initiative

revitalizing a shrinking community, as was the case in ancient Rome and as is the case in contemporary Detroit. In fact, many of Detroit's signature buildings are rehabilitation projects such as Wayne State University's "Main" building, which was originally a high school, the Motor City Casino that was originally the Wagner Banking Company and the maybe-not-such-a-great idea reuse project, a downtown parking lot that was once the grand Michigan Theater. This parking lot attained yet another role in a scene in the 2002 movie, *8 Mile*, and has become a popular tailgating spot before Detroit Lions football games. A building with a little less luck than the Michigan Theater becomes doomed when its lighting fixtures and copper pipes are more valuable than its whole, which is all too true of buildings in Detroit where pillaging for parts is commonplace. As Sobocinski points out, "[v]ery few buildings will ever be considered sufficiently significant to be preserved and maintained on their own merits, whether for religious, political, or historical reasons (7). Indeed, many Detroiters lack the agency and funds to completely revitalize buildings to their original purposes, and ingenuity has become the mother of invention, quite literally, as professional and everyday artists reuse materials, homes, buildings and even streets themselves to make art.



*This building has been repurposed as a sketchpad, a billboard and serves as a mnemonic.
(Photo: Liz Rohan)*



This building has been repurposed as a sketchpad, a billboard and serves as a mnemonic. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



The sign on this house reads, "Why Not Deploy 20,00 Troops to Protect Our Own Children[?]," and is an example of how a place embodies the intersection of the local and the global. (Photo: Debbie Merlo)

Loosely, this art might be called found art assemblage, and Detroit offers a particularly unique case in the sense that an artist can “find” a house to use as art. Artists from around the world, for example, have set up exhibitions in derelict Detroit homes, a project funded by a San Francisco art magazine. Husband-and-wife Detroit artists Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert began the trend on Moran Street by revitalizing a home from recycled materials that can function “off the grid” (Montemurri). Detroit outside artist Tyree Guyton is probably best known among Detroiters, and even beyond their circles, for his method of repurposing as an art method. He has reused everyday, discarded objects, including houses, to create a two-block outdoor museum. Anonymous artists have also used the city as a blank canvas in the case of a decorated home (recently torn down), tagged as “Art Vandalism,” a play on words referencing a Detroit-owned furniture store, Art Van. Lately, a new aesthetic has cropped up: artists painting domestic indoor scenes on boarded up homes on the city’s east side. Urban farming among Detroit’s citizens in the many empty lots in the city also reflects repurposing as a value, an aesthetic and a method of production among Detroiters.



Some found art assemblage that makes up the Heidelberg Project, a two-block long art installation. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



"Art Vandalism," a play on words nodding to a Detroit area furniture store.



Artists have used this house, recently torn down, as a "blank canvas," for art. (Photo: Debbie Merlo)



The Powerhouse, an art installation by Detroit artists Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, using found materials, including the house itself, and inspiration for a larger installation on the street by national artists. (Photo: Debbie Merlo)



An artist has used this home also as a blank canvas to paint a domestic scene on top of its window boards. You might notice the cats on the couch in this painting. (Photo: Debbie Merlo)

A recently developed bike pathway called the Dequindre Cut also honors memory as a value and repurposing as a method. This “blank canvas” Detroit aesthetic has become more formalized in this place. Developers and leaders who turned this former railroad track into a path for bikers, walkers and joggers that connects the riverfront to the city’s central farmer’s market decided to leave graffiti on its walls rather than whitewashing it. The result is another outdoor museum with an organically moving installation as graffiti artists continually use and reuse the space to produce and revise art on the path. The space retains its role as a community message board but is revised for a more public audience when repurposed for transporting people once again, if with different methods.

Longtime Detroit entrepreneur Stephen Hume has similarly repurposed an old salt factory into a boat yard and a marina, known as the Goatyard in memory of a goat that once wandered the property. Guts of the factory remind visitors and dwellers of the place’s history. On a somewhat bizarre and personal note, the Goatyard’s clubhouse, The Tugboat, was another adolescent hangout of mine when the boat was a restaurant across the Detroit River in Windsor, Canada, mostly because of Canada’s “generous” drinking age laws where we could drink alcohol legally when only nineteen-years-old after a fifteen-minute drive over the border. The boat, which now has a new home on the US side of the Detroit River, is currently filled with Hume’s many fascinating artifacts, including a set of sewing machines that date back to the 1800s that he actually uses to mend sails, which adds yet another layer to the place. *And* I can stand on its deck on the same spot of a date I had my freshman year of college that yet took place across the river when the Tugboat was in Windsor. (Only in Detroit, my local friends might say!) The aesthetic of layers and the method of reuse is reflected in both conscious and accidental collage on Hume’s compound.

Crossing Borders, Driving Detroit, the Flaneur and Streetwork

If the aesthetics of layers and the blank canvas collectively encourage cultural geographers of Detroit to question surface judgments and even their conceptions of what is beautiful and what is art, it helps to be there to see it, which requires some dwelling and some streetwork. Border crossing and dwelling has recently been modeled for Metro



The Dequindre Cut, a repurposed railroad track, and its outsider art graffiti installation. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



A small urban farm on Detroit's main drag, Jefferson Avenue. In a more prosperous and populated city, this property would be used for housing or retail development. The scarecrow adds an artistic touch. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



Layers of the place are visible. The compound used to be a salt factory. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



The repurposed Tugboat that had a previous life as a restaurant across the river, and across the border. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



An example of 'accidental collage' on this school bus: a real vine is intertwined with a synthetic Christmas garland. (Photo: Liz Rohan)



On the right, found object assemblage, a Detroit aesthetic and also a Goatyrd aesthetic. (Photo: Liz Rohan)

Detroiters not only by Eminem's *8 Mile* character Rabbit, who crosses the famous border between the Detroit suburbs and the city in order to make it as a rapper, but by a *Detroit Free Press* newspaper reporter Bill McGraw, who, in the summer of 2007, took a 2,700 mile road trip without ever leaving Detroit so that he could drive on every street. When students took individuals field trips into the city, many claimed to embody McGraw as a fellow writer and border crosser. They, like McGraw, made observations to contribute to McGraw's thesis about Detroit, "It's worse than you think—but better, too." Students also likened McGraw to Phaedrus, who "moved" in order to invent rhetoric. When fusing the collective enterprise of McGraw and Phaedrus, these students embodied rhetoricians, garnering the authority they previously lacked as outsiders to the city, in most case, to take on the role of "dwellers."

Cultural geographers in this capacity might be considered modern day *flaneurs*. According to Wilson, the *flaneur*, nurtured on the streets of mid-nineteenth century Paris, "[r]elished the kaleidoscope of urban public life...perceiving a novel kind of beauty in streets, factories and urban blight" and also "'ma[de] strange' the familiar and disregarded aspects of city life" (5). Reynolds describes the *flaneur* as "[a] writer, artist, and journalist who collects as he saunters, sketches as he watches" and who "organizes and juxtaposes material in various ways" (70). *Flaneurs* are not voyeurs of a place or parachuting to it. They dwell. Likewise, as McGraw drove down each street in Detroit from Seven Mile, which is a two-hundred and sixty-one blocks long, to Detroit Street that is one block long, he took on the role of the bemused observer. As a writer, McGraw points out the absurd juxtapositions that characterize contemporary Detroit's layers where, as he puts it, "[I]n some places you can hear the shards of a burned-out 19th-century home flapping in the wind at the same time as the mechanical groans of construction equipment preparing another site" (14A). McGraw indeed saw evidence of crime during his drive, memorials to deceased gang members, barbed wire, plexiglass shields, window bars, alarms and guard dogs. A few people offered to "get him high," a prostitute chased him on her bicycle and he watched "scrappers boldly dismantle[ing] awnings and carry[ing] pipes down streets in broad daylight." Yet McGraw asserts, "[t]here was nothing scary about the city I drove through." On the contrary, he observed, "It was peaceful and almost like a small town" (15A).

The average dweller or visitor to Detroit will likely have the same experience as McGraw. Such was the case when each of my students took individualized field trips into or around the city to look for layers, blank canvases, the reuse of buildings, and to visit some of the new businesses that have recently opened up in Detroit that we discussed in class—such as the aforementioned Burton Theater and a creperie called “Good Girls Go to Paris.” Of course, in Motor City fashion, most visitors to Detroit do a lot of driving, and therefore might not be considered “true” *flaneurs* who walked the streets of Paris during their urban adventures, and also when considering that Certeau associates walking in the city as part and parcel to the invention of rhetoric (99). But, McGraw drove slowly *and* he stopped to talk to people during his drive. So, McGraw, and by extension students who followed in his tire tracks (if not his footprints exactly), might be regarded as a modern-day *flaneurs* also.

Students also considered their “no go areas,” during their visits in Detroit, and especially those who traveled deep into Detroit neighborhoods, to see Tyree Gyton’s Heidelberg Project on Heidelberg Street or the Power House on Moran Street. As mentioned earlier, a no go area is a place where a visitor to a place is an outsider or feels uncomfortable (Reynolds 102). Many Metro Detroiters might consider every 138 square mile of Detroit as a “no go area.” When driving through every street of Detroit, McGraw obviously didn’t or couldn’t have any “no go areas,” and abandoning any fear or trepidation during his *flanerie* was part of his enterprise as a writer. Yet not everyone has his privileges: the ethos of a well-liked newspaper reporter, a company car, and a camera crew. The historical *flaneur* of Paris in fact had male privileges, although women, too, walked and wrote of the city (Wilson 56).

I too have engaged in my own “Driving Detroit” endeavor and in the type of self-reflection that I ask my students to do. As I have written about elsewhere, while working on my dissertation about a woman who lived in Detroit years ago, Janette Miller, I visited her old house in the city, and in a neighborhood called Woodbridge and on a street called Avery (Rohan “The Personal as Method”). The neighborhood, which is up and coming now, was posh in 1900 when it was new. In fact, Janette attended high school at the aforementioned Wayne

State building “The Main,” shortly after it was built in 1893. When looking for her house one afternoon, which was a bit difficult since the addresses had changed since 1900 when Janette lived there, I “used” the city to think about race relations and Janette’s life, particularly since she became a missionary to Africa after leaving Detroit. Janette, a white woman, spent her life with “Others,” a complicated story I was trying to tell and relate to. The afternoon when I went looking for Avery Street, Detroit “taught me” to stop judging it and to instead to think about what *it* could teach *me*. Although I hadn’t formally known about the concept of “layers” at the time, I was thinking about how historical Detroit was embedded in contemporary Detroit in a strange time-machine collage. My instinct that day was to fight nostalgia (another default *topoi* for Detroiters when thinking about the city). I told myself that instead I needed to consider my own emotions when present in this place and acknowledge my fears related to my race as a white person, which cast me as a de facto outsider to the city. So the methods that I have my students engage in are not that different than the ones I have experimented with myself. It’s laughable to me now that Avery Street was a kind of “no go area” for me years ago.

These methods are flexible as well when considering that I have students in my classes who are *not* outsiders to the city. One of these students, DeShaunda, in fact came up with a fascinating project when trying to answer the question about why children in her Detroit neighborhood didn’t go to parks near her house. DeShaunda assumed that these children chose to stay inside and play video games. After interviewing nearly fifteen of her neighbors, including children, she came to the sad conclusion that Detroiters don’t play in parks because these parks are too run down and do not look safe. In many of these parks, the equipment is broken and the graffiti on it has a nightmarish quality to the extent that, as DeShaunda put it in her presentation about these parks, it “look like scenes from a horror movie.” DeShaunda’s study not only gives a different perspective on the process of reuse and the blank canvas aesthetic, but shows how place-based methods in school might organically birth a civic engagement project. After completing this project DeShaunda became interested in the idea of getting involved with cleaning up and maintaining parks in the city. It just so happened that the week DeShaunda completed her project, there was an article in a Detroit paper about people organizing in the city to clean up its parks. DeShaunda’s park project is not only a good

example of how streetwork can be used as a source of invention for a civic-engagement project but also the importance and relevance of writing *with* a community and not “just” about it, one goal of service learning by its advocates (Schultz and Gere 146), and an ironic lesson that was taught to me “by Detroit,” in my more historical research about the city. Furthermore, I could have had students fulfill an assignment going into the city to clean up parks (a definite need). However, without the invention and investigation about why cleaning up parks is relevant or important, the assignment would be superficial, even to DeShaunda, had she not come up with the idea herself.

Conclusion

It's logical that former and current residents long for a glorious past when Detroit and the American dream could be a synonym not an oxymoron. The twenty-first century Detroit looks very different than its twentieth century layer, now a city with no Walmarts, Kmarts, or Costcos, and unlike many of its more prosperous suburban neighbors, spaces that have been “normed” as better or more attractive to average Metro Detroiters. Yet Detroit has ironically evolved as a site for production, of a few cars still, but also art, food and ideas. As Daniel Pink argues in *A Whole New Mind*: abundance of material goods “has put a premium on less rational [what he calls] R-Directed sensibilities—beauty, spirituality and emotion” (33), and he predicts that design will be a primary value in the twenty-first century. The abundance of space, and let's face it, garbage, waste and material leftovers in twenty-first century Detroit might on the one hand challenge Pink's thesis and question his word choice with the implied conflation of abundance and prosperity. Conversely, the abundance of space, and even the abundance of despair, in Detroit has inspired new art, new ideas and alternative paradigms for development and growth that encourage sustainability, community, altruism, and even peace, not values we'd associate with the twentieth century. When remixing and reusing texts and otherwise homely leftovers creatively, and sometimes with humor, these Detroiters encourage connections between people, places and things that Detroiters of yesterday could never imagine. In the best case, these unusual compositions of the every day and the unusual might even encourage the transcendence of racial and geographical divisions when celebrating the mixing of

incongruent objects to make new patterns. I leave you with these examples both to tell you about a method of seeing that worked with my class that could also work in other communities that are depressed or where depopulation has changed the landscape. I also introduce you to a city of revolutions where cool things are happening and where rhetoricians can look for models and inspiration, a place where both the invention and production of texts and ideas are uniquely possible. This work will ideally lead participants to become involved with projects in the city, or at the very least to recognize the place as a subject not an object, and in a manner that is genuine and, ideally, by their own design. Reynolds has also come to the conclusion that streetwork can be, and in some cases should be, an important precursor to service learning (135). I'd also agree with her that given the need for reflection and streetwork for service learning, one semester is too short for an authentic and ethically sound civic engagement project.

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