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Honors Capstone 2011

Talk about Crisis: Everyday Life in Detroit

Intro

Detroit, a city of 750,000, is in a state of catastrophe. Once an industrial boomtown, Detroit has been plagued by five decades of deindustrialization and ravaged by the recession that began in 2008. In the summer of 2009, Detroit's unemployment rate was almost 30 percent, up from 14 percent in 2005 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). The crisis also brought a wave of foreclosures, including 67,000 homes between 2005 and 2008 ("Motor City Woes" 2008). According the United States Census, a third of the city's residents live below the poverty line. The city government lacks resources to support even some basic municipal services, such as collecting trash and answering police calls (Draus et al 2010:664; "Motor city's woes"). The school system, in particular, is in disarray, with a debt of over \$300 million and graduation rates among the lowest in the nation ("Report: Detroit Ranks" 2008). Huey notes that an estimated half of the city's residents are functionally illiterate, and this is only the beginning of the social breakdown wrought by the city's economic insecurity: Detroit had the highest violent crime rate of any major American city in 2008 (O'Malley Greenburg 2009). Because of all this, it is not surprising that half of the city's residents say they would leave if they could (Herron 2007:665).

During the summer of 2009 I conducted an ethnographic study in Detroit, to explore on how residents were affected by the ongoing recession, which brought Great-Depression-era levels of misery and dislocation to this chronically poor city. In this article, I frame Detroit's crisis as a disaster—as have Draus (2009), Herron (2007), and Reese (2006)—caused by the decades-long advance of destructive structural forces. I conduct an in-depth textual analysis of my interview data, drawing from poststructural discourse analysis to examine the shared understandings through which Detroiters experience and make meaning of the disaster whose wake in which they live. My analysis leads me to a comparison with post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, and I suggest that a similar type of disaster has hit Detroit.

Literature review

Detroit's disaster is a long time in the making. Sugrue (1996) traces Detroit's woes to a mix of deindustrialization, housing discrimination, and racial tension during the postwar era. These phenomena created a positive feedback cycle that produces poverty and marginalization in the city. Other scholars have examined Detroit's contemporary predicament through a macro-level framework of structural causes and effects, and shown the systematic obstacles to economic and social well being faced by Detroit residents. Class, race, and geographic location are all variables that determine social outcomes. For instance, welfare recipients in the Detroit area face barriers to employment like mental health problems, lack of access to transportation, and lack of proximity to job opportunities (Allard, Tolman, and Rosen 2003).

Other work has centered Detroit's status on race. Schulz et al (2002) suggest "race-based residential segregation" as the fundamental determinant of health disparities in Detroit. They note that, even after controlling for income, racial minorities experience health outcomes inferior to those of the city's white residents. Farley et al (2000) document the lingering racial prejudices that continue to separate metro Detroiters, maintaining a status quo where urban blacks feel disenfranchised.

The paradigm of segregation provides material for other work on structural inequality. Detroit's black residents experience poorer access to supermarkets (Zenk et al 2005), closer proximity to landfills and EPA "superfund" sites (Smith 2007), and disproportionate risk from environmental pollution (Downey 2006).

Detroit Ethnography

Standing in contrast to macro-level, structural explanations of Detroit's crisis, another body of research has focused on interpretive data at the micro level. Draus et al (2010) situate Detroit as a site of social exclusion in order to study heroin use in the city. They draw on Agamben's concept of "homo sacer"—a category of people to be avoided, and whose plight goes unquestioned by society—to interpret the lives of Detroit heroin users. They show the self-devaluation of Detroit heroin users and conclude that structural forces cement the marginal status of heroin addicts. Older research has examined the lives of Detroit's female crack dealers (Mieczkowski 1994). This study is mostly descriptive in nature, examining the widely-varied roles played by females in the crack economy, their protection strategies, and their relationships with men. While women

were usually introduced to the drug trade by a man, they developed wide-ranging roles and varying degrees of autonomy once involved in the drug trade.

Ethnographic work on Detroit has also addressed questions of race. Willis (2008) finds that African-Americans in Detroit construct notions of manhood based on alcohol consumption, and that women and religion can be factors that exert men to adopt a more “nuanced” masculinity. He also finds that gender roles can be fluid; many men who grew up with fathers absent valued and admired assertive women in their lives. The work of Hartigan (1999) explores the ways in which class shapes racial identity for Detroit’s white residents.

Discourse Analysis

My work expands upon existing macro and micro analyses in literature by studying not just how Detroiters live in their city’s disaster, but how they construct, interpret, and explain it. In this article, I conduct a discourse analysis of my ethnographic interview data. “Discourse” in this sense refers to a shared system of cultural representation that allows people to understand and meaningfully talk about things. Like Pascale (2005) I rely on Stuart Hall’s understanding of discourses as “‘clusters of ideas, images and practices, that provide frameworks for understanding what knowledge is useful, relevant, and true in any given context’” (251). In other words, discourses are the ideological underpinnings that we use to create and interpret information.

Previous scholars have used discourse analyses to examine both poverty and disaster. Analyses of disaster discourse have focused mostly on media representation, and have addressed Otherness, neoliberalism, and political responsibility. Joye’s (2010)

discourse analysis of Belgian media coverage of the SARS outbreak across Asia in 2003, demonstrated that media coverage of disaster draws on discourses of the exotic Other in order to maintain a distinction between people who experience poverty and danger, and those who experience prosperity and safety. While much discourse analysis on disaster focuses on the developing world, Cox et al (2008) examined disaster discourse in Canada. They analyzed media coverage of a devastating forest fire, and found that local media relied on a neoliberal discourse that emphasized economy recovery, and deemphasized psychological trauma. By contrast, Littlefield and Quenette's (2007) analysis of media coverage of the response to Hurricane Katrina argued that the media broke from its usual impartial role to criticize the performance of authority figures.

Work on discourse and poverty has also addressed media representation. For instance, through an analysis of newspaper articles, Pascale (2005) shows how prominent national newspapers use discursive formations to dehumanize homeless people, and deemphasize structural causes of poverty. Other researchers used discourse analysis to examine ethnographic data related to poverty. Reid and Tom (2006) employ discourse analysis to understand how poor women in Canada made meaning of their poverty and dependence on state assistance. They demonstrate how women draw upon discourses of illegitimate and legitimate dependency, overwhelming odds, and a "critique and collectivism" discourse that identifies the systems that produce the women's marginalization.

Methods

Funded by an undergraduate research grant, I collected ethnographic data in Detroit for about six weeks in June and July 2009. My study received Institutional Review Board approval from American University in May 2009, and all participants gave informed consent by signing a printed form. I travelled all over the city, but much of my research took place along Woodward Avenue, the city's main north-south corridor. This was, first of all, for logistical reasons: Detroit is five times the size of Manhattan with about half as many residents, making for a very low-density city. I don't own a car, so I could only go places I could reach by foot, bike, or public transportation. Most days I arrived in the city by carpool early in the morning and left late afternoon. But the eight miles of Woodward Ave in the Detroit city limits also span the diversity of the city's neighborhoods, from downtown skyscrapers to the largely abandoned neighborhoods of Boston-Edison.

My interviews averaged about a half-hour in length, with some closer to fifteen or twenty minutes, and a few that spanned several hours. I used a semi-structured interview guide, with questions on subjects such as the auto industry, political leadership, and the best and worst elements of Detroit life. I used snowball sampling based on contacts I had in the city, but most of my interviews were conducted in the field. I met multiple occasions with two men who served as my key informants in areas of the city with which they were familiar. Contact with both was facilitated through a local soup kitchen; following the advice of kitchen staff, I paid small sums (between \$5 and \$10) to both men each meeting as a token of appreciation. One was homeless and often panhandled downtown. Over the course of a few meetings, he showed me some of the sites where he and other homeless people panhandled, slept, and used the bathroom. Another was a

former crack addict who had beaten his addiction and was a volunteer at the soup kitchen. He took me on bike and walking tours of the barren, drug-infested neighborhoods in which he spent his addiction.

In total, I conducted interviews with 26 Detroit residents. It is worth noting here that I encountered fewer women than men on Detroit streets, and that women I did encounter seemed to react with much greater suspicion to requests to participate in my project. As such, only 6 of my 26 interview subjects were women and my data reflects Detroit as seen through a largely male lens. Like Detroit's residents, most of my interview subjects were African-American. I interviewed three white participants, and one Iraqi-American. Ten of my interviewees told me that they were unemployed. At first I attributed this spectacular proportion of unemployed Detroiters that I encountered to the fact that most of my research was done during the workday, when people with jobs were like to be off the streets. Most of the unemployed interviewees formerly worked in blue-collar professions, and were seeking work in similar positions. The participants with jobs also tended to work in blue-collar positions or retail, but I interviewed a small business owner, a reverend, a professional community organizer, and five retirees, among others. Five participants in my research were homeless.

In addition to my ethnographic interviews, I conducted detailed study as an observer-as-participant in the city. I walked, biked, rode buses, and occasionally drove a borrowed car through neighborhoods all over the city. Several times during the day, I would find a place to sit and write long-form accounts of my observations in a notebook. And when it seemed appropriate, I took photos with a handheld digital camera. I also observed a speech by a local labor activist, attended an anti-corporate rally as a

participant-observer, went to a vigil at the site of a multiple victim shooting, collected printed materials available in public places, watched episodes of public-access cable TV, and attended a church service. Except the church service, which I attended at the invitation of the reverend, all of these events were open to the public. When asked, I would identify myself as a researcher. In total, I spent about six weeks immersed in the neighborhoods of Detroit.

Analysis

State and Economic Power

My data analysis revealed one overwhelming trend. When people talk about disaster in Detroit, they talk about *state and economic power*. State power most frequently takes the form of the city, state, or national government, but also more minute manifestations of authority like the police. Economic power spans from corporations, wealthy individuals, and casinos to more local forms of authority and power such as slum landlords and corner store owners. Overall, these types of power were directly discussed in 23 of my 26 interviews.

Overwhelmingly, Detroiters are angry at these manifestations of power and authority. Of the 23 interviewees who spoke about state or economic power, 19 expressed anger. Two patterns emerged among these expressions of anger. In one the government is characterized primarily through discourses of neglect, abandonment, and betrayal. I refer to this as passive hostility. The second pattern is characterized by expressions of anger that are confrontational, antagonistic, or exploitative relationship with Detroit.

The first pattern is represented by the following three excerpts. The first excerpt is from an interview with a retired auto worker who I've given the pseudonym "William Scott." He is now an activist with a black nationalist group, and he describes travelling to the suburbs to attend a County Commissioner's meeting with a fellow activist, and that activist's grandson. He explains that the grandson turned to ask him a question:

[He asked about] things supposed to be taken care of by your city government. He asked me: 'Say, [Mister Scott], on our way out here I noticed, I didn't see but one or two holes in the street, no paper, hardly, and the grass was cut.' He said 'Why is that?' And really I didn't have a good answer to give him. But I just told him, I said: 'It's the suburbs, the politicians that's in office care about the city.' And not only that, you know, the politicians in state government, in my opinion, care more about the suburbs than here in Detroit.

The first piece of noteworthy language in the excerpt is the notion of things "supposed to be taken care of." This phrasing implies duty or responsibility, as well as the neglect of that responsibility. And though it goes without explicit mention, race is deeply woven into Scott's speech. In Detroit, "city government" has a very particular meaning. The city is 85 percent black, so city government officials are fellow black people who have been elected from the city's neighborhoods into positions of power. Based on his phrasing, these are the people who are responsible for the city's well-being; yet he implicitly suggests that they "don't care."

Scott's use of the term "suburbs" provides further evidence of the racial discourses at play in his speech. The suburbs are a concept deeply associated with whiteness. In the suburbs, where white people live, politicians care about their constituents and thus the grass is cut and streets are clean. Scott makes two qualitative distinctions in his speech: urban versus suburban, and not caring versus caring. He pairs urban with not caring, and suburban with caring. Since the people in the city government with responsibility to the city are negatively contrasted with their suburban counterparts, this suggests that Scott is talking about betrayal by fellow black Detroiters in the city government.

Consider also an excerpt that comes from a man, around 50 years old, named Robbie Stanfield. He took me on a bike tour of one of Detroit's most barren neighborhoods, where he spent years homeless and addicted to crack cocaine. He is now a volunteer at a local soup kitchen. On our tour, Stanfield stops to point out an abandoned school building. He said to me:

RS: Now this used to be a private city school here. The city councilmember came out—you know, see, this is the thing that councilmembers, mayors, and governors need to see, right here. You know what I'm saying, Chris?

CL: Yeah, absolutely.

RS: Because this is where will show that you a good mayor, a good councilman. Because you see this problem right before your eyes, and you say, 'Oh my god, I want to do something to change this here.' But then they say, 'We want to make

our neighborhood safe with more police on the street.' Have you see a police officer since you've been riding, since we've been riding, Chris?

CL: No.

RS: That you can remember, just looking up around you? Have you seen a policeman riding in any area?

CL: Not today.

RS: Not since we've been riding, not a one. So now, in the most needed area, how could you say that the police is out here to protect you, that the police is out here for the people? How could that be so? When we have not seen one single police car. Not even patrol, nowhere. Nowhere.

I ask what would happen if someone called 911 to report a crime in progress. Stanfield responds:

RS: They probably wouldn't come. You know why they wouldn't come? Because this is the land of forgotten. This is where people don't supposed to exist. If it's a murder or something really dramatic they might come, but other than that they're not gonna come.

Stanfield, upon seeing the wrecked building, immediately begins speaking of "councilmembers, mayors, and governors," suggesting a strong association between blight and politics. How is the association elaborated? Stanfield says that the politicians

“need to see” such blight, implying that it is both relevant and important to their responsibilities as legislators.

Moving further down in the passage, Stanfield explains what he believes is the appropriate way for politicians to react to seeing a neighborhood in such disrepair: “Oh my god, I want to do something to change this here.” He then says “but,” in order to emphasize distinction between the correct reaction versus the actual reaction of politicians—rhetoric about policing. Immediately after, Stanfield points out the absence of police in the neighborhood, a clear suggestion that the political rhetoric is hollow. The excerpt draws upon a clear discourse of state power neglecting and abandoning the neighborhood. His references to the “land of forgotten” where “people don’t supposed to exist,” together with his comments about the police, are clear representations of this neglectful government.

These characterizations were common in my data. Authority was represented and made meaningful through discourses of neglect and abandonment. This hostility is not represented as intentional. In contrast, the second pattern of representation depicts authority as actively hostile to Detroit and its people—as illustrated by the following two excerpts.

The first excerpt from William Scott represents a construction of power as *actively hostile* to Detroit:

And not only that, but you know, the politicians in state government, in my opinion, care more about the suburbs than here in Detroit. The last fight that we had, fight we’ve got going on right now. They’re trying to take control of Cobo

Hall. And the guise they're putting under is that it's gonna to be given to an authority. Ok, well it's going to be given to an authority? What do the city and its residents get out of it? It's part of the city. They're gradually trying to take the water department. Under Mayor Archer, which was back in the 1990s, they put the Institute of Arts under authority, they put the main zoo under an authority. An authority is okay, as long as you're looking out for the interests of the city. Because, I mean, if these things is owned by the city, then that means the city have been providing revenue to keep them running, up until the time you put them under an authority. Now you put them under the authority, you're not giving the city anything in return. But the city don't have no control.

Some clarification is necessary here. Cobo Hall is a Detroit convention center, and in 2009 negotiations were underway to put the center under joint urban-suburban-state management, as opposed to control by the Detroit city government (Forman 2009). This excerpt is marked by a language of struggle. The Cobo Hall controversy is described as a “fight” for “control,” which takes the “guise” of a change in management structure—the term “guise” evoking deception or foul play. This is significant because government and people are presented as adversaries in the budget crisis. This adversarial relationship also appears when he says the state government is “*taking* the water department,” which is “part of the city.”

In the earlier excerpt, Scott framed suburban (i.e. white) in opposition to urban (i.e. black) interests. Consequently, I understand Mr. Scott as referencing a “state government” (which overwhelmingly white) that isn't concerned about black Detroit but

rather the “suburbs.” And what he describes is the state and suburbs attacking the city’s resources.

The next excerpt is from a young man named “Marcus Clark,” who had been recently laid off from a blue collar professional position, and at the time of our interview, was trying to make a living as a self-employed street vendor. I asked him “What do you think the community’s greatest assets are?”, a question that I posed to almost every participant in my research. His response also draws upon discourses of *active hostility*.

Marcus Clark: Well, I think that the assets of Michigan used to be the clothing, and the car industry. Once that fell, it just did a lot of things man, I mean now we don’t have nothing. Like Cobo Hall, and stuff like that. I mean like the car show, they trying to take that away from us. You know, it’s just we don’t have nothing! Ain’t nothing here no more. They done stripped Michigan, the motor city, or the state of music—music started here in Michigan—the car industry started here in Michigan. And they stripped it. We don’t have nothing. We have no crop of sugar or sugarcane to go to no more. No bailout, they done bailed out everything. All the state officials that was crooks like Mayor Kwame—they say that he was a crook—the lady, Monica Conyers, she turned out to be a crook. So everybody, every state official, to me, I have no faith in them no more.

It is quite telling that in response to a question about the community’s assets, Clark starts talking about assets that have been “taken.” The word he uses is “stripped.” Stripping is what people do to a car after they steal it—break it down and sell it off for

parts. Clark says this is what is happening to “the city,” but his geographic distinction is a bit ambiguous. He refers to “Michigan,” but all of his references—Cobo Hall, city councilmember Monica Conyers, former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, “the Motor City”—are all references to the city of Detroit, so I surmise that he is speaking about Detroit.

It’s important that what have been stripped is the car industry, and the music industry. (The term “music industry” is unspecific, but the only music industry Michigan has ever seen is Motown Records, so it is likely that Clark is referring to Motown.) Both the car industry and Motown are central to the identity of Detroit, and not only that, Motown has historically been a part of the black identity of the city.

A careful look at Clark’s words can evoke a hidden story. It is noteworthy that he describes the car industry being stripped, because the car industry provided many of Detroit’s black residents a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. This was after southern African-Americans left their “crop of sugarcane” and migrated to America’s northern cities. But now the politicians have stripped that, and “we don’t have nothing,” not even “a crop of sugarcane to go back to.” This stripping was done by political “crooks,” reinforcing Clark’s discourse of theft; “crooks” are exactly the people who “strip” cars. So because of this theft by politicians, Detroit’s population is now stranded, resourceless, in the city.

The Future

My interviewees exhibited strong patterns when talking about state and economic power; in contrast, I found that when Detroiters talk about *the future*, the most striking trend is the lack of any cohesive picture. Some interviewees were confident that Detroit

would rebound and that the city would see a renaissance. Some described this renaissance, but felt that they would be excluded from it. Still others didn't seem unable to contemplate what was in store for the city. And some respondents expressed hopelessness for their future. Around ten of my research participants didn't speak about the future at all, but this could be a reflection of my interview prompts and not necessarily the beliefs of Detroiters.

The following excerpt is an example of one of the more positive outlooks on the future. It is from a young black male working for a nonprofit that aims to rebuild the city's physical infrastructure. He asked to be identified as "Cannon."

CL: Have you seen the foreclosure crisis at all?

Cannon: I actually watch the news all the time, and you know the people then actually like, not necessarily rioted, but almost like went on strike because of what's goin on, and um the crisis is in effect, but one thing that I'm actually happy to know is that, you know, Obama in office and he's a pretty, you know, positive person. And he sees what the people really need. And he's goin after that, you know, the needs of the people.

CL: So what do you think might come of that, then?

Cannon: Well I just heard that he actually um had the government has a lot to do with the Big Three now, and that they own like a large part of it, and that they're gon start makin' like instead of havin all these different name brands of cars, that there might be like one big main manufacturer. And that might be able to you know cause like you know money to be in one area then just spread it around

everywhere. And so he's actually not tryin to let Detroit go down because he knows that we been you know the motherland for the automotive industry for like years and so many years, and so you really just can't forget about Detroit like that, you know?

As mentioned above, the foreclosure crisis is a situation that has impacted a large fraction of Detroit residents. When asked about it, Cannon mentions Barack Obama, who he says is a "positive person" who "sees what the people really need." Barack Obama becomes a symbol of hope for change here; he had only been in office a few months at the time of the interview, and the notion of a new black president "goin' after [...] the needs of the people" represents possibility for a new beginning. It is also a notable exception to the discontent with government analyzed above.

Cannon shifts the discussion to the auto industry, which has long been a symbol for the economic fortune of Detroit. And then he places responsibility for this industry in the hands of Obama himself, with represent references to "*he*"—rather than impersonal characterizations like "the government"—who is "not tryin' to let Detroit go down" or "forget about" the city. The notion that the city hasn't been forgotten certainly suggests that the city has a future; Cannon suggests that Obama is capable of saving the city.

Not everybody in Detroit is so confident, though. Latrell Summers has a wife and kids, and his family's home had recently burned down in a fire. When I spoke with him, he was living at a rescue mission while his family had taken in with friends. He was unemployed at the time of our interview.

CL: How about the auto industry?

LS: I don't even know what to say about that. I can't understand how they let this sink so low. It's a lot of people I know there that lost their jobs and got laid off, you know. And now you know it's really fin to get tight. [...] And you know, it's sad to say I think it's gon get worse before it's gon get a little bit better.

CL: Yeah, how come?

LS: Because you know look, all the homeless people right now, steady putting homeless out in street, know what I'm sayin? And it seem like there's no way out of it right now, you know what I'm saying? Not saying that it ain't gon get better because I believe it is, but right now at this present time, it's gon get worse before it get better! Cause it's gon be too many people unemployed by the time it start gettin better, and hopefully man, just hopefully things work out. People gon be gettin locked up, all that type of stuff. And the crime rate gon go up! It's sad to say but it's gon go up. I mean if you put a person out in the street, what results, I mean what they got to do? I mean the only thing they can do is to convert to crime. They're not gon be sittin out here broke. And that's been a problem with Michigan for a long time. A lot of unemployment, guys do what they do. Sell dope, stick up people, do whatever else they got to do. That's why we have so many damn prisons around here. And that's another thing. They tryin to relieve them guys that's been in prison for so long, they tryin to put them out here. Now you ain't got enough money for the prison system! I mean, but you fin to send all these guys home, now it's really gonna be—because they really don't know

nothing about a damn, if they can't get a job they really don't know what to do but stick somebody up or do something wrong to somebody.

But hopefully things get better man, but right now it just don't seem like it's happenin. So I have to stick goin' to school, doin' what I do, and hopefully like I say, times get better. I just pray a lot. That's all I do, I just pray a lot.

While Summers expresses his belief that the situation in Detroit will eventually improve, his speech suggests a lack of confidence. When asked about the future, Summers talks about "puttin' homeless out in the street" and people "sell[ing] dope" and "stick[ing] up people." Summers' language evokes a sense of disorder. The phrase "out in the street" implies a lack of recourse for the people who the crisis effects. And in addition to descriptions of crime and chaos, Summers says that released prisoners, "don't know nothing about a damn." This lack of knowledge is coupled with a lack of resources (i.e. jobs), in order to cause a situation where people have no choice but to commit crime.

Police, or other forces capable of restoring order, are notably absent from Summers' representation of the situation. He mentions unemployment, but no means for people to receive jobs. He mentions criminals, but no means for them to be rehabilitated. He says all this "has been a problem with Michigan for a long time," but does not discuss solutions to that problem. This provides further evidence that he does not have a clear conception for how Detroit's future could improve. And finally, he says that one of his methods for dealing with the situation is to "just pray a lot." The appeal to a higher power is a profound expression of being lost as to how the situation could be handled.

The final excerpt is also from Robbie Stanfield, on our bike tour of the abovementioned neighborhood. In discussing the neighborhood's conditions, he says:

Has any change developed? No. Is any change gonna come about? Maybe, but it wont be for the poor people, it'll be—like I said—for the rich and famous cause they the ones that always profit from these tearing downs and rebuildings cause what they rebuilding, they makin it out of the range where poor people can't even pay no bills like that there. You know, so it's not changin for the poor people. And you got guys out here on a daily basis sellin they drugs sellin they weed or whatever they doin. Still entrappin' people, you know?

The message here is rather blunt. Stanfield says firmly that change in the neighborhood “won't be for the poor people.” He also mentions “tearing downs and rebuildings”; earlier in our discussion he had spoken about a large housing project in the neighborhood that had been a notorious haven for crime. Later he mentioned that the project had been converted into far more expensive condos. So “tearing downs and rebuildings” is likely a reference to these projects, as “poor people can't even pay no bills there.”

Also noteworthy is Stanfield's reference to “the rich and famous.” It is unlikely that the new residents of the project are *actually* famous—despite the rebuilding, the condos are still situated near one of the most decrepit neighborhoods in the city. But Stanfield's addition of the term “famous” adds prestige to the privileged group he describes, and serves to enhance the distinction between rich and poor. This distinction is

important, because Stanfield describes the two groups as having *different futures*. The rich group is the one for whom it is possible for “change to come about.” So Stanfield draws upon a discourse of exclusion in order to describe the future.

Conclusions

The most salient patterns I found in my data were anger towards power and authority, and the lack of a united conception of the future. It is interesting that while Detroiters have a very vivid conception of what has caused the problems facing their city, there is not any accompanying coherency about the solution.

These two patterns are more connected than first glance would suggest. If Detroit can be understood as a disaster, then citizens and policymakers will naturally be interested in recovery from that disaster. But my data has shown that Detroiters construct an antagonistic relationship with the key social institutions necessary for organizing that recovery. Given the legacies of neglect and disinvestment that have shaped the American urban landscape (Sugrue 1996), we shouldn’t be surprised that Detroit’s residents have little faith in the institutions that presided over that process, regardless of whether or not such a result was intended. But if Detroiters do not have a healthy relationship with the main organizing structures of society, the city cannot recover from its disaster.

The actual content of my data also suggests some implications for recovery. The discourses that Detroiters draw upon to talk about authority and the future suggest the presence of problems that are deeply structural in nature. The city’s current state of catastrophe is 50 years in the making (Sugrue 1996), and the anger that Detroiters expressed in my research has long existed in the city. Although this anger was often

expressed in somewhat abstract ways in my data, history suggests that it is rooted in very concrete issues. For instance, the most famous expressions of anger at authority in Detroit history are the famous riots of 1967. Afterward, the “Kerner Commission on Civil Disturbances,” set up by President Lyndon Johnson to analyze the cause of the riots occurring nationwide, found that lack of access to the labor market was the fundamental cause of the riots (Kerner Commission 1968). This shows that the anger of Detroiters as unfounded or irrational. My research has shown that the anger behind the riots has persisted. The structural issues behind it have as well. Unemployment among black young adults was between 25 and 30 percent at the time of the riots (Sugrue 1996: 261). After the riots, between the years 1971 and 1986, black unemployment averaged more than 20 percent (Fosu 2000). And in September 2009, the number was around 30 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Herron (2007) attempts to dispel the notion that Detroit is an exceptional case on the American social landscape. The city’s situation is extreme, to be sure, but Herron argues that the structural phenomena at play in Detroit are at play all across the United States. The extremity of the situation in Detroit simply makes these forces more plainly visible. I argue that the acute sense of race, class, and place-based inequality I find in Detroit is thus emblematic of a much wider resentment. If it is going to be resolved in the United States, it must be resolved in Detroit.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professors Celine-Marie Pascale and Michelle Newton-Francis at American University for their invaluable guidance and feedback.

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