DETROIT'S RHYTHMIC RESISTANCE: ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND COMMUNITY PRIDE

by

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Preface

Music sounds better to me in Detroit. Sometimes music will make me stop mid sentence, mid word even, close my eyes, tip my head back rendering me incapable of conversation. The music that has the power to move me like this is electronic music, also known as dance music. Not everyone connects to electronic music the way that I do. I don’t expect to change the way you “hear” dance music – you may think it’s just bleep bleep over and over again and I don’t mind that. But I do want to invite you to know a Detroit that is different from what you might expect. Anyone who hasn’t spent a lot of time in Detroit is probably only aware of its reputation as a current day ruins and a shell of its former self; I intend to offer an account of a Detroit community that is vibrant, civic minded, and independent. My perspective rests within the music that brought me to Detroit but the story of the community surrounding the music has appeal for more than just electronic music fans. This dissertation will describe a vibrant community based around electronic music that reveals a Detroit many are unaware of. My project seeks to do double duty – dispelling the myths about the city, arguably America’s most broadly hated, while also dispelling myths about electronic music, its origins, and its deserved respect. This dissertation studies the phenomenon of electronic music in Detroit as a way
to understand one aspect of the pride Detroiters have for a city much of the rest of the country has already given up on.

I am using ‘electronic music’ as a catchall phrase for all the genres of dance music, in the way that the popular press sometimes uses ‘techno.’ Techno is one of many electronic music genres, such as house, drum ’n’ bass, and electro. This differentiation is especially important when talking about Detroit electronic music because techno originated from the city of Detroit. Though non fans tend to think of electronic music as repetitive, unnuanced, or soul less, Detroit techno’s distinct sound is funky, while simultaneously human and otherworldly. In this project I will be discussing both techno and house music. Detroit is acknowledged within the international electronic music audience as the birthplace of techno, in the same way that Chicago is seen as the birthplace of house music. The drive between Chicago and Detroit isn’t very long, less than five hours, and the exchange between the two music scenes has been abundant. Both house and techno use 4/4 time, but house music is generally slower (about 120 beats per minute) with accents on every other beat and is more likely to incorporate vocals. Techno is more likely to have a straight 4/4 sound, is generally faster, and incorporates more abstract sounds. Though techno is now made all over the globe, Detroit techno is known for its use of layered rhythms and influence of funk music. In the early years, differentiation between the genres of house and techno had more to do with city than sound. For example, some of the musicians from Detroit were making music that sounded far more like Chicago house than Detroit techno but were categorized as techno artists because of where they were from. My current ethnographic interest in Detroit
encompasses both techno and house as well as music that could fit as easily into one category as the other, which reflects the fluidity of electronic music made in Detroit.

The acronym DJ, short for disc jockey, refers to a musician who uses at minimum two turntables, a mixer, and records as the instruments for her or his performance. A DJ’s competence is based on the selection and ordering of the records played, the transitions between records played, and the skill employed to mix between the two (or more) selections in order to create what is essentially a new piece of art. In Detroit, a heavy emphasis is placed on a DJ’s ability to mix the records, performing tricks like beat juggling or matching sounds from the two tracks for extended periods of time so that what is sometimes imagined as a “third record” comes to exist, rather than just smoothly blending one track into the next. Detroit has an incredibly high standard of performance for local musicians; Detroit DJs must reach and surpass that bar or do not perform outside of their own basements. One DJ, whose career started before house or techno existed, helped set the standard of performance. Primarily working the black, gay social circuit, Ken Collier played disco, and later local house and techno tracks, with a skill that inspired the DJs coming up at the time. Known and respected for his record selection and ability to rock a party, most Detroit DJs attribute Collier as a major influence.

Detroit electronic music may be globally appealing in part because of its broad foundation of influences. Though electronic music is now seen as fitting within tight generic borders, its creation stems from DJs in the 1980s playing music from many different genres, including rock and roll and alternative, alongside funk and early hip hop. Most early Detroit DJs listened to a show of a radio personality known as the Electrifying Mojo that ran on and off from the mid 1970s until the late 1990s. Mojo refused to
recognize generic borders, dispensing with the notion that city residents would only tune in for stereotypically “urban” music. He played new wave, rock, funk, and soul introducing many Detroiter to Kraftwerk while playing Run DMC alongside the B 52’s. To this day the B 52s “Mesopotamia” will make a dance floor full of a certain generation of Detroiter absolutely lose their minds. Detroit techno owes a debt to Mojo for the multiplicity of influences that resonate within its sound. Detroit electronic musicians, raised on a bevy of musical styles, rather than the restricted diet of a single genre, always thought of themselves in conversation with musicians and musics of other places. Their early attempts at expansive, effective, global communication through music have resulted in the current international fan base.

The story of how techno began has become the stuff of legend in the popular music press, with frequent retellings that crown three artists, Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, a kind of triumvirate of techno forefathers. The following account will be taken largely from Sicko’s Techno Rebels, a well researched, thorough book that enlarges the story to include the social setting for techno’s beginning. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Detroit teenagers found their entertainment options sparse. They began throwing dance parties in social halls in downtown Detroit where the entertainment was provided by DJs playing records. The social groups at that time derived from two groups, the “preps” and the “jits.” The “preps” were mostly from Detroit’s middle class and upper middle class northwest neighborhoods. The “jits” were mostly from the east side and were more likely to come from working class neighborhoods. At a 1980 party thrown by the social club called Charivari, named after a clothing line to sound sophisticated, a group of musicians played a demo version of their
song called “Sharevari.” The band, called A Number of Names, released the record in 1981. The song is regarded as Detroit’s landmark techno record. Its layered sound and repeated vocals that mimic two copies of a record played almost in synch (“Chari Chari.... Vari Vari”) replicate the sound of a DJ’s performance.

DJs performing at the social club parties formed DJ collectives, in which they would be booked for parties together. One of the DJ crews, Deep Space, was created by Juan Atkins and Derrick May. They had larger aspirations than simply playing the high school party circuit. The same year as A Number of Names released “Sharevari,” Juan Atkins and partner Rik Davis released “Alleys of Your Mind,” as the duo Cybotron. “Alleys of Your Mind” built on the aesthetic of the high school social scene incorporating the electronic sounds of disco, but retaining the Detroit foundation of funkier sounds. Cybotron was noticed by the Electrifying Mojo who helped Atkins and Davis sell tens of thousands of copies of “Alleys of Your Mind” and its follow up, “Cosmic Cars,” through local mom-and-pop record stores. Cybotron was picked up by Fantasy Records. In 1985, Atkins left the duo because he and Davis had moved in different musical directions, and launched his own label, Metroplex, with the track, “No UFOs.” He released other artists on his label; his first success was Eddie Fowlkes’ 1986 “Goodbye Kiss.” Atkins set the prototype for not just the sound, but the independent release of one’s own music. His artists eventually would start their own labels. Their work would be recognized across the Atlantic before it reached the other parts of the U.S. Techno first gained an audience in the United Kingdom following the overseas popularity of Chicago’s house music; Detroit’s techno was next to be ‘discovered,’ culminating in the 1988 release of the compilation Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit. It wasn’t until after Detroit DJs
were already playing regularly in the UK that a US rave phenomenon began in the early 1990s, exposing Detroit DJs to a national underground fan base.

Atkins’ decision to start his own label was repeated by the next wave of Detroit electronic musicians. Many of the artists released on Atkins’ label began their own labels. Other musicians started their own labels with their first piece of music. Many of the independent Detroit electronic music labels found success in the growing years of techno’s popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During those years, DJs from Detroit toured regularly around the globe as well as, to a lesser extent, around the United States.

Back home, the early fans of Detroit electronic music remained a small but committed audience for the musicians during stays at home. The musicians and the fans in the current Detroit electronic music scene come from both high school scenes, the “jits” and the “preps.” Just as the musicians have achieved varying levels of success within the music industry, fans and participants are also varied in their class position and educational attainment. The scene easily incorporates many college graduates with professional positions. This variety belies the assumption that urban places are homogenous in regards to class and educational attainment. While I am not suggesting urban America in general and Detroit in particular are not in crisis, the people introduced in this dissertation will disrupt the static picture of the hopeless, flat, uniform “inner city.” An important first step out of crisis is to acknowledge the agency of urban American residents. The following pages will give the reader an introduction to members of the electronic music community and detail the way that they form a community
connected to Detroit. A detailed description of my research methods with this community can be found in the appendix.

What follows is not a history of Detroit techno. This is the story of the relationship of the electronic music community to Detroit and to Detroit’s current embattled image. It is designed to give the reader an idea of what is working in Detroit, through the example of a music community. It serves as a reminder that when it becomes too easy to completely write off urban places, we will lose what has made urban centers an integral part of American society – the central synergy of innovation, creativity, and imagination.

Though I think that my original intent and argument have remained mostly unchanged – that there is something in Detroit that disputes the disregard center cities in general and Detroit in particular face – the way I’ve approached it has changed. I think I originally wanted to offer the Detroit electronic music community and its vibrancy as an example of something extraordinary, as unusual. As a resident of Detroit, I’ve come to think of their existence, as well as the existence of communities like them in Detroit and in other besieged urban places, as normal and our cultural assumption that they aren’t likely to exist as what is truly extraordinary.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Being Here”

By the evening of March 7, 2002, I had been living in Detroit for almost three years. Feeling tired that night I almost missed an event that I have now come to recognize as a pivotal moment of my research. Rather than start this chapter where most works on Detroit start and finish – within the all too notorious tropes of absence, violence, vacancy and decay – I begin with the idea of “being here,” a seemingly simple thought that like most on Detroit proves to be deeply complex. On that night, I came very close to finding myself fast asleep in my apartment little more than a mile away from Porter Street Station, the venue for the event. Sleeping on the things that make Detroit special is an all too common practice and probably the reason why it’s unforgivably easy for outsiders, near and far, to pronounce “there is nothing in Detroit.”

It was the tail end of Michigan’s long winter and still very cold. I had been coming to this venue nearly every Thursday night for a weekly party called Mixworks, organized by Buzz Goree and Keleigh Gaspar. They had started throwing the event in January, a rough month to gain momentum for a weekly event, and the Thursdays in February had been sparsely attended. Previous attendance at the event hadn’t prepared
me to find the parking lot full and the street in front lined with cars. The fact that I was arriving at 10:30, considered early for such events, further added to my surprise. Porter Street is in Corktown, a neighborhood just west of downtown Detroit. Corktown is the city’s old Irish neighborhood complete with the residues of brick streets, semi-submerged streetcar lines, Victorian houses, Irish pubs and Tiger Stadium. Housed in a squat, single story, heavy brick structure, Porter Street sits on only a portion of its lot. Like the other buildings nearby, Porter Street sits amidst a vast expanse of asphalt. Guest DJs from built up cities like New York might be overwhelmed by the amount of land without structures as well as the low level of the two and three story buildings that dot the landscape, but Detroiter and metro area residents are used to seeing uncrowded space close to downtown. Crowded spaces are as uncommon as crowded venues; the Detroit house and techno scene regularly draws sparse to medium attendance. Notable exceptions are, like that March night, overflowing with people who haven’t been out in weeks, months, or years as well as the regulars who manage to make it out on a weekly basis. I was happy that I managed to show up and humbled that my appearance was only accidental.

The first time that I tried to go to Mixworks I didn’t even approach the building, not only because there were so few cars but also because I couldn’t hear any bass outside of the building. Reverberating bass of a particular tempo signals an electronic music event and lets the first time attendee know she has found the right venue. The thick brick walls of Porter Street insulate the sound, keeping it inside the venue. That night I did not let the silence of the surroundings dissuade my approach. However, I did not know if the

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1 See John Hartigan Jr.'s *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* for a description of Corktown.
silence surrounding the building was the typical insulation effect or if it was because this night’s event would be different from what I had come to expect. I knew that that night was an awards night, named the 20/20 Awards after the 20 recipients and their 20 years of contribution as DJs in Detroit. I didn’t know if it would be a typical awards ceremony with a podium and stage, maybe chairs and, most importantly, no loud music. When I walked in, I found that I needn’t have worried – it was a very familiar setting for me: loud music, dim lights, alcoholic beverages, the chatter of voices raised to socialize over the music and, as is typical for this early in the evening, few people on the dance floor. Even from the end of the coat check hallway I could see that the bar, an island in the front half of the large open space, was crowded on all four sides. The two bartenders were being assisted by two managers in order to fill the drink orders. Just at the moment my plan of arriving early and getting a stool at the bar looked like it would fall through, someone got up and I took the spot. There was no podium or platform, no chairs for an audience, simply a table on the wall of the dance floor opposite the DJ booth, where 20 plaques were stacked up waiting to be given out.

After settling into my stool and chatting with the people around me, I looked up into the smiling face and open arms of my friend. My friend always has a beaming smile and a kind word; she loves to dance, and is unafraid of being the only person on the dance floor. She looks like she is having such a good time that you usually want to dance as well. Sitting at the bar with her, I felt silly for almost choosing sleep over this night out because she told me she had to work at seven the next morning. She said that what made these awards so meaningful was that they were coming from their peers, from themselves. She and I caught up on our personal lives and she introduced me to a few of
her friends. I was so wrapped up in a conversation with one of them that I barely noticed that the awards were starting. I crossed through one of the two doorways in the chest-high barrier between the bar and the dance floor and joined the amassing crowd. DJ Minx, a tall, striking woman who is one of few publicly performing female DJs in the area, had stopped playing. Though I barely knew her, I was aware of her talent and reputation. It was a special honor to perform on a night when DJs’ talents and careers were being celebrated.

Minx stepped down from the DJ booth and joined the crowd facing a woman with a microphone standing next to the table covered in awards. We circled informally around her leaving enough space so that she could be seen by most. The emcee’s voice was familiar because I had been listening to her radio show for some time. Theresa Hill was the afternoon host, Monday through Friday, on the Detroit Public Schools Station, 90.9 FM, which played a format of old school hip hop, R&B, and house music. Hill dedicated one hour on Thursdays to showcase a guest house music DJ along with the opportunity for listeners to call in and answer a poll (for example: “back in the day, who was your favorite party promoter?”) or make comments to the guest DJ. Upon taking the mic at the 20/20 awards, she apologized for the interruption in music and stressed that it would be brief. She introduced the importance of the event, underlining the meaningful contributions of the DJs to Detroit and explained that this recognition had been a long time coming.

Hill introduced the featured speaker of the evening and casually passed the mic to Cornelius Harris. Cornelius is a non-musician member of the musical collective

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2 Theresa Hill’s afternoon program ended in 2004 when the Detroit Public Schools turned over management of its radio station to an outside company. The station’s format is now classical music during the day and jazz at night.
Underground Resistance. He stepped into the informal space around which we had
circled, receiving the microphone from Hill and reiterating that this would be a brief
interruption. Rather than undermine the awards, Hill’s and Cornelius’ reinforcement of
the idea of the ceremony as an interruption only served to remind the audience the reason
for the awards – dedication to the music. Cornelius drove home the importance of the 20
DJs work in Detroit. Cornelius emphasized that what made these 20 recipients special
was that they had been doing their thing for so long in Detroit. Reminding us that some
DJs from Detroit have found themselves flying around the world to perform, he
emphasized that staying and working in Detroit is also worthy of respect and recognition.
When he stopped the ceremony for a minute and suggested, “let’s give them a round of
applause just for being here,” he emphasized that a commitment to Detroit took
precedence that night over worldwide fame or stardom. Cornelius’ words stayed with me
from that night for what they meant to the crowd and later on what they meant for my
own ethnographic project on Detroit. His words and the audience’s enthusiastic response
represented a shared understanding that in the face of all the famous tropes of Detroit –
violence, vacancy, absence, and decay – “being here” becomes more than just an action,
but also a commitment. “Being here” emphasizes a sense of pride in a place you are
often told is not worth treasuring or, worse, doesn’t legitimately exist.

As I watched the rest of the ceremony, Cornelius’ phrase “just for being here,”
made sense of the unfolding events. Hill resumed her position on the mic and started
introducing the names of the recipients. First, she called them one by one,
acknowledging also those who had come to accept an award in a recipient’s place. As
er and Cornelius’ promise of a short interruption looked to be proven false, she
interrupted herself to say that she would call all 20 names together and asked would the recipients please come up as their names were called. This ended up making more sense with that particular group of awardees. As Cornelius had compared flying around the world to the careers of these DJs at home, it struck me that while touring is an individual act of a solo career, staying and working in Detroit necessitates group interaction and collective work. The 20/20 Awards made more sense announced as a collective acknowledgement of the creation of a local music community.

The recipients - Bruce Bailey, Gary Chandler, Mike Clark, Greg Collier, John Collins, Alan Ester, D-Wynn, Buzz Goree, Mike Grant, Stacey Hale, Melvin Hill, Mike Huckaby, Dwayne Jenson, Alton Miller, Chad Novak, Alan Oldham, Terrence Parker, James Pennington, Anthony ‘Shake’ Shakir, Delano Smith, Norm Talley and Rick Wilhite – could each be identified by the genre of music most commonly associated with their performances, for instance some might be identified as house DJs while others would be called techno DJs. However, the 20/20 awards did not differentiate by genre, which would have signified a contemporary concern with strict musical borders. Instead, the awards ceremony collectively marked out a musical territory that was open to most musical styles. This refusal to categorize music lies at the heart of why Detroit was the place where techno music was pioneered. Finally “being here” requires a passion for music, which is why Hill admonished the second DJ of the night, Mike Clark, also one of the recipients, to get back to work so that the music would continue. Clark was followed by Carl Craig, whose name is arguably more internationally recognized than all those called for awards that night, and his presence as a supporting DJ rather than an award
recipient himself suggested that even those who fly around the world must and do pay their respects to those who instead remain intent on “being here” in Detroit.

Just before the music came back on, a special award was presented to Delano Smith, one of the 20, for making a comeback out of retirement. He thanked all his mentors for their help and then called up two of the other recipients, one of which was the only woman among the 20, Stacey “Hotwax” Hale. Smith pointed out that the three of them had been DJing since the other recipients were in junior high. He then put his arms around the two others and proclaimed, “this is history.” “This is history” and “being here” are the impetus behind my work in Detroit. Detroiters have found themselves disregarded on many levels, as intellectuals, artists, and simply as citizens. As easy as it is to disregard Detroit as a place, it is proportionately difficult for Detroiters to assert their presence. Detroit DJs share their fellow Detroiters propensity to incorporate history into their everyday speech, however their tellings have an extra level of urgency in the face of the ability of the U.S. to forget that techno and house came from this country, rewriting its history as European music. Because a large majority of the musicians are African American, they share their fellow Detroiters sense of complexity in their history speech acts, suspecting that abilities to forget and disregard are often enhanced by racialized presuppositions. Now that the metro Detroit music scene has had some attention in recent years, with Eminem, Kid Rock, and even the White Stripes selling the authenticity of Detroit as “hard” or “dangerous,” it is even more crucial that the electronic musicians maintain their recognition internationally, build it nationally, and create it locally.
Clark had already started running to the turntables when he was called back for the group photo, shot by one of the sponsors of the awards event, the *Real Detroit Weekly*. The photo was meant to accompany a story in the next week’s magazine. The story never materialized. The only piece of journalism covering this event that I am aware of was in the May issue of a European magazine called *International DJ*:

**Detroit Spinners**
The Real Detroit 20/20 Awards recently bucked trends in the dance music industry by celebrating not the most well-known Detroit superstars, but rather 20 DJs, each with 20 years experience, for their considerable contributions to the local scene. The Awards Ceremony took place March 7th at a Thursday night weekly called Mixworks and was sponsored by Submerge, source distributor for Detroit electronic music (www.submerge.com). MC'd by Theresa Hill from WDTR, the presentation of the awards was book ended by sets from DJ Minx, Agent X, and Carl Craig. Mixworks, Hill’s radio show, and the 20/20 Awards are all part of a commitment to recognize the artists that helped build the foundation of the local electronic music community – the foundation that made it possible for Detroit to become both an adjective for quality electronic music and an international techno tourist destination. The recipients of the Real Detroit 20/20 Awards are Bruce Bailey, Gary Chandler, Mike Clark, John Collins, Alan Ester, D-Wynn, Buzz Goree, Mike Grant, Stacey Hale, Melvin Hill, Mike Huckaby, Alan Oldham, and Rick Wilhite. Mike Clark, AKA Agent X, said, “It was overwhelming to know that in our own lifetime we were appreciated by our own people.” Similarly Alan Oldham, a.k.a. DJ T-1000 said, “It seems like this year with the 20/20 Award along with my DEMF appointment and involvement, I’m finally getting some love in Detroit.”

If the style of the writing sounds reminiscent of the narrative above it's because this was my first and only adventure into music journalism. The only reason the awards ceremony was covered in the international press is because while on a research trip to the Winter Music Conference, an important annual electronic music conference, I happened to meet
the editor of *International DJ* and while talking about my work convinced him that this event was newsworthy. Originally, he asked me to recommend a local journalist but the deadline was short and the word limit even shorter and I realized I was the perfect person to convey, in the limited time and space, why the award’s ceremony was important. This was a huge marker as to how journalism and ethnography differ... I was enraged that seven of the recipients’ names were cut from what I submitted, as I had insisted that all names be printed. The editor informed me that that was journalism, which in the end confirmed my part of the debate we’d had in Miami in which he asserted that journalism and ethnography are essentially the same: you do research and you get your story. Above I have printed all 20 names because in ethnographic writing, I have space and I have time. “Being here” (space) and “This is history” (time) emphasize not only the focus of my work but the means by which to accomplish it. The first part of my fieldnotes from that night show how Cornelius’ request shined light on the methodology for my work:

I’m fascinated with the idea of being here. Cornelius said as he took the mic from Theresa Hill “let’s give them a round of applause for just being here.” Being here means so much in Detroit. And being here is integral to ethnography. Here I am thinking about how I don’t work enough, I’m never taking enough notes or talking to enough people and that I shouldn’t be out partying. But I am here and I’ve been here. Not nearly as long or long enough. 20 for 20. That’s what the awards were for 20 DJs who’d been doing it at least 20 years...It didn’t occur to me... that it would turn into such an emotional moment for everybody.

“Being Here,” part 2

In the excerpt above, Cornelius’ request helped me to assert claims to my research, as I wrote, “But I am here and I’ve been here,” qualified by: “Not nearly as long

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or long enough.” Comparing myself to those that had been participating in the music scene in Detroit for more than 20 years, I was acknowledging that my research here is not a beginning, but an entrance into an already in-progress project. I don’t have insider experience and knowledge to convey but rather the thoughts of a respectful outsider, who was able, in my first trip here, to see the value of this much-maligned place. My main research goal is to talk to Detroiters to find out what their city has meant to them during a time when outsiders have found it dismissible and, like some of its manufacturing plants, obsolete. My research goal and methodology have actually evolved out of the project itself. As I lay claims to preferring ethnographic work to journalism, I will go one step further and state my preference for interdisciplinary research as my topic proved only researchable through interdisciplinary work. The theory structuring the work was dictated by the project and not the other way around. Concurrently, the methodology followed suit. In this section, I will tell the story of how the project came to exist, or really place myself in the project in progress. Along the way, I will detail the places at which the methodology came to exist and shifted.3

The story of how I came to Detroit is one I’ve told many times; it never ceases to surprise Detroiters or suburbanites. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, did my undergraduate work at the University of California at Berkeley, and had never spent much time in the Midwest. After I received my bachelor’s degree in American Studies, I became fixated with the idea of traveling around the country in a Volkswagen van by myself. My mother was absolutely horrified, and possibly in denial over the idea so much so that when my father helped me find an ’82 Vanagon for $1000 she was irate that he had helped me with my foolish idea. Despite my mother’s anger, both my parents

3 A detailed description of methods can be found in the appendix.
were well aware that I am far too stubborn to be talked out of any idea, even a crazy one. It didn’t seem crazy to me at the time; I thought it was perfectly reasonable as a student of American Studies that because I had the good fortune of having my research material physically spread out in front of me that I should go have a look at it before I made up my mind to continue with a graduate degree in my field. The van I bought was not a camper so my father helped me remove the seats and install a futon, my grandmother’s chest that served for both storage and counter space, a cooler, curtains, and a coffee maker that plugged into the cigarette jack that I used to boil water for instant soups. I think my father may have been just as proud of the van as I was, despite the fact that he was, like my mother, worried about my solo adventure. The first day I drove the entire day, and it was the only time I would drive that much. After that, I drove no more than two or three hour stretches because I wanted to see everything. The first day was exciting however I felt a building panic over uncertainties that I had refused to listen to during the months before this trip – that this was a bad idea, that it was dangerous, that I should take someone along with me, or at the very least a dog. That night that I spent in a rest stop in Nevada was the scariest and loneliest of my life. But the next day was sunny, bright and I felt the most amazing curiosity for what the trip would bring. And there were more than a few surprises. For one, my planned three month trip stretched into five. Second, it turns out I was right in the assumption that people around the country are for the most part good and kind. They confirmed this by inviting me into their homes, cooking me meals, and pointing me in the direction of the best Volkswagen mechanics whenever my home on wheels needed attention.
The biggest surprise was Detroit. I guess most people traveling around the country wouldn’t make an effort to hit Detroit, but after making my way across the South up the East coast, and into Canada I made a beeline for Flint, Michigan because of Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me*. From Flint, I took I-75 to Detroit because as an electronic music fan I knew that techno originated in Detroit. I wanted to try to check out a few events, so I used the computing facilities at Wayne State University to find a local record store, the best place to find flyers for local events. At the only electronic music record store in the city of Detroit, I met someone who took me on a tour of the city showing me a complex picture that filled out my flat assumptions about the place that possibly everyone who has never been to the city shares. I was immediately attracted to Detroit and its predicament of living under the misconception of emptiness and decay. Why do people stay in this place maligned and disregarded by so many? Why were they so passionate about neighborhoods others told them not to care about? How could this place that was said to be nothing more than decay and dilapidation nonetheless have a powerful vibe? And the most pressing – why was it so different from what I had been told? I spent a few days in Detroit then stopped through Ann Arbor to see the university. The U of M then moved up to my top choice in graduate schools because it was only 45 minutes from the place I wanted to come back to. Over the course of the five month trip I had seen places where I thought, “OK I could live here,” but Detroit was the first, and turned out to be the only, in which I said to myself, “I will come back here to live some day.”

When I started graduate school, I found an apartment in Ann Arbor. At that time I couldn’t have known that my choice of location would position me so fiercely out of my
field site of interest. There is an immense divide between Detroiters and suburbanites. Both city dwellers and suburbanites use the label ‘urban’ to stand in for black and ‘suburban’ to stand in for white. Though in day-to-day life I find myself slipping into this racial shortcut, for the purposes of this dissertation I will refrain. Instead, I intend to allow the reader to reverse the usual assumptions in which persons of unspecified race means white. In this narrative, persons of unspecified race with whom I work are the majority members of my field, African Americans. The oddest part of my usage of the ‘urban’, ‘suburban’ shorthand is that as a Latina, I don’t fit either the black or white category and so am fully aware that this racialized shortcut elides the other ethnic groups living in the Detroit metropolitan area including Latinos, Asians and Asian Americans, as well as the largest group of people from the Middle East, outside of the Middle East, concentrated mostly in Dearborn on Detroit’s western border.

After one year in Ann Arbor, I made good on my promise to myself and moved to Detroit because I preferred commuting from my city of choice than living in college town Ann Arbor. Entering research on Detroit as a booster throws me into a stream of academic work that refutes my celebration of the city. I will detail this work in the next section but for now I’d like to point out that what I want to do – assert that there is something culturally vibrant here – would be ludicrous in the context of most other cities. It wouldn’t be enough to base a seminar paper around, much less a dissertation. Cornelius’ request to honor musicians for “just being here” would have made sense in few other places. This says less about the cities in question than it indict the attitudes held by the rest of the country. It is because of the dearth of work that considers
contemporary Detroit as something other than failure that my work will require the city to
be my primary resource.

Committed to studying the city of Detroit, I wasn’t sure about with which method
until I took a fieldwork methods seminar in the Ethnomusicology department. We spared
no critique of anthropological fieldwork’s legacy of assistance in colonization, tendency
to speak for the subjects in question, and annoying habit of trying to put music into words
that didn’t fit it as an art form. Our first two complaints are also possibly the strengths,
rather than simply weaknesses, of the discipline of anthropology – its past now forcing
the current practitioners to interrogate the equity of their methods, which in turn deepens
their approach and analysis of their subject matter. My work will build from the
experimental moment identified in 1986 by George Marcus and Michael Fisher in the
volume that they edited, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in
the Human Sciences*, which called for more self-reflexivity in ethnographic writing.
Highlighting anthropology’s tendency to look at Self through an examination of Other,
Marcus and Fisher suggested that the crisis felt through all of the human sciences might
be best resolved by lessons from anthropology’s methodologies, specifically
ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographers have to examine not only the balance of powers
in their written text, but are confronted with living “data” who merely with their presence
challenge the researcher to consider how just their behavior is at every phase of the
project. Marcus and Fischer put words to a trend that had long existed on the fringes of
canonical anthropology; as, Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon state:

> In an act of sanctioned ignorance, the category of new
> ethnography failed to take into account that throughout the
twentieth century women had crossed the border between
> anthropology and literature – but usually “illegally”, as
aliens who produced works that tended to be viewed in the profession as "confessional" and "popular" or, as in the words of Virginia Wolf, as "little notes." The *Writing Culture* agenda, conceived in homoerotic terms by male academics for other male academics, provided the official credentials, and the cachet, that women had lacked for crossing the border. Even the personal voice, undermined when used by women, was given the seal of approval in men’s ethnographic accounts, reclassified in more academically favorable terms as "reflexive" and "experimental." (4)

If you take what they say to heart, and its hard not to in the context of the work of non-professionally accepted anthropologists Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Cara Deloria and Katherine Dunham, then my unorthodox position as a not quite an anthropologist is not the worst legacy in which to follow.

From this project and from a one month house-sitting venture it occurred to me that because Detroit’s border with its suburbs was so fierce it would be inauthentic and impossible to attempt a detailed study of the city without taking up residence here. A few weeks after house-sitting and just before my second year in graduate school I moved and I started commuting. It’s made sense for me, in my ambiguous position as an ethnographer within an American Culture program, to have stayed “home,” choosing a U.S. context for my work. Actually the U.S. location came first and the methodology second. But though it may seem like my work would have a better fit in sociology, there is a call for this kind of work in anthropology, exemplified in Kamala Visweswaran’s *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*:

I have suggested that a feminist ethnography based on ‘fieldwork’ will not produce a substantially different (or ‘decolonized’) ethnography, but a feminist ethnography characterized by ‘homework’ might. Am I also saying that anthropologists, once they do their homework will have
‘nowhere to go’? Yes, but not entirely. Home once interrogated is a place we have never before been. This sense of ‘being at home’, I suggest, allows feminists and anthropologists alike to travel in radically new ways. For ‘indeed’ the countryside ‘at home’ has always held promise of dangerous journeys.” (Visweswaran, 113)

Maybe in Detroit more than in other cities, the residents are already living in Visweswaran’s “home once interrogated.” The particularities of the city – its struggles after losing half its population, its infamy as a black ruled city, the often ignorant hostility of its surrounding suburbs – make Detroiters constantly interrogate how they have come to the present (“this is history”) and how their present is located (“let’s give them a round of applause just for being here”).

As I entered into this world I realized I came to a place busy theorizing and intellectualizing itself and its relationship to outsiders. For that reason when I read John Langston Gwaltney’s Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America I found a model of American urban anthropology which allowed a long misrepresented community to speak for itself. Gwaltney interviewed African Americans in northeastern cities in the 1970s and let their words about themselves form the bulk of his book. His reasons for both his project and its format reaffirmed why it was important for me to allow the theory and method of my work to evolve from the community I wanted to work with:

[This book] stems from my long-held view that traditional Euro-America anthropology has generally failed to produce ethnographers who are capable of assessing black American culture in terms other than romantic, and from my belief in the theory-building and analytical capacities of my people. In other words, I share the opinion commonly held by natives of my community that we have traditionally been misrepresented by standard social science. (Gwaltney, xxii)
Calling his informants, “my people,” Gwaltney places himself squarely within the subjects of his study. He organizes the pieces into sections which along with his commentary guide the reader into the intellectualizing already happening in his community. His positioning of himself as a “native” of his community intervenes in the false belief of separation between Self and Other that anthropology was built on before the “new anthropology.”

Like Gwaltney, Katherine Dunham preempts critiques that would caution against becoming too involved (“going native”) because one would no longer be capable of scientific study. Dunham became an initiate into vodou and explained: “For a thorough scientific field study, no one single trait may be removed from its cultural matrix. To know the dances of Haiti, the life surrounding the dances must be known, and the focus of this life is the *vodun*” (Dunham, *Dances*, 5). Fellow student St. Clair Drake said of Dunham

...instead of getting caught up in the Ph.D. processing machine, she went on to a creative career in which anthropological training was applied in another sphere, that of the stage... Her entire career might be considered an exercise in applied anthropology, using the widest possible interpretation of the field (Drake in Aschenbrenner, xiii)

Though toting letters of recommendation from Melville Heskovits to both Jamaica and Haiti, her trips to those countries as well as West Africa eventually led her out of anthropology and to an influential career in dance, creating the Dunham Method, a well respected dance method which uses isolated movements as well as cultural contextualization to teach Americans African Diaspora dance. Though I came to her ethnographic texts only after taking beginning steps to learn her dance method, I find her
embeddedness in the communities she studied a great methodological influence for my work in Detroit. Unlike Dunham and Gwaltney, I do not share the same racial background with the people of my field and cannot be said to be conducting “native ethnography;” however, like Dunham I have been able to become a part of my field through dance. The many nights I’ve spent on the dancefloor helped integrate me into the Detroit electronic music community and helped demonstrate to the members of my field that the music is an integral part of my life.

Gwaltney’s first epigraph, a quote from one of his interviewees Othman Sullivan, “I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger,” found its way to the beginning of Robin Kelley’s chapter “Looking for the ‘Real’ Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto,” in his book Yo Mama’s Dysfunctional. Though a historian, Kelley’s undertaking in this work is similar to Gwaltney’s in that he essays to describe the complexity of black urban culture while critiquing the ways in which scholars and policymakers have approached urban studies:

In some respects, the title represents what I imagine the very subjects/objects of reactionary social science and public policy might say if they could speak back to the critics and analysis. Charles Murray, Dinesh D’Souza, even William Julius Wilson would find themselves in a position to have to defend their own mamas and their own behavior, not to mention their research. (Kelley, Yo’ Mama’s... 3)

He contends that the problems facing all of Americans can only be solved with an attention to serious analysis and complexity. Kelley extends his critique to right ideologues as well as well meaning liberal social scientists. Within a few months of my relocation to Detroit, I had been lucky enough to be chastised by my friend for saying
that I was much happier after leaving Ann Arbor because Southwest Detroit was more “real.” He pointed out that I was romanticizing my working class neighborhood. It was unfortunate for the well meaning ethnographers that Kelley takes to task for searching out “authentic Negro culture” that no one spoke with them this frankly. That warning, along with my continued residence in Southwest Detroit, changed my perspective from its starting point still clear in the language of my statement of purpose in the seminar paper excerpt: “The interest that brought me here is the expressive artistic practices of Detroiters and how these have facilitated economic and cultural survival in the particular condition of Detroit.” A few months later, in a practice project proposal, that statement of purpose included “survival and thrival” as my main interest which has now boiled down to simply what the city has meant to Detroiters. I am grateful to my field for my changing perspective or I may have found my work to be continuing the tradition critiqued by Kelley: “…when social scientists explore ‘expressive’ cultural forms or what has been called ‘popular culture’ (such as language, music, and style), most reduce it to expressions of pathology, compensatory behavior, or creative ‘coping mechanisms’ to deal with racism and poverty” (17).

I have been reminded many times during my fieldwork here that the cultural practices that interest me are about pleasure, aesthetic experience, and having a good time. I have also been reminded that though these artistic endeavors cannot be separated from the political, geographical, and cultural circumstances of their creation they are never simply “coping mechanisms.” It is precisely this reason that as my project rolled along, anthropology’s ethnography appealed more strongly to me than sociology’s. It seems to me that urban ethnography, as applied by sociologists, was too often structured
around finding the answer to a problem (single motherhood, drug use, crime, or other reputedly "urban" problems). Ethnography as practiced by cultural anthropologists, at its best, was built on long periods of residence. Though they also enter with a problem of study in mind, it is often in the finished writing that you read that that original focus changed over the course of the work. Anthropology has a probably longer legacy of shame than sociology in its treatment of informants as disappearing native "data," all the while imposing Western categories and frames of study on "primitive peoples." Rather than try to disassociate myself from the legacy of shame, I take my cue from the restructurers of ethnographic writing who resurrect that shame in order to consciously and constantly challenge what they are doing and how they have the right to do it. It leads me to believe that all academic work is fraught with ethical dilemmas and dependent on moral choices; lucky the ethnographer who is never allowed to let that thought slip to the back of her mind.

**Decay**

It is an exceptional book on Detroit that can tell any part of its recent history without constructing the city itself as the embodiment of decay. Heather Thompson’s *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* is a particularly interesting example of this kind of exception because she is explicit about her concerns for how interpretations of the recent past are constructed as commentary on Detroit’s

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4 As Mary Louis Pratt points out Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, became a “successful recent experiment in rehumanizing ethnographic writing” only after Shostak came to terms with the fact that her informants were well experienced at the process of fieldwork and therefore settled down to work with Nisa, whose life story structures the book.
present in ways that encourage the city's notoriety. Thompson focuses on coalitions of black middle and working class Detroiters, white progressives, labor and student activists to talk about what was here in Detroit, rather than what was left behind. She says that

...While urban blacks were too often victimized by racist whites, they of course fought back. Indeed, the determined efforts of urban blacks to achieve greater racial equality, political representation, and economic opportunity from 1945 onward, in combination with the effective activism of urban whites sympathetic to civil rights and hostile to political conservatism, suggests that when white racial conservatives eventually abandoned inner cities, they did so as losers - not victors- of the intense war for urban control that had raged since World War II. (Thompson 5)

Interested in the efforts of the urbanites upon which she focuses to build an urban center on “self-consciously liberal lines,” she presents their project as having an agency unto itself rather than it being simply a reaction to conservatives who abandoned the city (Thompson 6). Her work is very well researched; as she is taking issue with oversimplicity of both cities’ and labor’s narratives in recent history, the story she tells weaves back and forth from the shop floor to city council meetings. It is an indispensable addition to Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin’s Detroit: I do mind dying, which chronicles the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, radical Detroit autoworkers who applied a Marxian analysis to black workers’ conditions. Thompson calls Detroit: I do mind dying a “treasure” that inspired her own plans for graduate work. She intervenes against a growing body of literature that assumes inevitable decline, which would speak only from the perspective of the white conservatives who left the city behind, and wants

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5 Thompson’s book adds to a great body of academic work on Detroit including texts by Steve Babson, Grace Lee Boggs, Dominic Capeci, Joe Darden, Suzanne Smith, June Manning Thomas, Zaragosa Vargas, and the authors that I will soon turn to in this section. I single her out because her attention to the past is heavily matched by her concern with representations of the city in the present.
to emphasize determination, which best describes, independent of outcome, the position
of urban residents. Thompson’s analysis of Detroit reframes the way in which we as
scholars should be talking about our urban questions: “By taking more seriously the
possibilities embedded in postwar urban turmoil, we find that determination – not decline
or decay- best characterizes our nation’s cities” (8).

Whose Detroit? adds a layer of complexity to the literature on Detroit with its
attention to a history too often hidden behind assumptions of loss and decay.
Thompson’s points are born out in the contemporary stories of John Hartigan Jr.’s
ethnography of white Detroiter in which he shows that simplistic static ideas about race
and racial attitudes belie the complexity of the particularities of place. He studied a
concentration of working class whites in a neighborhood in Detroit. Part of his work
compared the racial attitudes of the residents of a predominantly white middle class
neighborhood in Detroit to his main area of study and found working class whites had
more charged racial encounters more often making it impossible for them to elide racism
in ways that the middle class whites did. Hartigan finds in his chapter entitled “Eluding
the R-Word,” that for middle class whites living as a “minority” in a majority black city,
“their class position – however heterogeneous, unstable, and distended – served as an
entitlement to suspend an interrogation of racial matters in their most intimate spaces and
lives” (Hartigan 207-8). Hartigan found that though racial identities are heterogeneous,
the sites that he looked at, Briggs, Corktown, and Warrendale, were inhabited by whites
marked, respectively, as “hillbilly,” “gentrifier,” and “racist” based on the current
struggles of each place. In my own work, I find myself intrigued by the growing ranks

6 Briggs is a working class neighborhood marked by higher levels of poverty. Corktown houses many
preservationists of middle class background battling less aesthetically motivated neighbors for putting
of the second category. Since I've lived here, their numbers are growing, though not specific to Corktown; some are moving in not despite their perceived ideas of "decay" but because of them. We will hear testimony from some in the next section of this work.

The interplay of inter-racial complexity that Hartigan describes for the Briggs neighborhood would be a hard outcome to imagine from Thomas Sugrue's spatial and economic arguments in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Thompson's call to refocus the characterization of U.S. cities is a tall order in light of the way in which Sugrue frames his argument in the most acclaimed recent book on Detroit. The use of pronouns in his title clued me in to his perspective. For Sugrue, Detroit is *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (emphasis added). Sugrue astutely locates the origins of the problems that cities face today in the economic and spatial inequality of the 1940s and 1950s, rather than the racial uprisings of the 1960s. He defends his emphasis on economic and spatial structures by claiming that "economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices. They set the limits of human agency" (Sugrue 5). The problem is that the limits, in his work, are set for black actors only. We see many instances of white agency - - whites choosing to leave Detroit, whites setting up paramilitary defenses of their blocks, whites attacking black families that cross those blockades and buy houses in, what would quickly become, the "wrong neighborhood." Black agency in his book is, however, almost completely constrained. Black agency is reserved for Sugrue's mention of what is to come in the 1960's. I know that historians are constrained by what they find in the archives, but I have a hard time believing that siding on their homes. Warrendale found its residents in a battle over a new school to be named the Malcolm X Academy.

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7 *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* won the 1998 Bancroft Prize in American History and Diplomacy, the Social Science History Association's 1996 President's Book Award, and the Urban History Association's Best Book Award in North American Urban History for Books Published in 1996.
there were no oral history projects, no papers collected by black organizations, no testimony in court that speak of black sentiment, strategies for resistance, and failed or successful attempts at breaking the limits on their actions in the 1940s and 1950s. The last few pages of his conclusion are like a tally sheet of Detroit's current woes. Sugrue needs Detroit to be a disaster in order for his thesis to make sense. After coming close to wiping out all hope, in the last paragraph he throws Detroiter a rhetorical bone by saying "What hope remains in the city comes from the continued efforts of city residents to resist the debilitating effects of poverty, racial tension, and industrial decline" (Sugrue 271).

Sugrue reduces Detroit to a symbol of decay for at least a valuable intervention into the "underclass debate" which he says is missing the perspective of history (5). The recent work on Detroit which most thoroughly reduces the city to a symbol of decay has no such valuable goal that I've been able to uncover. Jerry Herron's *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* depicts Detroit as a non-place after a failed attempt at living without history. He could possibly fit in Hartigan's description of middle class whites in Detroit because the whole framing of his book elides "racism" while disregarding Detroit's black inhabitants. A glaring example of his dismissal is his refusal to believe in Detroit's existence: "Detroit – more than any other spot in this country – has been so thoroughly humiliated by history, so emptied of content, both material and human, that used to make this place mean, that it becomes questionable whether the city still exists at all in any practical sense" (Herron 14). His essays on

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8 Elaine Latzman Moon's collection *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967* might have helped fill this absence.
Detroit pose the city as nothing more than a symbol for middle class failure. In response to Ze'ev Chafets' titling Detroit “America’s first Third World City,” Herron complains,

But this is a Third World City that we – not they – made. Its degradation, therefore, humiliates not only the physical remains “we” left behind, but it also implicates the cultural pretensions on which “our” superiority and insight are founded. This may be why Detroit presents so frightful, yet irresistible, a challenge. The perpetual othering of this place – the consigning of its too familiar terrors to another world – makes it possible not only to evade responsibility for our own worst fears, but also, perhaps more crucially, it preserves for us the belief that our culture does not carry within it those seeds of death, which are come to such terrible fruition here. (Herron 26-27)

Herron’s “we” and “our” refer only to the white middle class who left Detroit. Herron is unable to look around himself and see a city that exists as more than just a symbol for middle class failure. Through his journeys around town, on the bus, on the street, in restaurants and downtown developments Herron repeatedly finds a text, rather than an actual city, which represents violence, emptiness, and decline most sharply into the faces of white suburbanites who suffer nostalgia and sadness at the impossibility of their memories.

In a sense then, the people who can remember the old Detroit are justified in their aversion to looking at (much less visiting) the “new” one because the more they look, the less there seems here to see, as the city comes to stand for nothing so much as its own emptiness and vulnerability. (Herron 131)

I could go on; he is full of this theme of emptiness and nothingness, valuable memories lost and defaced without wondering about the possibility that there are memories that may still hold value. Before I return to the narrative I began, about a group creating a collective memory of a shared history within Detroit that is incredibly meaningful, I want to detour through some representations of a Detroit as devoid of meaning as Herron’s.
Romancing Decay

951,270 people live in Detroit according to the 2000 Census. It is a majority minority city, in that 89.5 percent of its residents are not white. 81.2 percent of Detroit residents are African American. The suburbs circling the city – misleadingly called “Metro Detroit,” since in local usage it means everything but Detroit – are made up of 87 percent white residents. Those figures earn the Detroit area the dubious distinction of being the most residually segregated of all of the nation’s 331 metropolitan areas and tie the conceptions of Detroit with racialized perceptions of African Americans, and other minorities. The experienced reality of this phenomenon is as stark as the numbers suggest. The borders between Detroit and its suburbs are tangible, fierce, and often as physical as they are symbolic, especially 8 Mile Road – popularized but not examined in Eminem’s feature film. For instance, if you drive out Jefferson Avenue, a major eastern artery, you can see an actual line where the crumbling asphalt and deteriorating buildings of Detroit give way to the manicured, well-maintained streets and upper middle class homes of majority white Grosse Pointe Park. One Detroiter noted that Grosse Pointe has no gas stations, no fast food restaurants, and no on-street parking. Driving through Grosse Pointe, I have also noticed the absence of conveniences for those passing through, as well as signs that restrict access to the parks to only Grosse Pointe residents. These measures convey hostility to outsiders, made more direct in the text of city signage.

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9 The Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research calculated the Detroit Metropolitan area’s dissimilarity index between blacks and whites to be 85, based on the 2000 Census data. This ranks the Detroit area as the most segregated of all 331 of the nation’s metropolitan areas. [http://mumford1.dynadns.org/cen2000/WholePop/WPsort/sort_d1.html](http://mumford1.dynadns.org/cen2000/WholePop/WPsort/sort_d1.html)

10 In 1986, the government of Grosse Pointe tried to build a floodwall on its border with Detroit. Detroiter protested because they felt it was an even more tangible way to keep them out. Campbell, Bob. “Suburb Proposes Dike along Detroit Border.” Detroit Free Press, Sep. 26, 1986.
Continuing the drive out Jefferson to where the street opens up to the western shore of Lake St. Clair, you’ll see huge homes on your left, and signs every few dozen feet that interrupt the view on your right with the words: “No Fishing Swimming Picnicking; No Stopping Standing Parking.”

Grosse Pointe currently defends its perimeter in indirect, publicly restrictive ways. In the 1950s, the tactics were more direct; real estate agents and sellers had to be barred by state officials from using a point system that restricted potential homebuyers who were not white by using a rating system that included categories like accent and swarthiness.11 Other suburban tactics have been both direct and overt. Dearborn residents kept Mayor Orville Hubbard, an outspoken segregationist, in office until 1978. In 1970, the residents of Warren voted to reject federal urban renewal grants that would have required the city to promote integrated housing.12 Warren and other suburbs, like Hazel Park, that share 8 Mile Road with Detroit, received casual help defending their perimeters from school children: I’ve heard stories from Detroiters of my generation who remember white youngsters throwing pop bottles at them while they were riding their bikes across 8 Mile. Fear of Detroiters, as well as fear of coming into Detroit, remains a widely acceptable rhetoric in the suburban communities.

Nine out of ten suburban commuters travel from their home to another suburb, rather than into the city of Detroit.13 This statistic paints a picture of disconnected suburbs, orbiting around something that used to be a center but now holds little for the

13 74% of employment commuting in the Detroit metropolitan area is suburb to suburb. Only 8% of Detroit area commuting is from the suburbs to Detroit. The rest of the area’s commutes are equally split between Detroiters who commute to the suburbs, and Detroiters who commute within the city. Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies.
community that has no real ties, apart from nostalgia, to the city. Ex-Detroiters have
found a place and a person to whom they can vent their feelings of absence. Lowell
Boileau’s web/art site “The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit” gives surfers a virtual tour of the
city showcasing empty buildings, empty lots, abandoned structures, and neglected tourist
sites. The site is extensive. Before we start the tour of Detroit, Boileau invites us to look
at photos he has taken of ancient ruins, to make a case for Detroit to be included in this
list. He has photographs of abandoned factories, the mammoth and crumbling train
station, as well as a disturbingly titled section, “The Cave Paintings of Detroit,” which is
a gallery of graffiti pieces. Each image has a short commentary, like the one that
accompanies the opening image of the graffiti section, “[y]ou do not need to tour the
ruins of Detroit long before you will be first amused and then amazed at huge and
accomplished paintings that appear in the loneliest and most forbidding conditions”
(Boileau).

Though I am disconcerted by his commentary, I remain untouched by Boileau’s
photography; maybe because I’m not afraid to be in Detroit and so I don’t need his
images to be a cybersubstitute for an inhabitance I’m not trying to avoid. I am
fascinated, however, by the “Fabulous Letters to the Author,” as he calls them, that he
receives and chooses to display. In fact, the letters begin with a letter he has written to
us.

Among the thousands of letters I have gratefully received in response to
this site, the following have been especially outstanding for their
writing, perception and or passion. I have chosen to share these
because they elucidate many of the issues of this site and help me
reflect on what I am doing. My thanks goes to all who have written and
a special thanks to the following writers who I have quoted.

Sincerely,
Lowell Boileau

Because Boileau has selected specific letters for me to look at, he has become my co-ethnographer. His choices resonate with his representation of the city through nostalgia for a racially exclusive past.

The letter that has had the strongest effect on me is this one from an ex-Detroiter exile in Evansville, Indiana:

Being nosy on the ‘net one mourning I found my childhood detailed on the screen. I had forgotten that a part of me always were proud to say I am from Detroit. It was easy, you marry, have kids a life but, there is a part of you (a rowdy part of you) that wants what he saw as a kid on a Saturday mourning with his mother downtown that he knows his children will never see, the details of a city your wife will never understand because her view comes from a memory that fades from sadness. But there it was, just like I said it was, all laid out very well. I took my wife on a tour of me, the true me. There was a gladness of showing her that despite it’s faults this is my home, this site brought back scenes of heartbreak and triumph. You did a damn good job.

I’m drawn to the phrase “It was easy, you marry, you have kids a life” juxtaposed by the word “but” to the phrase “there is a part of you (a rowdy part of you) that wants what he saw as a kid on a Saturday mourning with his mother downtown.” Though the writer’s Detroit experience of going downtown with his mother is within the bounds of familial relationships, the “easy” family choice he has made for himself makes it impossible for his children to have that same experience. His use of the word “easy” makes me believe that he sees his life in Indiana as inevitable. He has chosen not to stretch the normal and socially acceptable ways to raise a family. His letter leaves Detroit as a place where no one would consider raising children. He won’t even take his family there but instead uses Boileau’s virtual tour to educate his wife to what he calls “the true me.” He claims Detroit as “my home,” but I’m afraid he has confused “The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit”
for the real thing; it is the site that "brought back scenes of heartbreak and triumph," rather than a physical return trip here.

The desire to re-claim Detroit as one's hometown is represented in a few of the letters from ex-Detroiters and even in this one from a woman who has never lived in Detroit.

I am passionate preservationist. I am also the daughter of parents native to Detroit. And I am heartbroken by these images.

Many of the buildings commemorated by your site are those I heard my parents mention throughout my childhood; they met at U of D & dated at many now lost downtown haunts. One of them attended St. Stanislaus school and my mom and grandmother both worked for Hudson's, my mom then moving on to GM. One of my grandfathers worked for Ford, the other for Chrysler.

While I seldom visited (I grew up in San Diego, where my parents moved after marrying), downtown Detroit was my vicarious hometown through my parents stories. Here I am, with the urge to restore and preserve flowing through the blood in my veins, and the only major US city to which I am linked has rotted away fully. The blight your photos convey is beyond comprehension.

My husband forwarded your page to me and to my mother. When I called her today, she was weeping. And I was weeping for her, and so much lost grandeur, grace, and vision.

Thank you for the service you've provided by compiling this site so lovingly. In my visions of Detroit, I'll imagine a group of us who love the city and its architecture having coffee on one of those apartment balconies on Mackinaw Avenue.

Detroit is her "vicarious hometown." She confesses to preservationist fervor "flowing through the blood in my veins" but I wonder what she will come here to preserve if from Boileau's site she has learned that "the only major US city to which I am linked has rotted away fully."

The writers, steeped in a nostalgia for a racist past, need Detroit to be a disaster in order for their exile stories to make sense. Detroit must be counterposed to a normal
family existence. It must represent a deep nostalgia and fadingly sad memory. It must be, as it is for Herron, what another writer of a “Fabulous” letter claims, “A snapshot of the essential vacuity of contemporary North American commercial culture.” Detroit’s first black Mayor, Coleman Young put his finger on this perspective, taken to its most antagonistic level:

To this day, I believe, there are suburbanites who like to think of their old city in either of two ways – the way it used to be, or on fire. This suburban antipathy toward Detroit is not imagined, and, contrary to popular belief, it has not been promulgated primarily and spitefully by me. It has been fostered by anxieties accompanying a large neighbor city where upwards of eighty percent of the residents are black, including the outspoken mayor; by the resentment of what is perceived as a foreign occupation of one’s homeland; by the same sort of factionalism and provincial racism that has embattled the Middle East and Eastern Europe and South Africa. (Young 284)

Mayor Young penned the above comment before the new incarnation of this attitude. The suburbanites of whom he speaks have had children who now live in or come into Detroit and still need it to be on fire. They like to sell outsiders an image of Detroit as “hard” and “dangerous.” A purported “Detroit Techno” artist (though he is from and continues to reside in the suburbs), BMG of Ectomorph (AKA Brendan M. Gillen), was a featured lecturer at the 2002 Red Bull Music Academy, an annual electronic music conference. The excerpts from his talk posted on the Music Academy website claim he “explains the source of energy found in Detroit music and Detroit people.” His stunning commentary includes comments that Detroit is a “barren city,” with a “Blade Runner feel,” and (my favorite) it is a “big decaying, totally empty city where people are loners” (Gillen). Maybe Gillen began to realize that his audience was there because they love Detroit; his “loners” become “…creative people who want to see
a better place. So they create this fantasy world. I think Techno is largely based on fantasy representations of yourself. Everybody has some kind of fake name. It’s all these different ways of projecting yourself outside of where you are” (Gillen).

Though I think Gillen is way off about Techno’s fantasy worlds, in that the Detroit Techno artists I respect are deeply engaged with the reality of where they are, he may have inadvertently hit a nerve about the fantasy world of Eminem’s semi-autobiographical movie *8 Mile*. *8 Mile*’s Detroit is indeed a “barren city,” with a “Blade Runner feel,” in which the fantasies of white suburban boys around the country can be fulfilled when they watch their hero conquer an “urban jungle” and come out ahead. I wouldn’t be surprised if many of Eminem’s fans already imagine “the city,” specifically the black “inner city,” to look exactly like *8 Mile*’s barren, violent landscape. *8 Mile* uses residential segregation, the most glaring yet most ignored racism we hold on to, as merely backdrop while touting the arguably most powerful local symbol for it, 8 Mile road, as title. The clearest description of 8 Mile road comes off camera in Eminem’s title track contribution to the soundtrack for the film, spoken in the voice of his character, Rabbit:

> You gotta live it to feel it, you didn't you wouldn't get it
> Or see what the big deal is, why it was and it still is
> To be walkin this borderline of Detroit city limits
> It's different, it's a certain significance, a certificate of authenticity, you'd never even see
> But it's everything to me, it's my credibility
> (Eminem)

Why and how does 8 mile, “this borderline of Detroit city limits,” become Rabbit’s “certificate of authenticity?” The point of the film seems to be that Rabbit, though white, gains what he calls in the song “my credibility” by being poor enough with the proper

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14 Fulfiling Mayor Young’s suspicion, Eminem’s character, along with his friends, actually lights a building on fire.
disastrous family background to qualify for a class-based identification with the black Detroit hip hop community. Is it really wise at this time to be using class as a passport to cross a taut racial borderline? Rabbit may be right to claim his “certificate of authenticity” is something “you’d never even see” because the border, 8 Mile, is still a place more easily crossed and/or dismissed by people of his phenotype. What I would have been interested to see, what would have satisfied my hopeful anticipation of the film, might have been a few hints as to how difficult it would have been for his black counterparts to cross the other way. The only evidence we get of that struggle for a black character is just the endpoint of a slam that Rabbit gives a battling MC for having attended Cranbrook, a posh private high school in the Detroit suburb, Bloomfield Hills. Class eventually erases the audiences’ ability (both audiences, the one at the hip hop event inside of the film and the one outside watching it) to foreground race when Rabbit beats out his final foe, a black character who attended an upper middle class institution.

The overwhelmingly positive reviews of 8 Mile restarted the national news rhetoric of Detroit as decay and disaster. In the National Review Online, Henry Payne, a Detroit News cartoonist, calls 8 Mile “…a brave, un-PC, and brutally honest portrayal of America's most infamous urban nightmare, Detroit.” Owen Gleiberman of Entertainment Weekly calls Detroit “that gray zone of urban despair.” J. Hoberman of the Village Voice applauds director Curtis Hanson’s success in “…squeezing a bit of grit from the urban disaster zone of his Detroit locations.” For some reason it became, and still is, OK to let Detroit stand in for all that is bad about urban America. Most notable of these comments and the one that stirred up the biggest response in the local media was the comment of Frank Rich in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. In the same publication, ten years
earlier, Ze'ev Chafets' article led to Detroit's notorious title "the first major Third World city in the United States." Following in his well-traveled footsteps, Rich described Eminem as "...ascended from America's closest approximation of hell (aka his hometown, Detroit)."

Local media are not immune to this kind of dismissal of Detroit. Like Boileau's letter writers some Metro Detroit journalists actually romance the perceived emptiness and decay of local places. Unlike the majority of the letter writers who from afar see The Fabulous Ruins' "Detroit" through their lenses of nostalgia and lost memories, this columnist actually comes to Detroit and like Herron sees it as symbol rather than reality. Cavalier in the extreme to the neighborhood she describes, she takes "urban slumming" pleasure in the poverty of others:

I SHOULD BE SHOT: Hey... HEY! Let's not be so quick to agree! What I'm talking [sic] here is my former total lack of judgment when it has come to attending shows as The Gold Dollar in Detroit's delightfully seedy Cass Corridor. But no more! I've seen the light. Hallelujah! My redeeming grace was Car City Classics and WDET guy Willy Wilson's insistence over lunch at The Majestic Café that I look at GD's upcoming schedule... Botanica was like every band I ever loved in the old days of punk and were perfect foils for the Gold Dollar, a rough-cut gem in Detroit's gritty underbelly... Eternal thanks to Willy and GD's Neil Yee for relentlessly plugging this ghetto goldmine whenever they see me out and about. (Love, 11) [Boldface in original... the column is an oxymoronic hipster's society pages. Italics added for emphasis]

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15 Chafets' book from which the New York Times Sunday Magazine article was excerpted, has certainly contributed to the "decay" literature on Detroit however because his methodology is so questionable I'd rather consider him as one of the "pop" resources on Detroit like Eminem or the White Stripes, rather than as part of the academic literature that I reviewed. He says of his own work: "During the course of my stay in Detroit, I interviewed hundreds of people. In most cases it was impractical to use a tape recorder. I took notes or, on some occasions, reconstructed conversations from memory. Thus, the quotes in this book are not, for the most part, stenographic reproductions; some have been edited for length, others are close approximations. In every case, however, they are accurate reflections of what people actually said" (ix).
Unfortunately, the international success of some musicians from the very scene the columnist promotes have brought this kind of rhetoric out of the misnamed *Real Detroit Weekly* and into the pages of the national and international music press. For example, an interview with Jack White in the *Seattle Weekly* demonstrates that he takes pride in the perception of his city:

No matter what the end result of the rumor mongering, the White Stripes will at least have one shield left in their arsenal of privacy--the good old Motor City. The liner notes to the recent compilation of local bands, The Sympathetic Sounds of Detroit (recorded and produced in Jack's attic), explain that "no suit from L.A. or New York is going to fly to Detroit to check out a band and hand out business cards." Considering how many excellent bands now reside there (check out the new Dirtbombs record!), it's shocking that a feeding frenzy hasn't yet set in. The idea that Detroit is a burned-out ghetto war zone, though, keeps the interlopers away, allowing the area's bands to grow and support each other in relative peace. "I hope the perception about Detroit stays the same," says Jack. "Same thing goes for the people from the suburbs here who are afraid to come into the city. I hope they all stay out. I hate those people anyway." (Fontana)

In this piece, and specifically in Jack White's comments, we can hear echoes of the social science approaches that Robin Kelley described.

The White Stripes' perpetuation of the idea of Detroit as absence within exclamatory comments in their liner notes and to the press is an extension of the ideas they perform in their music. In the lyrics to *Hotel Yorba* named after a building housing low-income residents three blocks from my Southwest Detroit apartment the chorus says

Well its 1 2 3 4
take the elevator
at the hotel yorba
I'll be glad to see you later
all they got inside is vacancy

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The Hotel Yorba is actually quite full, meaning that one of the last things “they got inside is vacancy.” White’s hope that “the perception about Detroit stays the same,” would assist his continued popularity; however, the consequences, were he to get his wish, would come down hardest on residents like those at the Hotel Yorba, the ones he doesn’t believe exist.

Linking Herron’s perspective to this current trend of representations may not have been fair because, despite my dislike of his work, I do understand that it is an attitude like Jack White’s that he means to be tongue-in-cheek critiquing. It’s unfortunate that in order to make his point he felt like he had to reduce Detroit to emptiness. The danger of his work is that just I have purposefully misread him in order to critique him, it seems a strange collection of white Metro Detroit artists, journalists, exiles and most frighteningly post suburban returnees have taken what works as satire in his book as an example to follow and perpetuate. They take literally his literary strategy of emptying Detroit, in order to further their careers, have titillating urban experiences, or bemoan a lifestyle left behind with little to no respect for the inhabitants of a place they disregard as symbol.16

Mapping Connections

16 Caroline Ware’s Greenwich Village 1920-1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post War Years (Boston, 1935) shows an early case study of a clash between long term residents and new comers attracted by “the negation of neighborliness.”
I have mapped how the disavowal of Detroit goes from the academic literature, to the local pop scene, to the national press. I would now like to map how its best unmaking lays in the real spaces of Detroit, the real places that hold meaning and memories as well as people, music, and art. I relied on Dan Sicko’s *Techno Rebels* for information for the preface of this dissertation because it is the very best place to start for a description of Detroit’s electronic music scene. Sicko, a music journalist, carefully researched the roots of techno in Detroit with oral histories, newspaper accounts, as well as his own longtime participation in order to provide the context for today’s electronic music industry. Sicko introduces the necessity of his work by explaining how sparse American media attention has been to techno and how for the longest part of its history it was less accessible to U.S. audiences than to those abroad. He attributes this partially to the media’s interest in rock star back-story and perpetual quest for the new. His work serves to undermine the misconception that techno is solely a European phenomena. His narrative adds compelling stories of connections throughout some of the time periods that are the most notoriously difficult for Detroit. Building on oral histories, he tells the story of how high school students formed clubs to promote parties and new, fresh kinds of music. Sicko is by far the best resource to start to understand this phenomenon. He explains how the music was tied in to the social clubs, local radio shows, Motown, funk, Eurodisco, and Detroit’s working class aesthetic. Peter Hall’s chapter on Detroit in the subsection “The City as Innovative Milieu” of *Cities in Civilization* gives a good description of why Detroit would be the cradle of mass production. This part of Detroit that influences the sound of techno is not lost on Sicko, nor the artists about whom he writes.
The participants of the past scene have a place and a person, like the ex-Detroiter have the *Fabulous Ruins of Detroit* and Boileau, in which to construct their collective memory. The history Sicko delves into was being actively collected on the Detroit Public Schools Radio Station by host Theresa Hill. Up until her show ended in 2004, she would host a local DJ and plays his or her mix during the hour segment. Her show served as an introduction to contemporary listeners as well as a place for past members to relive their experiences. She regularly suggested a call-in theme asking the callers to answer questions such as, “who was the first DJ you ever head spinning house music,” or “back in the day who were the friends you called to go out to the club?” The callers responded with answers to these questions as well as other memories. One show was co-hosted by State Senator Buzz Thomas III and State Representative Bill McConico who along with the callers responded to the question where did you first hear house music? Answers ranged from clubs, to backyard barbecues, and house parties. Describing a theme echoed by many callers, Thomas and McConico admitted to rearranging their schedules in Lansing in order to be back in listening range of 90.9 on Thursday afternoons. State Senator Thomas and State Representative McConico were both on the host committee for Ignition 2003, the opening celebration of the Detroit Historical Museum’s current exhibit, “Techno: Detroit’s Gift to the World.” Along with the Detroit Electronic Music Festival, the exhibit demonstrated that the city had finally woken up to one of its largest recent exports, electronic music. Hill often publicly announced that her show was an effort to bring local recognition to an art form that is respected worldwide.

On January 18th Hill’s guest was Jeff Mills, known to most of her listeners as The Wizard for the time when his radio show, alongside the Electrifying Mojo’s show,
exposed Detroiter to all kinds of new music and styles. Mills has experienced Detroit techno on the radio, as a locally performing DJ, and now as a DJ who plays almost every weekend in a different country. The interchange between Hill and Mills speaks to the struggle that Detroit artists have had gaining listeners at home. After Mills responded to a question of Hill’s by detailing the places around the world that Detroit Techno has exploded, including Sao Paolo, Melbourne, and Berlin, the conversation came back to the ways in which these artists are better known abroad than at home despite the major influence Detroit has had on the dance music industry:

Theresa Hill: But it just seems to me, that
Detroit...knowing that the music was birthed here... it just seems like it had to go away and come back to get the recognition that it so rightfully deserves. And that just always bothers me, with the techno, with the house, all of it because it was underground for so long and now it's really coming to the forefront. And I'm like, "Y'all are late!"
Jeff Mills: Yeah, I mean, in the early 90s it really took off, it really exploded outside of the country and if you think of dance music today the basic structure actually comes from what was happening here in Detroit at that time. And still the best DJs come from America, and from this city.
TH: That's right.
JM: And there are 20 plus master DJs from Detroit that travel all around the world. On any given weekend, you can go somewhere in Europe and see, you know, Juan Atkins or Eddie Fowlkes or Rolando. Many, many, many DJs are always constantly traveling.

Mike Clark's extended comment from which I culled the excerpt for the

International DJ article points to the fact that locally based musicians are also well aware that hometown recognition has been a long time coming:

The 20/20... it was very satisfying. It didn’t really feel like it was an “about time” award but it felt good 'cause, for everything that we’ve done... you know, we’ve been doing it without asking for appreciation but just you know a
certain amount of respect. Because we worked hard to do what we did. For the longest, from the rest of the world we were able to gain the respect from different avenue where, in our own home, the type of respect that we got, we didn’t think we’d really ever have but with the 20/20 award it kind of showed us that it do go noticed. And it was overwhelming to know that in our own lifetime we were appreciated from our own people, and it was acknowledged.

My plan is to add a piece to this community history that will ensure that those 20 plus years of work do not go unnoticed. I hope these collective memory connections will map a space to understand the city in a way that undermines the constancy of the tropes of absence, violence, vacancy and decay. What I plan to offer, in the rest of this work generally, and in the next section’s description of a night out, is a map to a Detroit that exists in a very real and meaningful sense.

“Being Inside”

“Being here,” the commitment to Detroit voiced by Cornelius in the first section of this chapter has a harmonizing phrase of commitment within my research methodology, “being inside.” “Being inside,” though it is a common ethnographic goal, became important specifically to my project in three ways: first, I was able to better understand from the inside the ways in which the popular misconceptions of Detroit affect life in Detroit; second, being inside was the only way to recognize that in the same way that community contributions in Detroit were often disregarded because of the
reputation of Detroit, the electronic music scene in Detroit is built on the day-to-day work and participation of individuals that are not recognized for their contributions, a group I call the unsung heroes; third, my passion for Detroit’s realities and potentials lead me to care for the city on a more than professional level and I intend to make this city not merely the location of my graduate fieldwork but my eventual relocation as home. The state of “being inside,” within fieldwork, is peppered with constant reminders that the position is tenuous, more so than in non-research related social relationships. Fieldwork requires the researcher to simultaneously work to develop close ties, while attempting a critical distance with which to examine the subject of study. At the same time we become subjects of our own investigation, and we question our own intentions, our methods, and our relationships within our field of research.

It was some time after 5 AM early Sunday morning when a friend of mine inadvertently reminded me that the feeling of “being inside” could be revoked at any moment, by turning towards me and announcing, “this is no place for a graduate student.” I was surprised, particularly since it had been such a great, relaxing night, at the abruptness of her remark. It was October 2, 2004 at a nice fall party that followed a relatively slow summer for the electronic music scene in Detroit. Despite my initial reluctance to leave the house, I went out that night because I realized that the event had the potential to be the kind of night that, in the end, I would appreciate getting past the strong urge to stay home and go to bed. When I arrived at the location I knew that I had been correct. It was one of my favorite spaces in Detroit for a party: a warehouse space in Detroit’s Eastern Market that had been converted into an art gallery. I usually park near Bert’s, a local jazz institution that also hosts music late into the night. The art
gallery has entrances both on its street front, as well as in its back alley and sometimes I have a hard time remembering which entrance the owner is favoring. That night it was the alley entrance, where patrons walk down a dimly lit, long corridor to a small table set up to collect the cover charge of the night. Though tickets had been available presale for a discounted price, and though I knew the individual collecting cover, I didn’t attempt to use my acquaintance to pay less than the asking price of $20 because I knew the proceeds from the event would benefit a charitable organization called the Laura Ani Gavoor Dance Fund, which sponsors dance classes and equipment for teenage girls. After paying the cover, greeting the acquaintance working the door warmly, and noting the relief in his face that I didn’t try to get in for less, I turned the corner to enter the main room and was reminded of why I always love dancing in this place.

The ceilings are quite high and the walls are made of brick. The space is about half the size of a recreation center gymnasium. The cement floor is interrupted by pillars upon which iron candelabras hang and usually the candles are lit. My favorite setup is one in which the turntables are placed in the northwest corner of the main room because I believe that DJs should be at crowd level and relatively accessible. Sometimes the DJ table is set up in a fenced off area, facing away from the dancing crowd, and I find that less appealing because it is harder to develop the connection between the performer and the audience which is a requirement for a good DJ performance. The South wall which opens onto the street has large unpaned windows which are opened in the summer months after everyone has already spilled out into the street, avoiding the blazing heat inside. That October night this wasn’t necessary, however I wore a tank top underneath my long-sleeved top, because the place can still get hot when filled with dancing bodies.
I like to dance. That’s what I do at these kinds of events. Though it may seem strange to the uninitiated of the electronic dance music scene, dancing is not the only main focus for participants of the scene. Some people enjoy the social aspects, and mainly visit with friends while watching others dance. One member of this group has said to me, “I just like to watch people do their thing,” implying that she preferred this activity to dancing herself. Some people enjoy performing, and most DJs fall into this category as I’ve noticed they are happier performing for a crowd than dancing in one. A final category are those inspired by the music scene towards other creative activities such as poetry, sketching, and photography. One participant is well known for shooting photographs at dance events. He often produces enough shots to require that he bring not only his digital camera but his laptop in order to free up his camera for more photos.

Without speaking, and sometimes without making eye contact, the dancers on the floor manage to interact through a sense of the other dancers’ emotions, feelings, moods. The collective experience of these feelings is what we call the vibe of the event. The vibe that night was slow and thoughtfully melodic. The dancers gave each other plenty of space and shared calm smiles. I spent a few hours on the dance floor with short breaks to hang out with my friends who’d assembled one by one to the event.

At the end of the night I was sitting with some friends and we were approached by a local DJ, producer, event promoter, and regular at most events. He is normally friendly and relatively reserved but he was on this occasion a bit inebriated which led to slightly outlandish behavior. When we good naturedly teased him for this more playful side we were seeing, he said that it being so late in the night he could now be more relaxed because all the “commercial underground people” had gone, a group I took to mean the
kind of participants who know enough to be part of the underground but not quite enough to be considered insiders. He spent his energy trying to recruit us to an after party across the market, in a warehouse space, that used to be a regular after hours location. We were all reluctant, more interested in going out for breakfast than continuing the party. But eventually we let ourselves get talked into going.

It was at the after-hours that my friend surprised me with the remark, “this is no place for a graduate student.” I was instantly ready to defend the “coolness” of grad students, that yes we belonged here in this former after hours night club, that we could dance until 5 AM in the Eastern Market art gallery where I had done just that. Luckily before I mustered up more of a defense than my startled, “what!” my friend proceeded to explain what she meant and I realized that her comment actually implicated us both, and wasn’t hardly the insult that I took it to be. My friend used herself as an example. She said that she had two such distinct sides that some of her coworkers couldn’t really get her. They would say that on the one hand, she was very cerebral, and on the other she was into partying all night, and for them those two sides were irreconcilable. In reference to me, she gestured to the small warehouse space we were looking up towards from our vantage point of being sunk down into cushy sofas, at the DJ spinning as if just for us and the few other people who had ventured over from the first party, and she said that this just didn’t seem like a place for someone getting their Ph.D. Finally understanding what she meant I told her about the moment I’d had earlier. Out in the middle of the dance floor, dancing like I hadn’t in a long time with my eyes closed, all kinds of people weaving around me, feeling connected through the music and the movement I’d been momentarily jolted into the memory of what I would be doing later in the week. I thought of myself
standing in front of my students, leading discussion as a graduate student instructor. It was hard for me in my mind to reconcile the picture of myself at that moment on the dance floor with the one I imagined from the perspective of my students. The kind of knowledge that I have amassed from my fieldwork seemed out of sync with the knowledge that as an instructor I make available to my students.

My friend’s proclamation that our night of dancing in an art gallery, and afterwards reclining at an after hours spot, was no place for either of us, really had more to do with the expectations of outsiders than our own. We feel quite comfortable in those situations on a regular basis. Her momentary inability to reconcile the serious sides of ourselves with the celebratory sides was based in the perceptions of our coworkers and friends outside of our scene. Additionally she based these two sides in a traditional mind/body duality, with her choice of the word “cerebral,” and her description of the other side being one of partying all night long, an activity largely thought to be based in the physical. But I don’t think that this split is one either of us would feel strongly exists if it weren’t for outsiders’ perspectives. My students are often shocked that I am basing my dissertation on fieldwork conducted in night clubs. My friend’s coworkers may see her intellectual work applied at her 9 to 5 job as quite separate from the work she contributes to the music scene as an artist manager and event promoter. But for us out at our events we feel we are working with the same cerebral skills we apply in our “day jobs.” In the same way the scene as viewed from outsiders might look more like an escape, a meaningless party, but to those involved they are well aware that the implications have much to do with the city, community growth and serious cerebral work. In that sense, the electronic music community that makes so much sense to us, and
that mystifies outsiders who can firmly believe it to be something that it is not, is very "Detroit" – underestimated, disregarded, unacknowledged.

The promoter’s slightly drunken, spoken contradiction, the phrase “commercial underground people” was surprisingly astute. We, as fans of electronic music, think of ourselves as an underground. For instance, many of us have little to no familiarity with popular music trends. So much so that consumers of the traditional music industry are sometimes surprised of how ignorant we are of national phenomenons. Our time and musical energy is spent towards a small, independent music industry that does not for the most part participate in the commercial music industry, hence the term “underground.” However, within the Detroit metro area, and likely within other local underground music scenes, there are still levels within the underground scene. One includes music producers, DJs, event promoters: in other words, people who are actively engaged in the day-to-day production of the music and culture that surrounds it. The scene is a primary, integral part of their lives; if one were to withdraw their participation they would sense a great loss in their lives. Beyond this are those who seek out underground music, whose tastes are not commercial, however whose participation is not nearly as integral to the day-to-day survival of the musical scene. Their participation may range from casual to frequent, but the scene may not play as primary a role in their lives and they may some day grow out of it. In my inebriated friend’s comment, that the “commercial underground people” had left, he used this paradox to differentiate the two groups. He used what would normally be distinct poles, on the one hand commercial and on the other underground, to specify that the members of the underground who were not also members of the central core of contributors had already left, leaving only the inner core,
the most central insiders. I realized that he, by speaking of this to me, was not including me in the “commercial underground people.” It was another of a handful of moments when I was reminded of just how inside of my field of study I had become. Honestly, I was more excited about my inclusion, in his words, in the underground for personal rather than professional reasons. It felt good for the time and energy I had extended towards the scene to be recognized as being part of the more inner core. I realized only secondarily that this boded well for my ability to claim to be able to describe my experience within my ethnographic writing with the amount of authority that comes from having a position on the “inside.”

Detroit is a difficult city to know. To really get it I think you have to be inside; you have to live in it. The first of my reasons for which “being inside” is such a critical component of my work is that am able to better understand the ways in which the popular misconceptions of Detroit affect life in Detroit. On a regular basis in the suburbs surrounding the city, I hear the easiest tossed off comments that completely disparage the city. With what sounds like complete comfort, suburbanites joke, imply, and outright state that Detroit is volatile, dangerous, broken, and not worth their time. Detroit has very real problems to face but it in part due to this attitude that Detroiter are careful to not discuss these problems unless the immediate surroundings include only other Detroiter.

The second of my reasons for why “being inside” is such a critical component of my work became apparent the night described above because it was an event honoring the contributions of one of the Detroit electronic music scene’s unsung heroes. Another possible distinction between my friends and the “commercial underground” people, is
that we knew how important the honoree of the night was, whereas the others may have attended because the party had an impressive lineup of DJs performing. That night was the second annual of an event designed to commemorate Laura Gavoor, whose untimely death robbed the industry of a passionate contributor, Detroit defender, and professional booking agent. These are all things that I’ve heard as I only had occasion to meet Gavoor in passing. But her reputation is incredibly strong and deeply respected amongst the more regular attendees and participants of electronic music events in Detroit. The longer I spent working and researching in Detroit, the more I realized that although the possessors of the most famous names of Detroit electronic music are incredibly important and have made immeasurable contributions to the scene, my major interest would lie with the unsung heroes. The movement that created this kind of music and energy from this music city was always more than just a few people. It encompasses countless participants who’ve dedicated their time, who’ve made the scene a primary commitment of theirs, and who most importantly have stayed with Detroit. Their day-to-day work and dedication maintains an active electronic music community – a necessary foundation for any Detroit artist who has made an international name for her or himself, and future artists who will achieve international acclaim. Successes abroad start from having a foundation here at home in Detroit, and countless numbers of unsung heroes keep the foundation strong. Though women are numbered few of the artists with international reputations, they share a more proportionate representation behind the scenes as booking agents, event promoters, independent record label staff, and, to a lesser degree, locally known performers. It is this group, the individuals that sustain the local foundation, which I have been most interested in working with, and whose perspectives enliven the
ins and outs of electronic music culture in Detroit. This project will build on that foundational, supporting group, stressing long time, unheralded contribution as a major factor to the existence and survival of the electronic music scene in Detroit.

The final way in which “being inside” became critical to my work has resulted in an effect of the project on my life. Recognizing the importance of a commitment to Detroit as the basis for a project on Detroit created in me a dedication to the city out of the bounds of the project. Because I am interested in Detroit as not only a research site, but in particular for the city’s progress and possibilities I have chosen to remain here. This makes Detroit not merely the location of my fieldwork, but the site of my own more permanent relocation. The fact of my relocation, rather than use of Detroit as location of my research, changes the parameters of the relationships I have with the people with whom I work. My friendships with them, ones I expect will not cease at the finish of this project, hold me even more accountable to accurate and equitable tellings and use of their words and stories.

“Being inside” is an advantage for my research, as well as within my personal relationships with people I consider friends in a city I consider home. Unfortunately for both my work and my personal life “being inside” is a tenuous position. Part of the pitfalls of combining my life with my research is that a misstep in one aspect of my relationships could damage the other ties and connections. Additionally “being inside” muddies the critical distance necessary to examine what is at stake in a given location. However, I maintain that close affiliation with Detroit and Detroiter is a necessary foundation to this project, specifically because of the superficial dismissal of what is in Detroit that extends, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, from the
neighboring suburbs, to the regional and national media, and as far as within much of the academic literature. The optimism and commitment sustained by the Detroit electronic music community is admirable because it exists despite ordinary setbacks and disappointments as well as *extraordinary* disregard and disdain towards the community's locality. As should be clear from this chapter's opening narrative, Detroit, as a place, is of great consequence to the musical community and operates, in the scene, in vital ways that go beyond mere coincidence of location. My position of embeddedness in Detroit is a result of my own understanding of this central tenet of the music community and my concurrent attempt to incorporate it into my methodology.

This chapter has demonstrated the principle commitments of the Detroit electronic music community including loyalty to the city of Detroit, commitment to community development, recognition for previously unappreciated achievements, and respect for the history of the electronic music community. The second chapter will locate the electronic music community within Detroit by tying it closely to the characteristics that make Detroit unique. Chapter Two places the origination of Detroit techno within the discursive nexus particular to Detroit of technological innovation coupled with the humanistic response of social activism. Using the murals painted by Diego Rivera on the walls of the Detroit Institute of the Arts in 1933 as both a starting point as well as particularly good example of Detroit's dynamic 20th century, the Chapter Two examines three moments that demonstrate how Detroit's interesting balance of technological innovation and social activism created a cultural influence that is at the base of any local artistic endeavor.
The third chapter invites the reader into a weekly nighttime event to demonstrate what electronic music means in Detroit and what Detroit means to the community of fans, promoters, musicians. Chapter Three picks up the thread of civic commitment from the first chapter by elaborating on the kinds of events that the electronic music community participants promote in order to support their city of choice. Included in Chapter Three is a detailed description of the work necessary to maintain the Detroit electronic music community, as well as its importance to the current revitalization efforts of the civic and state governments. The fourth chapter is a life history style narrative of an important female Detroit electronic musician. The obstacles she describes as well as the support of the community she has received offer a case study of the issues raised in the previous chapters including the values of the community and its relationship to Detroit. The fifth chapter follows the stories of the electronic music community out from Detroit to examine the ways in which they work within the extended international arts community created by Detroit electronic musicians and their fan base. Chapter Five asserts that their connections and underground fame undermine Detroit’s national and local invisibility, by keeping Detroit plugged in to an extended, international music community.
Chapter 2

"Bring it Back to the Motor:" Detroit’s Dynamic 20th Century

At the press conference announcing the line-up for the fourth annual electronic music festival in Detroit, Kevin Saunderson explained why “Bring it Back to the Motor” was chosen as the theme for that year’s festival:

The reason we selected this theme is because we want the world to know that Detroit is the home and the mecca of the innovation that has created techno music - - 1982, that’s 21 years ago. When the first original festival started in 1999, 75 % of the artists were from Detroit. This year, once again, 70 acts will perform, mostly Detroit, showing that techno music was born in Detroit. It is still being nurtured in Detroit. And is being felt all around the globe.

Saunderson’s attempt to underline Detroit’s importance was stalled by the audience full of media, doubling as fans, whose applause and cheers made him restart his sentence directly following his proclamation that “techno music was born in Detroit.” The walls of the room in which we sat, covered with Detroit Historical Museum’s exhibit entitled “Techno: Detroit’s gift to the world,” were the perfect punctuation to his point. Early original records, photos, musicians’ biographies, and some of the equipment used to innovate the sound now known as Detroit techno surrounded the audience facing Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May, two of four artists featured in the exhibit for their creation
of the musical genre, who together were heading the production team of that year’s music festival for the first time. A large portion of the audience included regular electronic music scene participants, who attended with a press pass because they do promotional work in non-traditional media, such as web sites or email discussion lists. The festival’s theme resonated so strongly with the audience because most of the scene’s participants share an understanding that Detroit is often overlooked as techno’s birthplace. It is an important part of the discourse of electronic music community in Detroit that a pressing struggle for the artists is to maintain their current fan base while signaling to more mainstream audiences that techno came from Detroit.

While Saunderson, an original artist, was most concerned with Detroit’s role in the innovation getting its due, the Mayor’s Press Secretary, Jamaine Dickens, was more explicit about the connections between electronic music and Detroit’s most famous industry:

Movement 2003: Detroit’s electronic music festival, I think is the most fitting title for our music festival this year. Because when you think about the city of Detroit, we have been known across America, across the world for the auto industry that’s moved people from point A to point B […], known for the Motown Sound that has moved people to dance floors in every city across America and around the world, known for being a mecca of dialogue, […] the exchange of ideas, culture, music. That’s why Movement 2003 Detroit’s music festival is so fitting here, because in short: Detroit- we move the world. With this event we plan to move the world right here in downtown Detroit, Hart Plaza.

In this chapter I will attempt to fulfill Saunderson’s and the audience’s wishes to locate techno firmly in Detroit, by following the lead of the Mayor’s press secretary tying the music closely to Detroit’s other 20th century innovations. I argue that Detroit techno
could have only happened in Detroit because it is a direct product of Detroit’s particular 20th century nexus of technology, innovation, and social activism.

Histories of Detroit tend to focus on the role of industrial and technological advances, weighing the contributions of industrial leaders such as Walter Chrysler, Max Fisher, and of course Henry Ford. Whereas their names are on Detroiter’s factories, freeways, and buildings, the infrastructure of their accomplishments is only one part of the cultural landscape in which Detroiter’s experience their lives. Within the framework of freeways named for industrial leaders, day-to-day Detroit life operates on a system less individually heroic and more collectively meaningful. Work and the power of the collectivity are fundamental ideals that dominate a Detroiter mentality. Therefore social activism concerned with workers’ humanity under rapidly changing technologies played a careful balance to the changes wrought by workplace innovations.

Diego Rivera painted Detroit Industry, a series of murals originally titled Dynamic Detroit, depicting the state of technological and industrial innovation from July 1932 to March 1933 on the four walls of a garden patio court in the Detroit Institute of the Arts (DIA). I use Rivera’s original title, Dynamic Detroit, as the premise for this chapter in order to establish Detroit’s twentieth century history as the perfect context for the origins of the politically engaged techno movement. What I’m trying to stress is that Detroit’s history rests on a dynamic interplay between the local political history of municipal elections, protest movements, and strikes and cultural production including visual arts and music. As we shall see with Rivera’s sojourn to Detroit, these two concerns figure equally into his story, which I’ve chosen as the starting point for my discussion of Detroit. This chapter makes clear that Detroiter’s have, for a very long time,
seen arts and politics on a continuum rather than as separate entities and have worked their lives accordingly. The goal of this chapter is twofold: while I am trying to show that art can be politics, an underlying balance to that proposition is the often less obvious fact that political organizing requires art. For the purposes of this project I am using art to mean both two and three dimensional visual art, as well as audio and performance art, thereby including murals, sculpture, dance music records on their own or incorporated into a DJ’s performative mixing. By politics I mean to include local, state and federal governing, as well as community building, and labor organizing.

This chapter identifies three moments in Detroit’s twentieth century history that build on the premise of a continuum of arts and politics, and exemplify Detroit’s social terrain of technological innovation tempered by the attempts of Detroiters to humanize work and politics: Diego Rivera’s painting of the DIA murals, James and Grace Lee Boggs’s political organizing, and the build up to and development of the Motown Sound.

Not only was techno born in Detroit, it could not have happened in any other place. This chapter, I hope, will draw out the explanations of why members of the electronic music community are so committed to being here. Cornelius Harris’s emphasis on the importance of “being here” and Delano Smith’s invocation that “this is history” flow with the specifically engaged world of Detroit electronic music’s history that makes perfect sense with Detroit’s special connection between industrial advances, political activism, and artistic innovation. This chapter’s placement of techno within the context of Detroit’s nexus of innovation and social activism is intended to force a re-evaluation of many of the stereotypes regarding electronic music, in particular the idea of its European origins and its lack of substance.
Rivera linked human and machine in his description of his approach to representing Detroit:

My childhood passion for mechanical toys had been transmuted to a delight in machinery for its own sake and for its meaning to man – his self-fulfillment and liberation from drudgery and poverty. That is why now I placed the collective hero, man-and-machine, higher than the old traditional heroes of art and legend. I felt that in the society of the future as already, to some extent, that of the present, man-and-machine would be as important as air, water, and the light of the sun. (Rivera 183)

In this statement Rivera gets to the heart of my attempts in this chapter. Alluding to a collective hero, “man-and-machine,” he is linking humanity to technology in a way that politicizes his artistic theme (the “old traditional heroes of art and legend”) and artistically humanizes his politics by taking on the goals of governing, “liberation from drudgery and poverty” within art. This chapter opens with Rivera’s work at the DIA because he came to Detroit at a time when this unique coagulation of influences was beginning to form. Detroiters would always later be marked by the combination of both technological innovation and labor activism. His skills as a muralist were possibly outmatched by his ability to identify in the moment, with prescient historian’s hindsight, the nexus of ideas that would preoccupy Detroiters for the next century. He even, albeit inadvertently, knew one major outlet with which Detroiters would express this discursive mix of technology and humanity. After a visit to Greenfield Village, Ford’s collection of structures important to technological innovations, such as the Wright brothers’ studio, Rivera was moved to write in his autobiography:

As I rode back to Detroit, a vision of Henry Ford’s industrial empire kept passing before my eyes. In my ears, I heard the wonderful symphony which came from his
factories where metals were shaped into tools for men's service. It was a new music, waiting for the composer with genius enough to give it communicable form (Rivera 187).

Detroiter would later think about the same confluence of forces that Rivera did to create his DIA murals, and would express this nexus of technological innovation and social activism, Rivera's “man-and-machine,” through adventures first in R&B and then techno.

**Diego Rivera, depicting an optimistic balance**

In starting this discussion of 20th century Detroit history with Rivera, I hope to suggest not that he was a Detroiter himself, but that his strategies for creating the murals modeled a Detroit approach, one that would be born out over a century of political organizing. By humanizing technology, Rivera paralleled the movements for social change, which demanded that the ways in which technology changed work should be tempered by discussions of how those changes affected labor on a human scale. Because of the Fords' patronage, Rivera during his time in Detroit was the equivalent of a worker hired by Ford, an identity many past and present Detroiter have shared. To this day, Detroiter still add an apostrophe in their speaking of auto company names, so that rather than say “my father worked at a Ford plant,” most will say, “my father worked at Ford’s.” This possessive pronouncement personalizes the workplace, marking identities through employment and carving out neighborhoods by proximity to plant. Although Rivera probably never thought of himself as “working at Ford’s,” his adoration of workers was well-known. Still, the comparison of Rivera’s work for Ford to the average
worker is a provocative place to begin to examine the changing work places and labor movement in 1930s Detroit. After discussing how Rivera came to Detroit, I will use both his work as well as his contracts with the museum to demonstrate his interesting position between management and worker, and between technological innovation and social activism.

Rivera arrived in Detroit just as the city was coming out of a rapid period of industrial development. "Automobile production accelerated from less than one million a year in 1915 to 41/2 million a year by 1929, boosting the number of registered cars on the road from 2 ½ million to a staggering 23 million" (Babson, 52). The concentration of automobile production in Detroit changed a small port city into a major American industrial center. Though there had been numerous different manufacturers in the preceding decade, by the 1920s automobile production was concentrated mostly in three companies – Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. During the 1910s the city’s population more than doubled at a time when the national population increased by only 21 percent. During the 1920s the city grew by another 60 percent reaching 1.6 million in 1930 (Farley 22-23). This would not happen without conflicts between new arrivals and the entrenched workforce, and between newer citizens and longtime residents. The biggest battle, however, was the one between labor and management and it came crashing into the 1930s, a period of numerous strikes and increased unionization nationwide.

Rivera’s complex murals, covering all four walls of what was the Garden Court in the DIA, pinpoint the most important aspects of the history of early twentieth century Detroit. Their confluence of technology, humanity, the natural world, and innovation marked what were becoming dominant themes in Detroit. Rivera placed workers at the
center of the city’s most representative high art institution, making a permanent work of art that reminded city residents of the central position of collective work. The north wall’s main panel “Production and Manufacture of Engine and Transmission,” and the south wall’s main panel, “Production of Automobile Exterior and Final Assembly,” feature condensed versions of the assembly lines at Ford’s River Rouge plant. Panels on the west wall, as well as the smaller panels surrounding the main panels on the north and south walls, feature small tableaus depicting other technological advancements, including pharmacy and aviation. The entire east wall and the top panels of the north and south wall, directly above Rivera’s busy factory floors, demonstrate the importance of the natural world to advances in technology, emphasizing the role of natural resources in the industrial process. The east wall shows the mineral riches of the land in a cross cut perspective of a system of roots in the earth, at the center of which is a human fetus lovingly painted with gold flecks that shine when the sunlight hits at the right angle. Rivera asserted the dominance of natural resources by topping the representations of the assembly lines with depictions of hands breaking the earth’s surface to grasp the raw materials upon which all technological advancement depends. Sitting in each of corner of the top panels alongside the grasping fists are four androgynous figures colored black, white, red and yellow representing the interrelatedness of the four races. Rivera uses, throughout his murals, indigenous Mexican iconography and dualisms (light and dark, death and life) in order to humanize the celebration of technology which is at the heart of his murals. This results in a balanced depiction which leaves the viewer contemplating the interdependence of agrarian and industrial production, the interdependence of labor and capital, and interdependence of human needs and technological progress.
Part of the balance of Rivera’s work lies in its implicit warnings: the challenge of racial harmony, the imbalance of power between industrial and agrarian nations, the potential for dispute between laborer and employer. Rivera’s approach, however, folded calls for political change subtly into a work of art that did not offend labor’s biggest target, Henry Ford. In fact, Rivera’s Detroit work suffered stronger opposition from Christian groups objecting to what they saw as a blasphemous nativity scene than from capitalist interests objecting to its socialist undertones. Edsel Ford’s response to any critiques of the work was complete support, expressing his admiration for Rivera’s work. Choosing the slightly covert strategy of showing a worker in typical garb, including a commonly worn work glove made by the Monte Glove Company that happened to have a red star insignia on the cuff, Rivera managed to include the imagery of the leftist movements while avoiding obvious leftist references. Rivera’s illustration of the brutal working conditions is relegated to the predella panels, made to look like a sculptural frieze, running like a bottom border along the two major panels. In here the dehumanizing conditions of the workers – shown trekking in and out with bodies slumped overpowered by a large whistle, waiting in long lines for their paychecks, sitting with their lunches at their machines – is in black and white and small. These tiny panels are the only ones lacking fantasy or embellishment. In contrast with the highly condensed assembly lines of the main panels, or the allegorical representation of some of the medium sized panels surrounding the main panels, these show most accurately what life was like for Ford’s workers in the 1930s. They show the anonymous mechanization

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1 A year later, when Rivera chose to highlight the obvious and included a portrait of Lenin in his work in Rockefeller Center, Nelson Rockefeller, who had commissioned Rivera based on his fame, had the mural broken down in pieces. In February 1934, Nelson Rockefeller removed the offending face of Lenin, as well as the rest of the mural that he had commissioned.
of the factory whistle, and the inhumane pace of the scientifically organized line. These painfully accurate predellas demonstrate that Rivera knew that the balance between technology and humanity struck by Ford’s assembly line had already dehumanized the worker. Though closest to the eye level of the viewer, their lack of color and appearance of a frieze separated them from the rest of the mural. Sneaky enough to beat the campaigns to bring them down, Detroit Industry’s critique continues to unfold over time with some aspects, like the no longer common work glove, making a stronger impact viewed through 21st century hindsight.

The major outcry against Rivera’s Detroit murals came from the religious community. The New York Times reported that the controversy focused mainly on the vaccination panel, which consists of a doctor and a nurse on either side of a child with three scientists in the background. Printing a photograph of the image in an article entitled, “Bitter Controversy is Raging in Detroit Over Rivera Murals in the Institute of Art,” the newspaper identifies that “…Catholic groups attacked the panel as a caricature of the Holy Family and demanded its removal” (“Bitter Controversy…”). Despite the fact that the murals were officially accepted in April of 1933, Catholic groups, motivated by whitewashing of Rockefeller Center murals, called a boycott of the Detroit murals a year later, as reported in the New York Times in February 1934 (“Protest Rivera…”).

Some critics did attack the murals for political leanings. The New York Times reported that “Dr. George Hermann Derry, president of Marygrove College, declared Rivera had ‘perpetuated a heartless hoax on his capitalist employer, Edsel Ford,’ and said Rivera had ‘foisted on Mr. Ford and the museum a Communist manifesto’” (“Detroit Opinion”…). Rivera’s response to his critics focused on his human subjects rather than
his political leanings: “[Rivera] attributed some of the opposition to his work to the ultra-conservatives of Detroit, who, he said, were not in sympathy with his glorification of the working man.” (“Detroit in Furor…”). Rivera’s approach to the calls for whitewashing were incredibly clever because they positioned himself on the side of the average Detroiter, “the working man,” by suggesting that his critics objected to the subject matter rather than his political tendencies.

Rivera’s work showcased themes that dominated everyday life in 20th century Detroit. The murals celebrated innovations in technology, which created both the size and importance of the city as well as influenced the citizens’ upbringing within an industrial ethos—working on the line are on everybody’s minds and lips throughout the 20th century. Rivera also highlighted the interdependence of work and capital, the desirability of racial harmony, and the effectiveness of collective effort. Central to all of these themes and most significant is Rivera’s placement of work, and workers, at the center. Rivera’s Detroit murals reflect the struggles and conflicts of their creation, as well as the major conflict between industrial powers and fledgling unions. It is the first example in this chapter of the ways in which the conflict between the workers and the industrial leaders have left behind a legacy in Detroit of a balance between social and technological advances. It is a particularly good example of both the conflict at the time between workers and industrialists, as well as the hopes for eventual solutions resting in acknowledging the importance of both roles. Rivera captured accurately the important issues of the time in Detroit including technological innovation, human consequences, the value of work, and the interrelatedness of natural resources and industrial progress because he condensed all that he observed around him into complicated relationships in
his murals. His success in Detroit is all the more remarkable considering it was only his second North American location as a contracted muralist.

Rivera's mural in the San Francisco Stock Exchange was the first of his seven in the United States which, according to Alicia Azuela, mark a crucial period in his development of proletarian art, the concept that public art could function at the service of the masses with political messages culminating in a revolutionary education (125). Azuela notes the paradox that Rivera was unable to put a proletarian art into practice in the Soviet Union, developed partly during his stay there from 1927 to 1928; due to a series of conflicts with the Stalinist regime, however "his first opportunity to do so would come after the United States ambassador to Mexico, Dwight W. Morrow, who had commissioned Rivera's mural in Cuernavaca, helped make it possible, in the face of an extensive State Department file on the artist's communist activities"(126). His U.S. residency resulted in shows at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the DIA, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Director of the DIA, William Valentiner, met Rivera in San Francisco in December of 1930, while he was painting the San Francisco Stock Exchange. The exhibition at the DIA, from February 17 through March 16th of 1931, occurred two months before and facilitated the Arts Commission's acceptance of Valentiner's proposal (Hurlburt 72). Valentiner coaxed the funds to pay Rivera's commission from Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford and president of both the Arts Commission and the Ford Motor Company. Thus Edsel Ford became another in a series of capitalist patrons; Azuela asserts that "[Rivera] knew that they would expect him to interpret the realities of an industrial society in a way that would be inconsistent with his own radical views" (125).
Rivera was contracted by the City of Detroit’s Arts Commission in May 1931 to paint the walls of the garden court in the Detroit Institute of the Arts. When Valentiner learned that Rivera was anxious to see Detroit because of his interest in American industry, he realized that Rivera would be the perfect candidate to paint the wall of the interior garden court; “…Rivera’s interest in machinery was especially fitted to portray Detroit and its industries and would therefore appeal to likely art patrons in our city” (Valentiner quoted in Downs 47). The Detroit of the 20s and 30s that Rivera identified as the center of U.S. industry was shaped largely by the innovative and paternalistic hand of Henry Ford. Ford did not start automobile making in Detroit, but his incorporation of the principles of “scientific management,” starting in 1910 within his plants, set a pace that other automobile producers followed. Streamlining the work of making a car from a one by one approach to a mechanical assembly line allowed Ford to replace some of the skilled craftsmen with unskilled, usually immigrant, labor. By 1914 he was able to offer a profit-sharing plan that raised wages to nearly $5 a day. This curtailed the high turnover within his showcase Highland Park factory, in which the assembly line had become so prominent that the lack of creativity and speed of the line made Highland Park jobs less attractive than others that also paid the $2.25 industry average (for a 9 hour day). The success of Ford’s implementation of the assembly line forced his competitors to follow suit. Immigration to Detroit, from within and outside of the country, rose as high wages for unskilled labor brought masses of workers. Mass production allowed the price of Ford’s Model T to drop dramatically, making cars accessible on a popular level.

The inconsistencies within the working relationship of a social realist painter and his capitalist patron started before Rivera even made it to Detroit. On March 5th, 1932

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2 The first factory was opened by Ransom Olds in 1899.
(three months before Rivera would arrive in Detroit) his chief assistant Clifford Wight
sent a telegraph to Valentiner asking for date of the “Ford Workers Parade [sic] which
Rivera says he must not miss on any account” (Wight quoted in Downs, 30).
Presumably, despite Wight’s intimation of Rivera’s urgency, his Detroit patrons would
not have wanted him at the Ford Hunger March, which Rivera missed on March 7th 1932.
The Hunger March was organized by the Unemployed Councils, a collective of
organizations that protested the conditions of and provided relief for workers hit by the
Depression. Henry Ford, having been a decisive force in creating Detroit’s industry,
would also define, in many ways, the Depression for Detroiters; the Ford Motor
Company laid off one-third of its workforce. In the oral history project Untold Tales,
Unsung Heroes Frank Angelo, calling 1930 “sort of the official start of the depression,”
states “[b]ut what people don’t understand is that the so-called big depression had started
in Detroit about two years before when the Ford Motor Company shut down all its plants
to end the production of the Model T” (qtd. in Moon 40). This practice of opening and
closing plants, as well as hiring and firing whole work forces, was normal for Ford and
part of the reason that he was adamantly anti Union. Detroit, as an Open Shop city at the
mercy of its industry heads, garnered early and devastating effects of the depression.
Responding to the effects as well as identifiable catalysts like Ford himself, the
Unemployed Council leaders led a symbolically powerful march on Ford’s Dearborn
Plant demanding jobs, medical aid, and emergency relief for the unemployed. Had
Rivera arrived in time to join the estimated 3000-5000 participants, he would have
witnessed the brutal response to a mostly peaceful protest resulting in the shooting deaths
of five demonstrators at the hands of the Dearborn police and Ford’s Service Department.3

Five days later a massive funeral march down the city’s central avenue drew several thousand people and helped make the brutality of the Hunger March a catalyzing force for the growing union movement. Shelton Tappes, who helped organize the first UAW contract with the Ford Motor Company, remembered the Hunger March as one of the events that brought the city into focus after a period of stagnation. His description of workers’ reactions to being shot reinforces that the brutality of being shot at was in keeping with the already brutal open shop controls, with which Ford workers were familiar: “When the shots were fired, people scattered. A number of people were injured with shots in their arm, leg, or whatever. They were dragged and hidden away, because, as Ford workers, that meant they would never work at Ford’s anymore. They never went to hospitals or anything like that” (qtd. in Moon 107). Linda Downs links the Fords’ sponsorship of Rivera’s murals directly to the backlash of the Hunger March:

The mural project was a convenient bridge between the Ford Motor Company and the public after [The Ford Hunger March]. Ford also had major interests in Latin America and had just opened its first Mexican assembly plant in Villahermosa. Rivera was probably unaware of the magnitude of his role in respect to the company, which went far beyond the actual murals he was to paint. The company’s image in Mexico would be enhanced and its

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3 The most colorful description of the Ford Service Department and its leader Harry Bennet comes from Coleman Young who worked as a union organizer before becoming Detroit’s first black mayor: “Those who take exception to my frequent use of the term ‘motherfucker’ have obviously never encountered anyone like Harry Bennet. He was an ex-sailor, ex-boxer, and all-purpose badass who served as Ford’s security chief, closest confidant, and bouncer against the union. Under the euphemistic heading of the Service Department, Bennett recruited a gang of ex-cons and wrestlers and assorted goons who, disguised as workers, were paid to spy on and intimidate union sympathizers.” (Young, 41) Workers were not allowed to sit or talk while on the line. The Ford Service Department also monitored the toilets to make sure that disgruntled workers were not allowed any kind of space to discuss their concerns.
public-mindedness would be demonstrated to the workers in Detroit through this commission. (Downs 34)

Down's contention that Rivera's work was meant to smooth things over at home and ease the path abroad establishes Rivera's role for Ford partly within public relations. Rivera's roles within Ford's industrial empire, though at times not entered into consciously by the artist himself, demonstrate a common problem for groups attempting social and political critique. Attempts to critique or circumvent the conventional system — whether artistic like Rivera’s, political like the Boggs’ work that will be addressed in the next section, or business oriented like electronic musicians’ attempts to remain independent discussed in Chapter Five — are often muddled by their relationships to conventional capitalism that complicate our understanding of these attempts to work outside of convention, but do not sully the legacies and implications of the attempts themselves. This very ambiguity is clearly evident in Rivera’s contract, relationship to Ford’s, and the murals themselves.

The contracts that Rivera entered into with an American capitalist seem peculiar in hindsight but are an interesting place to examine Rivera as himself a nexus between labor and capital, technological innovation and humane working conditions, social equality and industrial progress. For one, Rivera was well compensated for his work. Though it amounted to $27.53 a square yard, well under the $100 a square yard he had asked for, Rivera signed the contract for $20,899. The amount covered his salary only;

4 Rivera was first offered $10,000 to paint a portion of each of the larger walls of the courtyard. Rivera’s rate of $100 per square yard would have made the $10,000 insufficient for all of both walls so, before he came to Detroit, he only agreed to paint a portion of each. Downs, “The Rouge,” 47. His negotiations were not only in the realm of his pay, he also had creative freedom in deciding his work: It was suggested to him by Dr. Valentiner that the commission “would be pleased if you could possibly find something out of the history of Detroit, or some motif suggesting the development of industry in this town; but at the end they decided to leave it entirely to you, what you think best to do, although they would be pleased to see the sketches for the paintings and approve them before they are executed.” Letter from Valentiner to Rivera, May 27, 1931 quoted in Laurance Hulburt, The Mexican Muralists in the United States (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) 128. The proposal sketches he turned in to the Arts Commission
materials and supplies were paid for by the Detroit Arts Commission. This was at a time when the DIA staff “scraped by on a budget in 1933 of some 40,000 down from 400,000 in 1928 and Valentiner was forced to take an unpaid leave of absence for several months” (Hurlburt 130). In one sense, we can think of Rivera as a worker hired by [Edsel] Ford, skillfully negotiating his own contract and accepting a role, as Downs points out, of a magnitude far greater than he had anticipated.

As he fluctuated between his role of a worker and his personal ties with management, Rivera demonstrated ambiguity in his self portrait within the murals. His self-portrait is in the top left corner of the central panel of the North Wall within a group that by their coats and hats can be identified as management. He averts his eyes from the workers who take up the main focus of the central panels of both the North and South walls. He also avoids the gaze of the observer of the murals, though his head is turned in our direction, because his eyes have rolled back into his head. His glorification of the state of the nation’s industry was a hope for the future rather than a documentation; this is evidenced by the fact that Rivera would have been well aware of the difficulties faced by autoworkers at the time but chose instead to glorify the potential unity of man and machine, technology and human needs.

The realities of life for Ford’s workers, alluded to in the predellas, was far from the main focus of Rivera’s murals. The uncertainty of their working contracts created the kind of fear that Tappes discussed. Additionally their compensation was a far cry from

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stretched his project from two sections of the main walls to all of the panels of all four walls. For this he asked Dr. Valentiner for $5000 more. Valentiner was able to persuade Edsel Ford to increase Rivera’s commission (by double the asked for $5000) and the contract was signed on June 10, 1932.

5 The uncertainty implicit in the Ford hiring practices of the 1920s and 1930s. Since auto work was seasonal, annual model changeovers resulted in periodic layoffs lasting from three weeks to four months. Laid off workers did not receive first opportunity at newly available jobs and were rehired along with men congregating arbitrarily outside of the factory (Vargas, 118). Though Rivera was not free from Ford’s
the contract Rivera negotiated. Average annual wages for workers in the motor vehicle industry fluctuated around $1,600 for most of the 1920s but dropped to $1,228 in 1931 and $1,035 in 1933 (Peterson 47, 130). Unlike Rivera, most Mexican and Mexican American auto workers were, to only a lesser degree than African Americans, clustered in the jobs that garnered lower pay for more taxing work, such as working in the foundries (Vargas, 111; Peterson, 26-28).6 One Mexican worker who refused to put up with these conditions explained to Paul S. Taylor: “I quit my job. I saw that they were giving me all the hardest and dirtiest jobs. I asked the boss about it and he said it was because I was the strongest. I know that the real reason was because I am a Mexican.” (Vargas 111) In contrast, Rivera was able to hire assistants to do the dirtier work of producing the frescoes. Prepping the walls, plastering and tracing the cartoons onto the walls were tasks performed by hired workers. Rivera was given the authority to decide what materials and what work needed to be secured (with the funds of the Detroit Arts Commission). Rivera worked the hours of his own choosing. He was assigned a Ford photographer to help him record what he witnessed touring the factories and to record his own painting process.

supervision and the Arts Commission’s stamp of approval, his ability to negotiate his contract and dictate the methods of his working conditions granted him a freedom and security auto workers just didn’t have.

6 Even before the Great Depression, when Mexican workers were the first to be laid off, the hiring and rehiring processes were more inconsistent for Mexicans than Anglos because of national and racial discrimination. Ford Motor Company was one of the first to open its hiring to blacks and Mexicans but Henry Ford’s motivation was more likely geared towards maintaining a docile, non-unionized work force than any kind of belief in the equality of the races. Hiring practices were independently maintained from factory to factory. This position was usually held by naturalized European immigrants who followed Henry Ford’s formula for maintaining a certain level of black workers in his factories (Vargas, 109). Vargas claims that segregation and discrimination against black workers acted as somewhat of a buffer for Mexican workers. Though Mexican workers were not segregated into work gangs the way that blacks were, they did not escape assignment to departments reserved mainly for blacks, such as the foundries or sanding departments (Ibid.). The uncertainty of the situation forced them to find ways of negotiating the hiring process: obtaining letters of recommendation from community leaders, buying and selling jobs on the black market, and lying, when necessary, about their skill level (Vargas 116-120; Peterson, 52)

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The depiction of the workers in the larger panel glorifies a hope for the future rather than a present day reality. Rivera’s portrayal of the workers’ strength and energy, signified by their huge forearms, celebrated workers as the real strength of the industrial revolution. In placing the worker in the center and the managers on the corners Rivera was prescient because the strongest legacy in Detroit is of the workers. Whereas Ford imagined the possibilities of how fast and how efficiently the assembly line could move, labor activists in response imagined the questions of is this just? Is this speed natural? Does this push the limit of what is human? Rivera also recognized the important questions within labor leaders’ thinking. His celebration of work and the potential for technological advances is couched within the cautionary webs of the natural world. By employing indigenous Mexican iconography he links workers and technology to the earth’s elements and natural resources, making explicit the link between the industrial world and the natural world.

The present day physical landscape of Detroit continues to reflect the key themes identified in Rivera’s Detroit Industry. In Southwest Detroit, a long-closed convenience store still reminds the neighborhood residents of their ties to the also long-closed Cadillac plant a few blocks from the store. The Clark Street facility, as with the other plants in other neighborhoods, contributed to the sense of identity of the community surrounding it. The convenience store is covered on two sides by an elaborate mural that details the inner workings of the Cadillac plant. The style is reminiscent of Rivera’s DIA murals and the words “Cadillac workers” dominate the design. Rivera derived inspiration from Detroit workers for his Detroit Industry mural. He borrowed their spirit, their work ethic, and their values. The mural on the convenience store in Southwest Detroit shows that
Detroiters borrowed back from Rivera, using his style and form to represent their own lives. It is flattery and imitation of the most sincere form in that their borrowing back implies how deeply Rivera dug into the Detroiter mindset and to what degree he got it right.

**Humanizing Work: Grace and James Boggs**

Rivera depicted Detroit at a time when Detroit's industrial prowess was solidifying and workers were battling against the industrial leaders, attempting to humanize their own working conditions as well as the industrial landscape of the larger national culture. Detroit recuperated from the Depression slower than the rest of the country. Detroit's banks closed first before the nationwide moratorium declared by President Roosevelt (Widick 54). The automotive industry's struggles at this time were not absorbed by management but placed on the workers. This meant wage cuts and unsteady work. What resulted was a wave of over 100 strikes in 1933 within Detroit's automotive industry, at the same time as the nationwide increased radicalization of the labor movement (Widick 55). As organizers were well aware, attempts towards unionization were often met with violence, the Ford Hunger March of 1932 being just one example. Participants in walkout strikes were vulnerable to both the police and the internal security forces of the auto companies, as well as the companies' employment of replacement, non-union, "scab" labor. In an ironic twist on the company policies that left workers no choice but to eat their meals while seated or standing at their positions, auto
workers used the newly developed tactic of the sit down strike, which allowed workers to retain control over stopped machinery, and immobile plants.\textsuperscript{7}

The rise of the UAW during the 1930s, culminating in the organizing of the last open shop, Ford's in 1941, was based on the organizers becoming inclusive rather than discriminatory. They realized that because of Detroit's growing black population they needed to include black workers in order to make their drive successful.\textsuperscript{8} Two factors made that difficult at first. First and foremost, The Ford Motor Company was arguably the most equitable towards black employees of any comparably sized company before World War II. Additionally most labor unions, up until the time period, had excluded blacks from membership. Ford had long been known as a kind of benefactor within the black community, working in a sometimes paternalistic manner with community leaders, particularly the clergy, to arrange jobs for community members. He not only employed the highest percentage of black workers during the 20s and 30s of any Detroit area auto company, he also positioned black workers on machinery and production positions outside of the foundry, with some achieving the supervisor positions of foreman and general foreman. Still most of Ford's black workers were positioned in the most disagreeable positions within the foundry, the only positions allowed black workers in

\textsuperscript{7} The sit down strike was pioneered by Akron rubber workers, shortly before it caught on widely in the auto industry. B. J. Widick. \textit{Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence}. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972, 67.

\textsuperscript{8} The black population in Detroit grew from 5,741 in 1910 (1.2\% of the population) to 40,838 in 1920 (4.1\% of the population). From 1920 to 1930 their numbers grew to 120,066 and though they accounted for 7.7\% of the population they represented 14\% of the population change. Between 1940 (149,119) and 1950 they accounted for 53\% of the population change. The rapid increase of their change within Detroit forced both management and union to pay attention to them during the unionization drives of the 1930s and early 1940s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 in 1941 pertaining specifically to racial discrimination in federal defense contracts affected Detroit because of the large proportion of military production. It was too weak to completely prevent decimation within the workplace, and had no effect on residential segregation which boiled over in the 1943 Detroit race riots in which both whites and blacks raged in battles mostly fought in the black neighborhood, Paradise Valley.
most plants outside of Ford. Ford had even bailed Inkster out of bankruptcy during the
depression (though he deducted the funds from black workers paychecks). His support of
the majority black town represented his views on the racial question; he believed in
segregation, and was opposed to social and residential integration. Providing jobs to
blacks was not based in his belief of racial equality but rather what the ‘superior’ race
was duty bound to do for the subordinate races. Black workers and community leaders
began to understand that Ford did not have their best interests at heart, based in part on
their being used as strikebreakers and finding themselves at the brink of a race riot.
Nonetheless, the alliance struck between the NAACP and the UAW, as well as with local
black community leaders, was at first a tenuous one based on skepticism of the disparity
between the union’s profession of non-discrimination and the realities in the industry
(Meier and Rudwick 101). NAACP Secretary Walter White, said after his trip from New
York to Detroit to try to talk to the remaining black workers, “the Negro worker had the
grim choice of casting his lot with the union or having its hostility after they organized
Ford.” (qtd. in Meier and Rudwick 102).

Rivera depicted an optimistic representation of the balance between technological
progress and human needs despite knowing of the clashes between the industrial leaders
and their employees. After the completion of the murals, the workers fought their
managers for a decade winning a big battle in 1941 by organizing Ford. Management’s
fears that unionization would slow production were overshadowed by the wartime
industry, where the automobile manufacturers converted their assembly lines to
production of military needs such as airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles. The challenge
posed to the industrial leaders by the demands from Detroit’s working class maintained a
relationship of conflict despite the progress of the industry within Detroit. These clashes kept the industrial leaders from dictating solely the future of Detroit’s social and economic landscape. However, interior battles within the UAW in the 1940s included competing ideas of unionism. Questions of the inclusion of racial minorities as well as members with leftist leanings affected the UAW. The leaderships flirting between militancy and accommodation with management would later result in wildcat, unauthorized strikes and dissension creating split off factions. The problems within the union of discrimination and segregation were paralleling the residential tensions within the city itself.

Detroit’s social terrain, including increased activism on the part of the rank and file coupled with issues of racial integration, drew Grace Lee Boggs and her political allies from New York to Detroit at the start of another phase of clashing visions between Detroit’s workers and the industrial leaders. Boggs and her associates would build on Detroit’s characteristics to fuel a grassroots battle against the industrial leaders as well as the institutionalized, bureaucratic turn of labor organizing.

Boggs, then Grace Lee, was born in 1915 in Providence Rhode Island to Chinese Immigrant parents. She moved with her family to New York City in 1928. She received a BA at Barnard College in 1935, an MA in 1937 and PhD in 1940 both at Bryn Mawr College. She was one of three people of color on campus when she graduated from Barnard College with a BA in 1935. After her bachelor’s degree, she heard about a Chinese graduate student scholarship and applied after considering the few options for her philosophy degree and because “a Chinese woman salesperson at Macy’s or Gimbels was as unheard of as a black one” (G. Boggs 28). Leaving Bryn Mawr with a PhD in
1940 she said, “it would have been a waste of time for me, a Chinese woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy, to apply to a university for a teaching job” (G. Boggs 34).

She moved to Chicago in 1940 where she got involved with a group organized by the Workers Party, and met CLR James when he came from New York to Chicago to speak to members of the party. Boggs felt alienated from the Chicago group because they seemed to know very little regarding the issues facing the black community, her main motivation for joining radical politics: “The Russian Question did not particularly engage me, because unlike those who had been around since the 1920s and 1930s I had been drawn to the radical movement – not by the Russian Revolution but by the black struggle” (G. Boggs 49). She moved back to New York in 1942 in order to work directly with CLR James who with Raya Dunayevskya, espoused the position that the Soviet Union was a form of state capitalism, causing them to become a faction from both the Socialist Workers Party as well as its off shoot the Workers Party. James and Dunayevskya’s faction was called the Johnson-Forest Tendency, named after the last names of their two party names, J.R. Johnson and Freddie Forest.

The members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency became increasingly frustrated with the inability of other Socialists to recognize emerging changes on the left. Boggs explains the change in focus that would lead her to Detroit in her autobiography, Living for Change:

So in 1951 we decided that the time had come for us to leave the Trotskyists completely behind, and after issuing a document titled The Balance Sheet Completed summarizing our experiences with the Socialist Workers Party, we set out on our own with the view toward publishing our own newspaper and pamphlets that would mainly recognize and record the views and activities of rank-and-file workers,
blacks, women, and youth – the four groups that we identified as the revolutionary social forces (G. Boggs 67).

After publishing texts that pertained to the four revolutionary social forces within months of the split, “in order to complete our break with Old Left politics, mainly fought on the Lower East Side of New York, Raya moved to Detroit to set up our new office in that city....” (G. Boggs 67). Boggs and her colleagues recognized in Detroit, as did Rivera a few years before them, a city in which workers inform the social discourse.

Boggs had, before her move to Detroit, already forged a connection with a Detroit worker, coauthoring a pamphlet called The American Worker. The first part, written under the pen name Paul Romano by Phil Singer, a General Motors worker, is a description of everyday life and its political concerns on the factory floor. The second part, written by Grace Boggs under the party name Ria Stone, connects Romano’s observations of factory life to larger political processes, mostly through a Hegelian framework. This collaboration shows the philosophical direction solidified by the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s move to Detroit. Romano unapologetically writes for workers rather than intellectuals saying that the rough draft garnered a single reaction from the other workers he gave it to read: “Their reaction was as one. They were surprised and gratified to see in print the experiences and thoughts which they have rarely put into words” (1). In contrast he suggests that intellectuals who read his draft were not interested in the grime and receptiveness of work on the shop floor. Of the intellectuals he says, “[t]he best expression of what they had to say was: ‘So what?’” (Romano 1).

Romano sums up the discrepancy between the intellectuals’ and the workers’ reactions by
making his intended audience clear and implying on whose shoulders he believes the impending changes rest:

I am not writing in order to gain the approval or sympathy of these intellectuals for the workers' actions. I want instead to illustrate to the workers themselves that sometimes when their conditions seem everlasting and hopeless, they are in actuality revealing by their every-day reactions and expressions that they are on the road to a far-reaching change. (1)

Romano's descriptions of the factory floor life demonstrate the talent of the workers constrained by the tediousness of the work. He uncovers the workers' creativity stifled by monotony, skill crushed by disempowerment, and division caused by isolation and hierarchy.

Boggs, as Ria Stone, accepts Romano's details of shop life as informative evidence of potential political change:

The workers described by Romano who wander about the plant, hungrily eyeing different machines and different operations, are seeking to make this appropriation and create this new human and natural relation. Their absorption in popular science magazines, startling science stories, museums of industry and art, is also part of this desire for re-integration. To the intellectual, smug in his contempt for the labor process, Marx's social program for the human appropriation of the social productive powers may seem abstract. But the worker who ingeniously devises new tools or carefully thinks through various set-ups, although in a fit of despair he would as easily break up the machine which dominates him, would have no difficulty in understanding that the new relations of production must be based upon the 'free development, intellectual and social, of the individual.' No other relations of production could break through the contradiction tearing at the workers in their daily life in the factory. (49)
Her words recognize the capacity of the worker to humanize the technological advances within the factory. The worker, through her or his creative relationship to the machines with which their lives are so intimately entwined, are bodily understanding the new relations of production and as such have the power to educate the rest of society about the emerging changes. Boggs' fierce faith in the educational power of the worker to both humanize and be informed by her or his position rests the utmost leadership power in the worker and puts her in a position to respect Detroit's centralizing focus – work.

Boggs' respect for the worker and the worker's perspective over that of the abstract and intellectual would eventually lead her to Detroit in June of 1953. She found a place where she would for the first time settle down:

I liked Detroit. It was much smaller than New York, people seemed to know one another, and it was a city of neighborhoods and beautiful trees. It also felt like a “Movement” city where radical history had been made and could be made again. Working with CLR had been exciting but also extremely intellectual. As Johnsonites we tried to remain close to the grass roots, but it was still secondhand. I needed to return to the concrete. (G. Boggs 79)

Boggs settled down in Detroit and became connected, in a concrete way, to a community of activists. She made every effort to learn from rank-and-file workers, rather than the other way around. Like Rivera, she recognized in Detroit a particularly suitable location for societal progress coupled with technological change. Unlike Rivera, she chose to stay in Detroit and devoted her own work to build on the rapidly changing social forces. Solidifying her links to the city, she married a Chrysler worker, James Boggs.
James Boggs had been a participant in the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s Third Layer School in New York. He had been elected to attend by his Detroit local, who provided for his family during his two week absence from Detroit. Grace reported that he “became the historian and leader of the school, an organic intellectual and natural leader” (Duncan and Lindberg 51). Grace and James would not meet in New York, but would work together in Detroit on the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s newsletter, Correspondence.

Grace described James’ perfect fit for the goals of Correspondence:

The Correspondence comrades in Detroit recognized immediately that in Jimmy Boggs they had found (or been found by) someone who was a prototype of the kind of individual for whom the newsletter was being created. A rank-and-file black Chrysler-Jefferson worker and community activist, Jimmy had definite positions on everything – locally, nationally, and internationally – and could dash off an article on any subject at the drop of a hat. (G. Boggs 77)

Grace and James’ lives were so intertwined that her autobiography is also a biography of him and an account of their political work together.

Grace served as an editor while James wrote a column for Correspondence.

Grace and her colleagues would maintain in the newsletter their commitment to the four revolutionary social forces that had drawn them to Detroit. She recollected:

The idea behind Correspondence was that, unlike the traditional radical paper, it would be written and edited by rank-and-file workers, blacks, women, and youth. And for the most part that is how it developed, with regular columns by Jimmy and Selma, and with six columns of what we called “Readers’ Views,” consisting of comments by people in the plant and in the community on current events and their living and working conditions. (Duncan and Lindberg, 51)

9 From this point I will refer to both Grace and James Boggs by their first names in order to avoid the confusion and clutter of using their common last name and first initial.

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Grace’s correspondence with Frances and Lyman Paine, who worked on the newsletter but lived in Los Angeles, demonstrates that all decisions made about the newsletter, including frequency, content, and even ownership, referred back to the founding idea that it was for and by the rank-and-file. Her letters to Frances and Lyman suggest that Grace continually worried that any deviance from the original plan would take too much power away from the concrete, the worker, and place it in the hands of the abstract, the intellectual or trade unionist.

Grace’s letters to Frances and Lyman demonstrate the ways in which she was amazed at the power of *Correspondence* to affect all aspects of a reader’s life, pulling in the strains of work and life, and humanizing the worker’s condition. In a letter dated Dec 26, 1953 addressed “Dear F and L,” she is effusive about the newsletter’s success:

> This is a city. Everybody I met yesterday I feel what our paper can and must mean to them, and how deep it will have to go politically to [sic] satisfy them. And with each one, the paper establishes a unique relationship. Oscar, one of the fellows who went with us and who rides to work with J every morning, has become a different person in recent weeks. He doesn’t just want to talk about pool or any little thing. He wants to discuss what’s taking place in the shop, the relationships within a family (he has a bad family situation), not personally but socially. He is a very attractive man, from New Orleans, (half-creole, half-Indian, and looking like a Spanish toreador), and we talk about the social problems of an attractive man as analytically as I have discussed similar questions with Selma. I feel a lack of forces in this sense - - that the paper itself is not yet grappling fundamentally enough with these profound questions of man’s relationships with his kind, so that all our people, by means of the paper, and with it are sensitivized to the sobriety with which workers are working out these questions.¹⁰

¹⁰ This letter is a part of the Frances D. & G. Lyman Paine Collection in the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Union Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI.
Oscar is a successful example of the goal of Correspondence, and a preview of the way that Grace would continue her work in Detroit from 1953 until the present. For Grace, the workers already learn an analytical approach to their lives from their relationship to technological and economic changes on the factory floor. Correspondence provided them with an outlet with which to apply their skills of analysis to other aspects of their lives, and to, in turn, educate outsiders from their advanced position within capitalism. Her enthusiasm for the success of the newsletter’s founding goals is matched by her excitement for the activist role rank-and-file workers will take. Grace shares Rivera’s enthusiasm for the worker, and further she applies her faith in the power of the workers to bodily and mentally understand their own position towards her own political work.

Grace and James continued their working relationship, developed through Correspondence, together in Detroit for almost 40 years evolving through different organizations as their surroundings changed. Grace was the Coordinator of the Michigan Freedom Now Party in 1964, Educational Director of the Inner City Organizing Committee in 1967, and Coordinator of the Black Community Educators Conference at Wayne State in 1968. Together in 1976 Grace and James helped found the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR) through which they hoped to move beyond rebellion and encourage a radical change in humanity as well as political structure. Their work with NOAR is a practical application of the ideas espoused in James Boggs’ The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook, published in 1963.

The American working class, as described by James Boggs in The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook, has fundamental problems that
must first be addressed for the success of a lasting revolution. Though *The American Revolution* celebrated its 40th anniversary on June 29th, 2003 James’ description is still frighteningly fitting:

> The horizons which the social revolution in America open up are more tremendous than anywhere else in the world. But the path which the revolution will have to take in this country is also more difficult and vicious than anywhere else in the world. First of all, it is the Warfare State with its huge forces which has to be challenged. And second, inside each American, from top to bottom, in various degrees, has been accumulated all the corruption of a class society which has achieved its magnificent technological progress first and always by exploiting the Negro race, and then by exploiting the immigrants of all races. At the same time the class society has constantly encouraged the exploited to attempt to rise out of their class and themselves become exploiters of other groupings and finally of their own people. The struggle to rid themselves and each other of this accumulated corruption is going to be more painful and violent than any struggle over purely economic grievances have been or are likely to be. (J. Boggs 45)

Recognizing that the United States’ legacy of slavery and treatment of immigrants makes for a very different and stratified working class, as compared to the unified one suggested by Marx, the Boggses envisioned that the primary goal of radicals was to organize situations that allow the population to become more *human* humans. What makes the Boggses’s work an excellent foundation for a politics that incorporates art is that they not only *theorize* that in order for a true American revolution to happen self-transformation must be the first step, but they *practice* their methods of building community through art projects. For example, Detroit Summer the last project they would work on before James’ death in 1993, is an ongoing annual four-week session that brings youth and elders together to work on rebuilding the city, in which nighttime discussions follow the daytime creation of public murals and community gardens. Similar to the ways the
Boggses asked questions during a time of technological progress, they applied the same humanizing questions to the consequences facing Detroit after the economic changes left many young people unemployed. In this example from *Living for Change*, Grace demonstrates that the question of humanizing technological and economic progress remains at the forefront in her assessment of the current concerns of political organizing:

If, however, those who need to make a revolution also need to transform themselves into more socially responsible, more self-critical human beings, then our role as revolutionists is to involve them in activities that are both self-transforming and structure-transforming, exploring and trying to resolve in theory and practice fundamental questions of human life more complex than anything Marx could possibly have dreamed of. What kind of an economy, what kind of technology would serve both human and economic needs? What kind of transformation do we need in our values, institutions, and behavior to reconnect us with the rhythms and processes of nature? Should we do something just because we can do it? What is the difference between needs and wants? How do we meet people’s psychic hungers? What does it mean to care? What is the purpose of education? How do we create community? What is the difference between community and a network? Why is a community a revolutionary idea? How do communities start? (G. Boggs 156)

Grace lists the important questions driving James’ and her work in Detroit. Their work presents an exemplary case of the ways that Detroiter challenge their industrial leaders asking “Should we do something just because we can do it?” That question is at the heart of the ways that labor and social activism has always challenged the economic and technological progress of industrialization in Detroit. The list of questions is similar to what Rivera asked in his murals, touching on a legacy in Detroit that has been born out over the course of the twentieth century.

During the course of their work, the Boggses’ most adamant reiteration is that revolutions and therefore revolutionary organizing are evolutionary; that is they must
change as the circumstances change. In *The American Revolution* James Boggs attributes changing workplace situations to automation, arguing that changes in technology will affect more than just the number of unemployed but also the social conception of labor: “[Many people] have not been able to face the fact that work is becoming socially unnecessary. They have not been able to face this fact because they have no clear idea of what people would do with themselves, what would be their human role, or how society would be organized when work is no longer at the heart of society.” James posits development on a creative and social scale to fill the void once work becomes socially unnecessary. James’ cautious optimism regarding technology’s potential for human development is reminiscent of both the careful balance of pessimism and optimism, as well as the intimate linking of technology and man, in Rivera’s *Detroit Industry*. In the second half of the twentieth century in Detroit, as decentralization drove more and more work out of the city center, the void was filled with two creative innovations – first Motown and later Detroit techno.

**Motown and Techno: New Music, Detroit Industry**

In this section we will look at Detroit’s musical landscape, after Rivera’s sojourn to Detroit had ended and the Boggs’ had begun their political work, and pick up on the threads of innovation, technology, labor struggle, and social justice that Rivera had noted in his murals. Automation and social justice figure as a prominent nexus for Detroit’s nascent jazz scene, which together with the ideology of the assembly line built the base
sound of the most famous music to come out of Detroit, Motown. Though the most cited similarity between Motown and Detroit techno are the way the musics represent Detroit on an international scale, another striking similarity are the two sounds' histories of being birthed from both technological innovation and the need to counteract social inequities, linking forcefully the topics of this chapter, the human and the machine of Detroit’s discursive landscape.

For African American Detroiters technology and human needs were never separate. Rivera’s words quoted in the introduction to this chapter in which he said Detroit’s industrial landscape produced a “wonderful symphony” which was creating “a new music, waiting for the composer with genius enough to give it communicable form,” foreshadowed the musical innovators who would come along and turn the Detroit industrial, technological, and innovative ethos into an audible form. Rivera’s prophesy came alive when Motown’s and Detroit techno’s composers, like Rivera before them, balanced the celebration of technological innovation with attention and concern for its consequences for humanity in order to give a sonic description of what moves Detroiters.

The connection made audible in music between innovation and human needs was never solely based in economic necessities, though these did play a large part in the development of Detroit’s original musical genres. Music like Motown and techno and murals like Detroit Industry, are also a way to work out the spiritual and philosophical challenges wrought by a rapidly changing society. One interesting analysis of the relationship between technology and music can be found in Joel Dinerstein’s Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars. Dinerstein proposes that African American musicians worked out the anxieties of
speed ups, changes, and the quickening pace of modernity through jazz music, specifically swing and its attendant dances. Similar to Rivera’s concerns expressed in his murals, Dinerstein sees in swing music a negotiation between humanity and technology: “Swing music and dance were participatory cultural forms that yoked then-assumed opposites together – the human and the machine – in a dance-hall ritual that helped dissipate the tensions of a technological society” (316). Dinerstein is particularly interested in music and dance as a response to societal changes created by increasing industrialization because he suggests that the physicality of swing music enables it a different kind of response than allowed in visual media including literature, painting, and photography; his insistence that the best way to theorize the changes happening at the time is through embodying the movements evokes Paul Romano and Grace Boggs’s arguments in The American Worker that workers are best equipped to understand the changes based on their physical knowledge of the factory floor. Rivera’s cautions of the importance of humanity in the advances of technology stretch into Dinerstein’s assessment of contemporary music and its legacy of a physical expression of the concerns implicit in modernity;

…the Swing revival, rave culture, hip hop, techno, and clubbing continue a tradition of rebelling from the feet up – just as tap dancers did – as the mindful body asserts itself against American society’s mechano-idolatry and an increasing embedded faith in the salvation of technological progress. (316)

Dinerstein views the understanding of modernity achieved from music and dancing as a way to avoid robotic reactions to technological progress.

Motown and techno happened specifically in Detroit because of its social terrain of industrial innovation tempered by humanizing social movements. Before both techno
and Motown, dancing to jazz, and specifically to African American musicians playing jazz, integrated first the interior spaces of Detroit’s night clubs, and secondly the public spaces of the city, including its central corridor Woodward Avenue. Lars Bjorn’s *Before Motown*, a discussion of Detroit’s jazz scene through the early half of the twentieth century, uses oral histories to detail the jazz scene that would lead to Motown. Bjorn examined the years after the 1943 riots and noticed that entertainment venues on Woodward were an important part of African American movement into what had been white space on Detroit’s main avenue. Bjorn points to the first entertainment venue catering to blacks that opened on Woodward in 1941, the Paradise Theatre, as an important moment for both black music lovers as well as civil rights advances; by the close of the decade, Club Juana’s opening on Woodward would add integration inside of public spaces because of their aggressively self advertised status as a black and tan.

During the mid 1940s jazz music aficionados continued to maintain their integrated foothold on the city’s central corridor including performances at 888 Woodward, the address of the city’s most prestigious arts institutions, the DIA. The shows were organized by local radio disc jockey Bill Randle. *Before Motown* includes a flyer for one such show on Monday Feb 5th, 1945 at 8:30 PM featuring Coleman Hawkins and Detroit jazz artists as opening acts. The four performances that were scheduled before intermission (Red Raye’s Jazz ensemble, the Four Sharps, Willie Anderson and then Coleman Hawkins, and two after bringing back first Red Raye’s and then Coleman Hawkins) would lead to a long night at the DIA, keeping attendees partying in the museum until, one would assume, well past midnight. The nights called
Jazz at the Institute were sponsored by Bill Randle and his ‘Strictly Jive’ radio show on WJLB; Bjorn found that

Randle’s concerts were well attended; he had a large following and an arrangement with Al’s Record Mart to sell tickets. In addition to jazz, Randle presented left-wing authors and current political figures. [Randle said], “It was very political, very hip. All the shows were always sold out. I had nine or ten shows at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts] before they threw me out. They threw me out because they said the audience was ‘rowdy;’ they left marijuana cigarettes in the john.” (Bjorn, 85)

Randle’s political, hip shows were thought to be too rowdy for the space of the DIA. His left leaning politics along with the perceived raucous nature of his customers created a high society stir. Not being a permanent installation, the event was easily removed.

Once at the head of innovative approaches to politics and art by the hiring of Rivera, the DIA could not in the mid 1940s continue that trend.

Jazz musicians of the 1940s and 1950s continued to work in a complicated matrix of politics, civil rights, social integration, and above all excellence in artistic innovation.

According to Bjorn, Detroit musicians were tapped by New York artists to join hard bop groups in the late 1950s. One of the reasons for this was the high level of musicianship as noted by saxophonist Pepper Adams on his experiences of joining a military band in 1951:

Most of the fellows in the Army band were considerable older; some had been on the road with name bands. I didn’t even consider myself to be a professional musician, and here I find myself in a milieu of professional musicians and they don’t know a damn thing close to what I know. You see in Detroit the standards were so high that to compete for local gigs you had to really play awful goddamn good! If you were good enough to be competitive in Detroit, you were far ahead of what the rest
of the world’s standards were. (Adams quoted in Bjorn, 123-124)

Adams’ surprise to find out that the skills he learned in Detroit reflected a higher standard demonstrate the importance of the local within musicianship. Though jazz musicians participated in a culture made national by touring groups, Detroit’s bar for local gigging was set higher than in other places resulting in large numbers of accomplished, professional musicians. While Detroiter may have noticed that New York’s markets were stronger compared to Detroit’s lack of major record labels, New York artists recognized in Detroit a crop of talented musicians to add to their bands’ rosters. Earl F. Van Dyke, a studio session musician who played on most of Motown’s biggest hits also noticed the Detroit musicians’ exodus for New York:

I’ll tell you what really happened. At the time Detroit was like a mecca for good musicians. And I never will forget, when I first came home from the service, Jackie Gleason came here, and he raped the city of good white musicians. He picked up his musicians very easily. Then you had people like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Andy Kirk; everybody was coming through here taking musicians out of here. By 1955 everybody was gone. (Van Dyke qtd. in Moon 242)

Fortunately for Detroit’s most famous music, Van Dyke managed to avoid being procured by a New York ensemble. As a member of the Funk Brothers, the collective name of Motown’s session musicians, he participated in the innovation of a sound that would in the next few years, spotlight the country’s interest on Detroit as a musical originator, rather than simply a feeder ground for New York’s jazz scene.

Until the recent documentary Standing in the Shadows of Motown, the musicians that make up the Funk Brothers have remained a largely unrecognized force behind the
essence of the sound of Motown. Van Dyke’s recollection in Ryan’s oral history of Motown artists stresses the integral role that the Funk Brothers played and how they would remind the producers of their own contribution:

Berry Gordy’s brother, George, came downstairs one day to produce some material. He took the attitude that we didn’t understand what he wanted, and he started giving us orders. We had been recording Motown music for quite some time, and this was George’s first attempt at producing a record, so we decided to have some fun with him. Instead of putting anything special into the session, we played exactly what was put in front of us. George couldn’t understand why the sound he wanted wasn’t coming out on the record. After several hours, he called us all together and asked what the problem was. We told him to go into the control booth and leave us alone and we would record the material. In the next hour, we recorded four songs exactly the way he wanted. It was our way of showing him that we knew our business and could deliver almost anything a producer wanted, if he showed us some respect. (Van Dyke qtd. in Ryan)

Van Dyke’s anecdote shows the fundamental relationship between Motown and its workers. It also displays the seeds of the company’s later failure and fracture. Motown, through Berry Gordy’s innovation, was a company built in a similar structure to the industries dominating Detroit; it had an assembly line producing art rather than an industrial product. Gordy originally tried to build on the structure of the industrial assembly line with interchangeable parts, but unlike the industrial leaders, attempted to create a familial, utopic organization that included workers within decision the making process. Moments where integral cultural producers like the Funk Brothers were disregarded, like in the anecdote above, created disjunctures where the workers needed to reassert their importance to the productive structure of the company. These bumps and clashes eventually mimicked the industrial leaders that Gordy had set out to avoid. The
failure of Motown happened when it completely became like the industrial leaders by
disregarding the contributions of its workers yet assuming the same results would be
found even after the workers had been left behind in Detroit.

Motown’s beginnings mimicked Detroit’s industrial leaders in an attempt to avoid
employment within them. Berry Gordy was raised in a family that eschewed industrial
jobs in preference for entrepreneurial opportunities. His father, despite moving to Detroit
from the South in the 1920s like many future autoworkers, avoided employment at Ford’s
and apprenticed himself as a plasterer in order to raise enough capital to open his own
business (Smith 65). The name of his Booker T. Washington Grocery Store symbolized
the values he and his wife taught their children of self support and reliance. When his
son, named Berry Gordy, spent time at Ford’s it was only after the failure of his own
entrepreneurial attempts to open a jazz record store, called 3-D. Through a family loan,
Gordy moved his interest to the production of music and created the Motown Record
Company. Gordy’s turn towards musical production elevated his enterprise further than
the efforts of any of his other family members. Where their businesses depended on the
patronage of the black community – his father’s grocery, his sister’s nightclub
concessions – Gordy built his success on appeal to white and black audiences. Motown’s
financial makeup denoted the reliance on entrepreneurial capitalism; as Brian Ward
described it:

At the heart of Motown’s economics were the classic
business strategies of vertical integration and cross-
collateralization. Gordy controlled and profited from every
aspect of the careers of his artists, writers, and musicians,
and every dimension of record production and promotion.
(260)
Gordy’s Motown included several labels, a publishing firm, and a management agency. Gordy’s rationale for the control he exerted over his artists, musicians, writers, producers and staff had a theme of “family” that resonated throughout the statements of most of Motown’s “dependents.” The rhetoric of familial ties served the purpose of allowing Motown to write contracts that kept its performers in its fold. Nelson George described the “cross-collateralization of royalty accounts” including deducting from artists’ royalties the costs incurred to make and market their records:

> None of these practices were illegal and, for a new enterprise, they were quite cost-effective. But certainly no smart talent manager would have to agree to all of them, since they placed the power in the management-artist relationships squarely in Motown’s hands. Of course with Motown, through ITM, looking to manage all of its own acts, these policies would prove too easy to enforce. (George 29)

Gordy defended the contracts by use of the ideal of the family relationships. For example, Gordy claims that the artists’ dependence on him for assistance in personal matters was the reason for his starting the artist management division:

> And now that the artists’ own Cycle of Success were kicking in, it brought on a whole new set of responsibilities for me. They looked to me for advice not only from a creative standpoint, but a business and personal one as well. For me to not get too sidetracked by all the various problems developing around me, I created an artist management company, naming it International Talent Management Inc. The purpose of ITMI – as we called it – was to act as personal manager to the artists. They did everything from getting them to gigs, providing career guidance and negotiating with booking agents to making sure they paid their taxes – something I would continue to stress over the years. (Gordy 144)
His paternal tone regarding whether the artists paid their taxes, even in a paragraph in which he asserts that his overbearing contractual relationships with the artists resulted from their asking for his assistance, demonstrates why most of the artists’ discussion of Gordy is filled with exasperation as well as admiration.

In her memoir, Gordy’s second wife Raynoma demonstrates the sense of connection that made Motown a business in which the workers were included through a sense of family:

The summer of ’62 was a lot like heaven. Detroit was alive and green. We were a family, a very large one, and we were not inclined to miss out on any family tradition. The summer was studded with celebratory outings to Belle Isle and River Rouge parks, and I loved every bit of it – the food, the fun, the branches of our family tree (121)

According to Raynoma, she was a founding partner in Motown but Gordy managed to steal her part of the company by playing on her feelings of trust and loyalty. She describes a conversation with Mary Wells that demonstrates how this sense of family affected contractual negotiations that she would ironically suffer from as well. She recounts her response to Wells:

Wait a minute. It’s a standard contract, and it’s just a formality. What are you talking about rights? We’re not here to steal your money. You’ll always be taken care of, don’t even worry about it. This company is built on trust, and Mary,” and I looked at her questioningly, “loyalty. We want you to what you deserve, so please, trust me.” And I was quite firm. In later years, I would learn the importance of educating an artist in all details of his or her contracts and career. But in these formative days, when the contracts were very straightforward, I took demands like Mary’s to be affronts to our business ethics. I did understand, however, the disappointment many felt upon receiving their first royalties. “Wow, I’ve got a hit song and now I’m going to be rich, and then – after all the cost of recording
the song, promotional monies, and advances are subtracted
— they’d open the envelope, “Twenty-nine dollars and fifty
cents?” (120-121)

Raynoma describes the business practices that, though legal, felt incredibly
disadvantageous to the artists. Ironically, Raynoma would later be betrayed through her
own loyalty and trust. She claims that the original Gordy family loan was given to both
her and Berry, and that the company belonged to them jointly. She admits to having
signed off on paperwork to simplify things by putting the company in Berry’s name only,
then her husband, who promised to always take care of her. The sentiments of Motown
as a “family” enabled contracts and negotiations in which artists, musicians, and
songwriters never felt they received proper remuneration.

The legal problems between Berry Gordy and the song-writing team Holland-
Dozier-Holland, known as H-D-H, demonstrate Motown’s failings to fulfill the “family”
structure it touted. H-D-H, along with the Funk Brothers, created the distinct “Motown
Sound.” Jon Fitzgerald’s study of all of the Motown top forty hits between 1963 and
1966, focusing on those written by H-D-H, finds that Motown songwriters, producers,
vocalists, and musicians created “...a new style of mainstream popular song – thoroughly
based in gospel and conceiving of song structure in an innovative way, where the hidden
architecture supporting the melodic/lyric hook is now primarily rhythmic” (8). Prior to
Motown’s official move to California in 1969, Gordy spent much of 1967 and 1968 in
Motown’s Los Angeles office. Nelson George attributes Gordy’s distance from Detroit
as the reason why he would become so out of touch with some of his original workers.
Speaking of H-D-H George claims,

The days of paying dues at Motown were long gone, and
for those who had built Motown with Berry, who had made
his vision the beat in millions of teenagers’ transistors, who had believed in him as in a father, it was time for some real remuneration, but for many it wouldn’t be forthcoming.

(151)

George elaborates that H-D-H’s treatment was not a single event but part of a large trend at Motown consisting of the firings of an original musician and a radio show liaison, as well as the moves of management executives to RCA and MGM Records. Coupled with changing developments in the music industry, where major labels were signing black music acts away from Motown and Stax, Motown’s relocation to Los Angeles and focus on Diana Ross’s film career connoted a loss of their substantial power within the music industry.

Motown’s success began to disappear as Gordy lost touch with integral parts of the Motown sound such as the H-D-H songwriting team, Detroit musicians, and the general Detroit milieu. The company operated less like the “family” most Motown members talked about in the golden years of the mid 1960s. As the company operated less like a family and more like the industrial leaders that the Gordy family sought to avoid, the company began to fail. Though Motown has been seen as apolitical and inconsequential to its local relationships, the company’s struggles after the move to Los Angeles demonstrates that Detroit and the social, political, and cultural context was crucial for its success. Suzanne Smith, for one, argues that scholars of Motown have ignored Detroit as location and originator of sound proposing it merely as a coincidence of location. She quarrels with their view that Motown could have happened in any city with a large African American population. This situating of Motown firmly in the cultural topography of Detroit is central to her argument that “Motown did not stand apart from its social circumstances but was the product of a complex set of historical forces.”

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She pays attention to the interaction between Motown, local black politics and the national civil rights campaign. Smith sees political organizing and artistic endeavors as more alike than different; in her introduction, Smith juxtaposes the July 12, 1968 DRUM picket at the Chrysler plant where picketers beat bongo drums, with the performance of a classic Motown song “Dancing in the streets,” by Martha and the Vandellas to say that:

Throughout the 1960s, Motown and the other cultural work of black Detroit offered not only a symbol of what was possible but also a means to empower the city’s often embattled African American community. Whether it was the beat of a bongo drum at a black autoworkers’ strike or the celebratory chorus of ‘Dancing in the Street,’ the sounds of black Detroit reverberated with the history and circumstances of its producers. Motown, in other words, provided more than a soundtrack to its era. The company and its sound were active – through sometimes reluctant-agents in the politics of its time. (20)

Smith sees Detroit and Motown so intertwined that it would be impossible to argue that it could have happened in any city with a sizable African American population.

The connections between musical innovation and cultural and political location are as important in the creation of Motown as they were for the next original music to come out of Detroit. Detroit techno musicians found themselves in the world prophesied in James Boggs’s *The American Worker*. Creating their own musical genre as well as maintaining control of their products was a solution influenced by Motown. Before the automobile industry lost its strength within the Detroit employment market, the Motown family found economic independence by creating a national following for their musical innovations. Techno built on a similar model as Motown within Detroit’s blueprint of work, technological innovation and humanizing. Techno would have Motown as a
negative model, though, of when losing sight of the industrial leaders’ wrongs and recreating them by losing touch with their foundation, their workers.

One of Detroit techno’s unsung heroes draws a direct link from techno to Motown, which reinforces the indirect link that techno shares with Motown participation in Detroit’s nexus of technological innovation and social justice. Ron Murphy is a record cutter, mastering engineer and record producer, who has mastered hundreds of Detroit techno records, including early recordings now considered classic techno records. He has therefore watched Detroit techno from its inception in a position close enough to understand the challenges and successes of the originators of the music. Murphy at one time had one of the largest collections of Motown’s records. He also found himself an inadvertent collector of cutting equipment used on Motown recordings by discovering the equipment in a garage sealed since 1964. His recollections of the techno industry, and the struggles those artists have overcome to make music allow him to make a comparison of techno to Motown:

I think that Joe Archer of Archer Record Pressing […], Joe never talked too much but he did make what I thought a profound statement, and he didn’t even realize how profound a statement it was, about uh 15 years ago. He said, “Now that Engler is in there, and they’ve cut down on welfare, my business has dropped.” But he didn’t relate it to anything. He was just talking about current events. And I thought about that, and I said, “Yeah, I know why your business has dropped.” See because… and this is why that probably the last records on earth might just be made in the city of Detroit… because people were taking, y’know, some of their money from the welfare money and putting it to make a record […] because it’s the cheapest was to get a product out there. And, isn’t it true?

This is what really made Motown. Why… were these people rich? Before they started Motown? Then what would have been the reason? They started it because they had nothing. And this is why Motown was successful.

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They had nothing. [...] And this is why Gordy stayed on the Boulevard in those seven houses. He was afraid to spend any money because he came from nothing and he was afraid to lose what he had. And that is why they stayed in those houses on the Boulevard way past the time he could afford any building he wanted. Just boom we want that building. But he stayed there. Yeah that’s how Motown started. A bunch of people working together to create something and be a success and make some money doing it.

This is what goes on today. These records are not being made by millionaires. They are being made by poor people and they always have. And that’s why you’ll see if you run a research that there has been almost as many records made in Detroit, a product, then there has been anywhere else in the world. Because you got, first of all you got people that that’s one thing that they can do and they can do it cheap. Where it is true that in the 40s and 50s that radio wasn’t playing black records but that changed a little bit starting in the late 50s. And they seen a way they could make a product cheap and they did have the talent, a lot of them. It is true, I’ll say this, but there are some perceptions around that a lot of people think that all black people can sing. That’s the biggest lie there ever was. But that is a perception. They’ve all got rhythm, that’s bullshit. They ain’t got no more rhythm than any other race. It’s just a percentage is probably the same. It got to be where music and stuff was a point where it could get accepted, easier, not easy, but easier than doing some other things. And so there is a lot of records made, a lot of different record labels in Detroit. Still is. And I mean you can get a product out... where can you get something for 500 dollars? You can’t make a CD for 500 dollars and manufacture it, y’know, but you can put some records out. At least, it’s a chance, is what it is, I call it like a lotto ticket. Isn’t it, really? It’s almost like a lotto ticket, you’re taking a chance. You put out the record you’re taking a chance.

Murphy is in an interesting position to understand both Motown and techno’s struggles.

He sees similarities in their reasons for striving for success in the music industry. As a
collector of Motown music and a record masterer for techno, he witnessed innovators of both genres start their businesses from nothing and build them to international acclaim.

During the discovery of some of the equipment used to cut early Motown recordings, Murphy was reminded of how precarious of a gamble the early years were for Berry Gordy:

> Back in the late 50s, and early 60s, there were records cut in garages on rented equipment. They would go to a Hi Fi store and rent a tape recorder and a couple mics and go in and cut, and y’know put out a record definitely for a couple hundred dollars and sell a million records. It has been done.

> We found a studio, well there is a guy currently writing a book on Detroit and he ran across some of the people that recorded there because they kept talking about… Berry Gordy talks about in his book that he recorded in a garage, y’know when he first started. We found that garage. It still existed. It had been…nobody had been in there in 40 years since he walked out of there in 1964. It was padlocked and we were finally able to get in there. It’s incredible. It’s a lot of historic recordings. We found receipts, where he still had, it said uh “Berry Gordy, 37 dollars and 50 cents” for some recording time and then it had a note, “no more credit until he pays his bill.” So there was some receipts like that. And then another one, “Berry Gordy, hold the tapes until he pays his bill.” […]

Murphy’s stories reflect that music making in Detroit was dependent on social inequities that compelled Detroiter to push the boundaries of existing musical genres. Innovation in sound, both the techniques that created the Motown sound as well as the origination of techno as a genre of electronic music, were directly linked to Detroiter’s struggles within the economic challenges of the respective time periods. Berry Gordy’s innovation of the form and structure of Motown was an attempt to avoid employment in an industry that was still booming. In the 1960s and 1970s, American automobiles
maintained their dominance in the market. By 1980, rising gasoline prices coupled with higher interest rates made for less of a market for the low mileage, high priced cars made in the U.S. U.S. and Canadian factories contributed only 22 percent of the world’s motor vehicles. In the city of Detroit, already affected by the decentralization of the automobile industry to rural areas, the Sunbelt, and out of the country, this meant closed plants setting off a ripple effect of closed restaurants, empty gas stations, and boarded up homes. Unlike Motown artists seeking an alternative independent business, techno musicians were faced with few other choices.

The response of the early techno artists was to imagine a world where technological advances worked on behalf of humans. They used new audio equipment as instruments. They programmed their music to sound futuristic and otherworldly. They, however, maintained a funky, soulful foundation to all of their records. Finding themselves displaced in the factories by automation, they mastered the techniques of automated instruments producing a new, forward thinking but still human sound.

The dystopic and sparse sound of early Detroit techno was definitely a product of the lived reality of James Boggs’s prophecy, in *The American Worker*, that the increase in automation would result in a group of “outsiders” who had no place in the workforce. Boggs’s 1963 vision became a relatively accurate portrayal of the 1970s and 1980s in Detroit, where young people did not find the same automatic jobs on the line as their parents had. Paul Willis’s theorization of ‘art-work’ lends credence to Boggs’s vision that once people could no longer define themselves through work, there would have to be a more creative, human space for development; “The realm of leisure/pleasure is not inconsequential, or ‘necessary’ only for the re-creation of the capacity to work in waged
labor. It contains its own work, its own ‘art-work,’ symbolic work which is about the
formation and expression of identity – this work in play is more crucial in many ways
than the material productions of formal worktime” (Willis 26). Detroit techno, as a
process of ‘art-work,’ not completely unlike the kind of proletarian art conceptualized by
Rivera, in which art was meant in service to the education of the masses, fused Detroit’s
dynamic interplay between arts and politics through the medium of technology. Both
Rivera in the first third of the century and techno musicians, in the last third, recognized
that technology’s strengths lie in its connection to humanity.
Chapter 3

"I Love Detroit:" Electronic Music's Consistent, Persistent Community Pride

If your first visit to Detroit occurs in the middle of a brutal Midwestern winter, you might be surprised to see the handful of permanent street signs that read “Ethnic Festival” and point towards downtown’s major river side public space, Hart Plaza. The largest sign is on Larned, near Washington, visible right when you get off of the Lodge Freeway via the tunnel under the Cobo Hall Convention Center. Some of the other ones, smaller but still pretty big and quite permanent, are on Woodward near Larned, and Randolph near Jefferson. Each sign consists of red lettering on the image of a white flag, flowing over a blue background. I called the city to find out who made the decision to put the signs up and the most I could find out was that with one exception all of the city’s street signs are permanent. I received a harried and slightly annoyed “yes,” to my question “So there are enough festivals in Hart Plaza that it made sense to put up permanent signs?” The Department of Transportation staff referred to the signs, after my description in detail, as the “Hart Plaza signs.” I’m willing to accept that most, if not all, events in Hart Plaza are enough like a festival so that the second word on the signs can be plausibly substituted for “Hart Plaza.” But the word “ethnic” is as permanently written on the signs as they are permanently secured with bolts and screws. During some
weekends of summer festival season the signs read accurately – for instance during the Arab and Chaldean festival, Fiesta Mexican, Caribbean International Festival and the African World Festival. The festival season always ends with the jazz festival. A case could be made for calling a jazz festival an ethnic festival, depending on whether you think that celebrating a music originated by African Americans constitutes considering an event “ethnic.” Festival season, as of the last five years, now begins in May with an event that is also only ambiguously, rather than accurately, pointed at by the “Ethnic Festival” signs -- the Detroit Electronic Music Festival (DEMF).¹

The first festival held in May 2000, then known as the Detroit Electronic Music Festival, was erroneously reported to have drawn 1.5 million people to Hart Plaza. Though later these numbers were seen as an over count, with actual attendance being closer to the hundreds of thousands, the massive attendance represented a bittersweet success for the locally originated art form of Detroit techno music. Before the festival, local and international music journalists announced this event as a homecoming for Detroit techno. Detroit’s legendary status to electronic music fans worldwide underlined the irony that Detroit electronic musicians required a homecoming. Detroiders didn’t know about the music in the way that the international fans did. As Derrick May, one of the event’s headliners, pointed out, attendees may not have even been listening but as far as what will be remembered, that’s immaterial compared to the relevance of the sheer numbers that turned out.² May’s savvy comment gets at what festivals are fundamentally

¹ The Detroit Electronic Music Festival was the original title of the festival. The title has been changed with each change of festival management but the phrase “Detroit Electronic Music Festival” has remained in some form as part of the title so I will use DEMF as a shorthand to represent all of the festivals.
² May’s comment comes from an interview in the midst of the festival captured on footage that my fiancé collected.
about — representation. For instance, the oddly named Fiesta Mexican, a more clear cut “ethnic festival,” is a display of Mexican culture for both outsiders and people of Mexican descent. It is a chance for festival-goers to participate in Chicano culture. Similar to any themed festival, the boundedness of both time and space is what forces the display to be so showy and representational. In other words, if you’ve got only two or three days and limited space, you have to bring as much of what it means to be Mexican close together resulting in a superficial introduction for newcomers.

It is clear from the media coverage of the first Detroit Electronic Music Festival that at all levels of organization of the event was the recognition of the importance of image and representation. The comments of Carol Marvin, the co-organizer of the festival, get at the heart of the whole festival; “Detroit is the birthplace of electronic dance music, and this sound is the city’s greatest musical export today. This festival is certain to be remembered as one of the most positive new visions of our city” (Marvin qtd. in Case, “Techno music...”). Marvin’s choice of words, calling a 3 day musical event a “new vision,” emphasizes an aspect of the first Detroit Electronic Music Festival that is less about participation and more about display, a vehicle in order to generate a positive impact. Phil Talbert, the special activities coordinator for Detroit’s recreation department said, in a similar vein, “We want this to be a destination point for people all over world who love electronic music. As we're entering a resurgence downtown ... this is just another mechanism for us to highlight how well Detroit is doing” (qtd. in Altman). May’s assurance that the numbers are what count, Marvin’s use of the word “vision,” and Talbert’s identification of the music festival as a “mechanism” show that all three are
concerned with the battle to change the public discourse about Detroit by creating a counter narrative to the city’s popular reputation of vacancy.

The comments of Marvin and Talbert proved to be insightful – the first DEMF generated over 400 articles in its aftermath. And though, as I mentioned before, the aptness of the pointing “Ethnic Festival” signs was debatable, the DEMF left an indelible mark of its representation of the city to the city. Carl Craig, the musician who partnered with Carol Marvin to organize the festival, said “I guess it’s the biggest festival ever in Detroit. The anticipation was there from everyone, but 1.5 million people - - that’s amazing. We’ve been the underdogs (in Detroit) for so many years, and now we’ve proven ourselves” (qtd. in Case, “Electronic music…”). The DEMF definitely proved that Detroit electronic music is a crucial part of Detroit’s past, present, and future. But another of Craig’s anticipated results, quoted in a New York Times mid-Festival article, was not proven as conclusively; Craig had hoped to draw a young, black audience. A new young, urban, black audience would mirror Detroit electronic music’s original fan base. By my unofficial count that didn’t happen. Craig explained why the musicians find themselves in a position to need to reach a black audience:

Techno is faceless. They don’t know it’s black music, that it was created by young black men in the same way hip hop was. We were more interested in mastering the machines and seeing how far the music could go without being typecast as something that came form the ghetto. (qtd. in Christian A9)

The attempts to make a faceless music placed techno in the predicament of needing the DEMF to operate as a homecoming and as a representational reminder to situate techno into Detroit history.
The successes of the DEMF, as a representational impact of Detroit electronic music’s local impact, as well as its failures, including the inability to reconnect electronic music with an African American audience, make the festival a snapshot of the ongoing culture of electronic music, and in many ways mirror Detroit’s revitalization. City supported resurgence efforts that occurred near the same time as the first festival showed elements of the intensity of a bounded festival. For instance, the casinos, though built even more formidably than the permanent “Ethnic Festival” street signs, were meant to be temporary locations until permanent structures, which have yet to be attempted, were finished. As I hope was clear in my first chapter, I believe that Detroit’s ability to change its reputation through its representations on regional, national, and international levels, is crucial to any potential revitalization successes. Perpetuating an idea of Detroit as empty and violent, absent and unkempt, is dangerous to the citizens attempting a resurgence. Not only do city residents and officials need to increase public works, better the schools, secure the streets but they must also win at the battle of representation so clearly being waged. Additionally, as the DEMF’s struggles to reconnect with an African American audience demonstrate, maintaining the support of an original foundation is crucial; any city sponsored resurgence should be built on what Detroiters have already been creating and sustaining.

The bounded limits of a festival are important as a way to introduce outsiders to something new. Newcomers need to witness all the cultural items and activities close together in time and space in order to begin to understand anything cohesive about the community. Particularly for music or other arts based communities, in order to have something to offer outsiders in convenient chunks, participants of a community must
sustain it on a day to day basis. Like Detroit’s long legacy of community development, Detroit’s electronic music community is built with week-to-week, day-to-day participation by long term community members whose commitment is based in Detroit pride and resilience. For there to be a DEMF to so publicly challenge misconceptions of Detroit, there has to be a solidly built community functioning as a sustainable example of vibrancy working to revise Detroit’s notorious reputation.

The goal of my ethnographic project is to foreground the sense of pride that techno and house musicians share with their fellow Detroiter, in order to counteract the popular misconception that Detroit is nothing more than a burnt out shell. My project extends current understanding of the ways in which Detroit is circumscribed physically, economically, and culturally from its surrounding suburbs and, by extension, the nation. In this vein, I see a project that foregrounds the positive and vibrant in Detroit, against the tendency to see Detroit as absence, as a work of politically informed, activist ethnography. I hope that my project will serve to find ways to de-truncate Detroit from its suburbs and expose the potential for new relationships and alliances. In this chapter I’d like to introduce the reader to a Detroit party held in a unique space – a hamburger joint that doubles as a nightclub – in order to introduce an aspect of Detroit that is positive and growing. I’m aiming this at both Detroiter and non-Detroiter, because the electronic music community is often locally overlooked. In doing so, I intend to give non-Detroiter a better understanding of what life in the city is really like, as well as give Detroiter another aspect of city living for which they can be proud. The temporary transformation of a downtown restaurant, The Hunter House, during a weekly musical event, called Beautiful Fridays, engages in a long term sustainable battle of representation.
that extends the limited space of an ethnic festival, to discourage the defeated Detroit image.

"...Hunter House, a perfect location"

If it’s Friday night and you are in Detroit, I hope you are headed to the Hunter House, a restaurant in Harmonie Park specializing in those little hamburgers, sometimes called sliders, that I’d never had growing up in California. I’ve spent many of my Friday nights there, hanging out at an event called Beautiful Fridays. The weekly party, featuring DJs mixing electronic music, shares elements typical of night life in other places – loud music, cocktails, dancing, and socializing. However, Beautiful Fridays distinguishes itself from conventional nightlife, as well as resists popular expectations in regards to electronic music, through the elements that help make newcomers into regulars. For one, the maturity of the crowd, in both actual age as well as behavior, means that at thirty one I am one of the younger party-goers. Second, a large portion of the crowd are Detroit based African Americans, ranging from my age to their late forties, some of whom have been a part of the electronic music community since it evolved out of their high school social scene. Though many of the Hunter House regulars have known each other a long time, the crowd is by no means exclusive, and, as a Latina from California, I’ve been warmly welcomed. The Beautiful Fridays crowd, like the electronic

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3 Beautiful Fridays no longer occurs at Hunter House. The event was forced to end because the restaurant was closed and relocated to a newly opened hotel. Zana still promotes electronic music events about once or twice a month at various locations near her downtown boutique. The event at the Hunter House ran from Summer 2002 through the very end of 2003.
music community from which it draws, is mixed: gay and straight; male and female; and although primarily African American, also incorporates Latino, Asian American and white performers and participants. Teachers, engineers, service workers, social workers, sales representatives, elected officials, graduate students, and music industry professionals, amongst others, make up the event’s clientele. This last category includes event promoters, booking agents, as well as DJs and vocalists. The night’s sponsor, Zana Smith, and resident DJ Korie bring the diverse crowd out week after week encouraging a sense of family. For all of these reasons, I became a regular at Hunter House on Friday nights and decided to make this site part of my research.

Beautiful Fridays at Hunter House was one of a handful of events that showcases the talent of Detroit’s electronic music community. Most of these events are weekly, and are sponsored by local promoters and musicians working with the management of various locations. For example, Hunter House is a restaurant which allows the sponsor of Beautiful Fridays to arrange delivery of a sound system and contract weekly guest performers. Usually, the restaurant or bar serves merely as location and the event promoter is responsible for most advertising, promotion, and artist booking. This setup differs from a larger-scale night club that would have in-house booking and promotion. The usually smaller scale of the space, as well as smaller crowds necessary for a successful event, allow event promoters the freedom to cater to specialty tastes rather than mass appeal. For instance, a crowd of 25 dancing at Hunter House is a good enough sized group for the dance floor to feel welcoming, and relatively full. The small scale of this kind of party promotion business, compared to the larger endeavor of an established, large scale nightclub, allows the promoter flexibility, and the ability to begin a weekly
event with less monetary investment than securing a permanent location would require. This small business model is representative of local Detroit commerce that remains close to the heart of local roots: independent, small, flexible, and attentive to community needs. Zana is a particularly interesting example because she participates in the small business model as both an event promoter as well as the owner of a small shop, a boutique called Spectacles located a few storefronts away from Hunter House.

Hunter House is wedged in between two other restaurants on Randolph Street in Harmonie Park, a small retail and residential district made up of the few blocks facing a very small triangular park. It is in downtown Detroit, east of Woodward, and north of Greektown. You can walk to every corner of Harmonie Park in less than ten minutes, however its size does not preclude comparisons to New York’s Soho. Detroiters, including some of the attendees of Beautiful Fridays, make this comparison because Harmonie Park has restaurants, bars, apartments, lofts, art galleries and shops, including Zana’s shop, Spectacles, all within steps of each other. This is a rarity in Detroit, a city nicknamed the Motor City not only because of the automobile industry but because cars are by far the most common form of transportation. The distance from my apartment to Hunter House is less than three miles but like a true Detroiter, I not only drive I also take the freeway. Sometimes, en route to the restaurant from my car, I step down into the recessed area of the park, quickly passing the few chess tables and the fountain, and am able to cut through in about the same time it takes to walk the length of my two bedroom apartment.

Leaving the park and crossing the street to Hunter House’s plate glass floor-to-ceiling windows, you can see the small sound system set up against the front wall of
windows with a few tables pushed aside to accommodate the dancers. The entrance is surprisingly lacking the double door foyer that I have come to expect from Michigan establishments, so that during the wintertime a cool blast of air enters with each patron. This can be a welcome addition when the dance floor is packed with sweaty bodies. Usually when I get there near 11 PM this isn’t yet the case. The other early arrivals are lining the bar, which runs the length of one side of the narrow, rectangular space. The wall across from the bar has tables jutting out from it, all in a row, the entire length of the restaurant. Each table seats four to five on either side. If you sit at the head of the table you run the risk of being bumped by people trying to squeeze past the growing numbers of groupings along the bar. I have been a regular since the earliest parties in late Spring of 2002, which were held as a happy hour on the patio out front, and when the event, after it had been moved to a regular 10 PM to 2 AM slot, gathered a packed dance floor I was surprised for a couple of reasons. The venue is relatively well lit, and the warm yellow walls only serve to keep the place bright. The row of long tables (clearly an asset for accommodating a hamburger-chomping lunch crowd) make for an almost gawking audience for the dance floor. These two things usually make patrons less, rather than more, inclined to shake it in plain view. Despite the lights and the rows of spectators, a hamburger restaurant became a favorite place to dance and a special Friday night hang out.

Some time after midnight, the small impromptu dance floor begins to fill up a bit. Between my arrival and later when I start to dance, I spend my time catching up with the people I haven’t seen since the week before. Some Hunter House regulars will spend their whole night socializing, moving from the tables, to groups standing around the bar,
or along the edge of the dance floor. I never want to miss the fun of a friendly dance floor, and end up being one of the first dancers. House music, the standard at Beautiful Fridays, has a warm, enveloping quality making dancing to it a smooth endeavor – not unlike swimming in the ocean. Dancing to house music allows you to become part of a smiling, undulating group grooving together, while retaining your individuality. To some fans, it is a kind of spiritual comfort and a great way to relax and exercise at the end of a busy week.

Some people on the dance floor dance as couples, some, like me, by themselves. I never, however, feel alone on the dance floor, as the dancers often exchange eye contact and smiles, break into couples for moments, then break apart, and occasionally convey our approval to the DJ for an impressive move or particularly hot track. If someone dances onto my toe, she or he is likely to pat my shoulder and smile an apology my way, while maintaining the beat. I have never felt uncomfortable as a woman alone, on the dance floor, or at the event – this is not a place where uninvited hands grab your backside, as is an unfortunate and sometimes prevalent experience at traditional night clubs.

One Friday in November of 2002 serves as an excellent example of the kind of exuberant energy that spontaneously came to be there. I arrived early to a mostly empty venue and was slightly disappointed because it had been packed the week before. Zana hadn’t even arrived yet. I spoke with Korie, the resident DJ and Norm Talley, who was the guest DJ that night, while they traded short turns at the decks. The turntables, set up in the window, were facing the crowd, so that either Korie and I, or Norm and I, would be sitting on the bench that edges the window, chatting while we faced the back of the DJ.
and the front of the crowd. At one point during Korie’s turn at the turntables, Norm asked me about my project, and I let him know that I still wanted to interview him. We helped ourselves to the free shots from a promotional “shot girl,” who had entered the bar and seemed a bit out of place, mostly because we were not used to seeing, here at Beautiful Fridays, those kinds of promotional gimmicks normally launched at large night clubs. I explained to Norm that I wanted to work with other people besides the most recognizable names in order to get at the behind the scenes kind of people, mentioning that for instance I would like to interview Zana. Near midnight and about an hour after my arrival, the dance floor filled up. On this particular night one woman seemed to be always at the center of the most exuberant dancing, a huge smile bursting from her face. A dance floor can be like that; it can feed off one dancer’s enthusiasm to become more lively and animated. Swept up in the excitement, I pulled out the normally reluctant dancer, Zana, on the dance floor. She didn’t stay long but she later told me that she had enjoyed herself that night. That night, like many others at Hunter House, made me feel very much a part of a cohesive yet flexible group. Norm, as the featured guest, took a longer turn at the decks and in response to his set we danced, smiled at Norm and each other and shared moments dancing together as well as apart. The feeling on the dance floor, the vibe, was exuberant, loud, open, and colorful. For a time, I found myself dancing next to a friend of mine. She leaned over to say that someone she knew kept saying, “I’m right where I need to be now.” A few minutes later, a man dancing next to us shouted this phrase, and so we smiled and laughed with him. After his set, Norm came over to me and said, “people keep coming up to me and going…” at that point demonstrating a wide, peaceful, open smile. I was familiar with it because it was the
same smile we dancers had been exchanging on the dance floor throughout his set. A
good dance floor creates that sense of happiness, in the smiles, and that sense of
belonging heard in the one man’s repeated statement, “I’m right where I need to be now!”

The dance floor in the window works out well for the patrons who like to first
drive slowly past, peering in to size up the crowd. As Zana pointed out to me,

It’s a great drive-by location, because people in Detroit like
to drive by... because we all have fabulous cars. The cars
are very important in Detroit. So you want to be seen in
your car. Having those windows there and people being
able to drive by, made Hunter House a perfect location.

A potential Hunter House patron, assessing the scene and showing off a prized vehicle,
will be only one of many slow moving vehicles around the downtown Detroit area on a
Friday night; the others belong to suburbanites too afraid to venture off major arteries
who therefore find themselves in time consuming traffic jams jockeying to approach
freeway on ramps. Showing off your car represents pride not only in what you are
driving, but where you are driving, because you place some sense of value on the
opinions of the people in proximity to your car. Hunter House regulars refuse to
participate in the public discourse of disavowal of Detroit. They do so by, in many cases,
living in the city and by showing their appreciation and support of a Detroit based
entertainment venue. Dancing to Detroit DJs in a Detroit setting is not just an incredibly
fun night, but simultaneously an act that counters Detroit’s seedy reputation accepted in
large numbers in the surrounding suburbs of the city.

Zana’s life is an exemplary counter narrative to the public discourse surrounding
Detroit that maintains that there is little of value left in the city. Her dual career as a
boutique owner and event promoter is a living testimonial for what possibilities exist in a creative, vibrant Detroit. Born and raised in Detroit she attended schools on the West side of Detroit, leaving to attend Ferris State University at the age of 16, followed by time at Clark University in Atlanta. She came home to finish her degree in Communications with a minor in Public Relations at Wayne State University in Detroit. I met Zana through a mutual friend at the very first Beautiful Fridays event at Hunter House. Meeting her in another context, I would have been surprised to find out she is a party promoter because she is quiet and serious. I wasn’t sure what to make of her that evening, but later I would come to learn that her kindness and good intentions were no weaker because of her reserved demeanor. In contrast, one of the best aspects of Zana’s character is that she doesn’t waste words and always means what she says. As I became a regular at Hunter House on Friday nights, I began to learn little bits here and there from other regulars about Zana. Zana has been promoting events in Detroit for more than twenty years. Within the electronic music community she is locally respected for her professionalism, skill, and long term participation. She worked her earliest events with a DJ largely credited within the scene as influential to the point of being foundational, Ken Collier. Their parties helped establish the house music scene in Detroit. Over her tenure she has learned the business of promoting well and knows her audience. During my interview with her she mentioned that “house music is a… it’s a very intimate group of people that enjoy the music. It’s not a real large market.” Her reserved demeanor does not prevent her from conveying a deep sense of hospitality that connects her with her customers. Maybe this is because becoming a promoter, for Zana, was an outcome of her personality:
Zana Smith: It seems that it was just a natural progression of things. I always gave parties, as a kid coming up. I decided that I wanted to have a couple of parties when I moved into a flat because I had the vacant upstairs. And I gave a couple of parties up there and I can’t even remember how we were making the music. I think we had, uh... we were just playing records but Ken Collier just came out of nowhere and he came in with a crate of records and he just blew up the system. I decided because the two parties I gave at home were so crowded and so successful that I would find a place in downtown Detroit to continue the parties.

CV: So what were some important things you learned early on about promoting parties?

ZS: What did I learn? Our first invitation had a picture of my roommate in army fatigues with the hat, the gun, kind of like a soldier and it mentioned Ken Collier and the fact that we had a special sound system. What I learned was it’s always a combination, it’s not just me, promoting the party. It’s a lot of ingredients, just like making soup.

In an understated way, Zana is achieving the goal declared by Carl Craig in regards to reaching Detroit African American crowds with the DEMF. Those that attend her events live and socialize locally. They know each other not just from being regulars at Hunter House but at all kinds of similar events where they support each others’ endeavors at promotion and within the music industry. Zana had broadly brought up the topic of DJs-turned-promoters when I asked her what was the biggest change she had seen over her twenty plus year promoting parties in Detroit:

Well now you have the DJs trying to promote their own parties. So you have the DJs trying to throw the parties now. Because they have such notoriety overseas that they really do feel like celebrities and they don’t want to play for, you know, 100 dollars, 50 dollars. They want to make
500 dollars at home because they can make 3000 overseas. So to come back here and to be able to play for a crowd -- they want to get paid. And so they started to give their own functions.

Zana mentioned that this trend had slowed down because

They haven’t realized all the difficulties... in working the door, in working the guest list, in dealing with talent. Because they have to deal with the talent too, and the egos. You have to deal with talent, egos, you know hospitality is an art, and a lot of them aren’t business savvy. Maybe they’ll make a bad deal in how much they are paying for the space or they’ll get a space that’s too large. Or they’ll get a space that’s been used too much. Because they don’t know the science of promotion. Quite a few of them have come back and said to me and 'wow I see... I see now, Zana, what you go through trying to give a party.' It’s not as easy as it looks.

I had attended some of the parties promoted by the DJs that Zana alludes to and had noticed that their audience was largely the same as the DEMF, white and suburban. I pushed Zana to talk about why she was able to reach the crowd that the organizers of the DEMF had hoped to reach.

Well that’s why a lot of the DJs do like to play for me because we do get a Detroit based, urban crowd. But again, the market is small. They don’t go, I think, to some of the parties that some of those DJs [who play] overseas give because they’ve lost touch with the city. They don’t feel them. They don’t play at the regular clubs. Every time they give a party they are trying to get a space, or trying re-create a space, but they never come back and actually play for the people and stay in touch with them. They are all on the outskirts of what’s going on. They’re not in the inner city where things are gritty, and raw. They’ve become too sophisticated and that’s why they don’t get that black urban crowd and they tend to get more of the worldly crowd or the suburban crowd. That’s the only thing that I can guess.
But at Hunter House we’ve been able to get a cross section of people Hispanics, Asians, suburbanites, you know and gays, straights... it’s something that I’ve been fortunate enough to have... You know when I throw a party, I don’t know who is going to come, but I think it’s from being receptive to everyone and being in sales because with having a store I want to drive people to the store so therefore I have to be open to all lifestyles.

Zana’s small, flexible business model allows her to remain connected with local needs and concerns. I do not wish to diminish the very real contributions of the world traveling DJs, whose ability to build fan bases around the world for Detroit music has created an international respect for an underground art form that can only help the city’s revitalization. However, their long absences leave them less in tune with local fans. Essentially, both Zana’s model and the large, promotion vehicle of the DEMF are necessary and together maintain and sustain the Detroit electronic music community. The existence of the weekly events at Hunter House, as well as Zana’s boutique Spectacles, do the day-to-day work of counteracting the prevailing discourse of an absent, deflated Detroit.

“Create-a-gig”

The tendencies towards erasure or disdain within public discourse outside of Detroit were, from 1991 through 2002, mirrored by Michigan Governor John Engler’s budget cuts and policy reforms which fell hardest on Michigan’s largest city. Only halfway into her first year as governor, his successor, Jennifer Granholm, announced at the Detroit Regional Chamber’s annual Leadership Policy Conference that she believed...
that the way to keep young, creative people in Michigan was to nurture cool cities. Picking up on ideas from Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class,* she designated a commission to investigate what cool aspects of Michigan cities should be supported by state funding. Echoing a concern, similar to that shown by the DEMF participants, of the battle of representation required to change the public discourse of uncool Michigan cities, Governor Granholm put on a pair of dark black sunglasses at the announcement, as well as subsequent public discussions, to emphasize the goal of "cool." She asked the mayors of 250 Michigan cities to convene advisory groups to explore how to encourage more young people to remain in Michigan. I attended one of the meetings in Detroit, and at the time assumed a Cool Cities initiative would have to be launched, primarily, at Detroit. As far as I could tell, Governor Granholm had realized the state needed to help counteract the negative reputation of Detroit, or in other words, engage in the battles of representation on behalf of its largest city. The Cool Cities Initiative was poised to turn the tide of Engler sponsored dismissal of Detroit. However, a year later when the Governor announced the recipients of the $100,000 pilot grants only 3 of the 20 were for projects in Detroit.\(^4\) Even while stating, "There's no reason the city of Detroit can't be like Chicago," the governor announced 17 out of 20 projects destined for the suburbs of Detroit, and small cities spread throughout the state of Michigan (qtd. in Hornbeck). The Cool Cities Initiative sponsored an ice rink in Marquette, a pedestrian walkway in Alpena, and an arts center in Saugatuck, three projects located more than 200

\(^4\) Detroit won three grants and Grand Rapids two along with one each for Ferndale and Warren. Other cities with winning projects are: Alpena, Bay City, Flint, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Marquette, Port Huron, Portland, Saginaw, Saugatuck, Sault Ste. Marie, Traverse City and Ypsilanti.
miles from Detroit that won’t markedly affect Detroit’s urban reputation, much less actual life in the city.

To be honest, the three projects in Detroit – one to rehabilitate Shed #2 in Eastern Market, one to make a mixed art/use space on the far east side, and one to renovate Odd Fellows Hall in Southwest Detroit – aren’t likely to make Detroit that much more desirable to the Initiative’s targeted groups. Eastern Market is an important institution that fills with shoppers Saturdays buying both local farm raised as well as commercially raised produce. The two other spaces will provide interesting new structures, but it should be clear that the young creative types are more interested in creating their own cultural landscapes then having a designated cool space set up for them to flock to. The first grants failed to identify nascent cool spaces, and nurture them into more viably cool neighborhoods. For instance, most Detroiters travel solely by car. There are few neighborhoods in the city where you can walk to grab take out or stroll down the street for a drink with a friend. Harmonie Park, the neighborhood in which Zana’s Beautiful Fridays takes place, functions as a walkable neighborhood. There are restaurants, art galleries, a few shops, and loft apartments. Support of Harmonie Park would be an ideal way to invite young people interested in urban living.

My critiques of the Cool Cities Initiative come from the opposite end of the spectrum of most within the public discussion of one of the governor’s favorite projects. Most critics complain that the Cool Cities Initiative is an unfortunate move during a time when the state is facing almost a billion dollar budget deficit. The failure to centralize most projects in Detroit, and tie the Initiative intimately to the city’s need to alter its representation in order to attract investment, created a situation where the farthest
suburbs and exurbs are asking – what about us? For instance, in Canton, which could be considered either a suburb of college town Ann Arbor or an exurb of Detroit, Supervisor Thomas Yack joined other suburban officials that complained that their suburbs were treated unfairly. Yack’s comment that, “somehow our residents aren’t as equal as other residents,” followed a logical framing of the Initiative that took focus away from Detroit, as Michigan’s major city, and made it appear that all places – cities, suburbs, townships, and small towns – had equal claims to the fund (qtd. in “Don’t Limit Brownfield…”).

I hope that as the program moves out of its pilot stage, the governor and her staff implement some of the information they received at an ad hoc meeting that I attended on August 27th, 2003, meant to gather preliminary data for the beginnings of the Cool Cities Initiative. At that meeting, the attendees acknowledged that in the absence of comforts such as stores that carry fresh produce or maintain late hours, what keeps many of them in the city are Detroit’s musical legacy and the current creative output. Zana’s event at Hunter House was used as an example by an attendee of the meeting in a way that demonstrates how a cultural event, in this case a weekly house music party, is part and parcel to the economic struggles of the city and can be an excellent example of thinking of Detroit in terms of presence rather than absence. The individual, whom I have seen many times at Hunter House, said that what Detroit has, and what it needs more of, is the ‘create-a-gig’ mentality. If you don’t have work – create a gig; if there is no place to hang out on Friday nights – create a gig. He brought up Friday nights at Hunter House as an example of how ‘create-a-gig’ thinking could be beneficial to the city. He said that the promoter of the party had done specifically that by creating an event where people can come together, and across differences, get along. He emphasized that she’d taken a

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place that was mostly empty on Friday nights and made it into something different. I understood his 'create-a-gig' plan to mean that any proponent would have to find a way to value a presence, in places, services, or things where most assume only absence.

It made sense, to me, for the speaker to choose Zana and her work with Beautiful Fridays as an example. I can see after having spoken with her about her event that making something out of nothing, 'create-a-gig,' describes well what she did to make it happen. Basically, she took a place that had no significance to many of the people who eventually became loyal to her Friday night event and made it a site for the kind of interaction I described above. Most didn’t eat there or hang out drinking at the bar. She tested the management’s reserve by starting the event at what they perceived was a harmless time.

This ‘create-a-gig’ mentality requires not just the idea and the interest but also a lot of hard work and follow through. If the governor’s suspicion is correct, then the city needs many more people like Zana who can successfully promote events so that young people have somewhere to go. What Zana did to get it going shows how difficult a successful weekly event is to produce:

It took us a while to get the management to let us have the parties. So we started early after work but the reason I started at Hunter House, we were also giving parties at the Detroit Artist Space, ... and when I do things I’m trying to get as much out of it as I can. I say, well if I’m going to be out there promoting Saturday night I might as well go ahead and try to get this Friday night going and I’ll do them both at the same time... I knew that one of them probably would fall by the wayside, because when you go into these things you never know which personalities are going gel. So this is just having a business sense about how to do things. I knew that I had to show the management at Hunter House who our audience was. So that they would be receptive to us being there. You know I had been trying to have a party there for two years prior to that.

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Though her Saturday night event at the Detroit Artist Space did fall by the wayside, she
was left with a very successful Friday night event. After a couple of months of early
evening patio parties, the management allowed Zana and her team to move to a regular
nightlife time. She therefore created a party out of nothing, in a space where there not
only hadn’t been parties, but where the management was resistant to the idea. Her
persistence for the perfect location paid off. Though this is a weekly event at which she
eventually started charging a cover, Zana still uses the words 'invitations' and 'party' to
describe it and her attention to detail as a host shows. She greets a large number of the
patrons and makes sure everything is running smoothly. She secures impeccable talent to
perform with the resident, DJ Korie.\(^5\) Zana works very hard to create a space of vibrancy
in Detroit, which counteracts Detroit’s reputation of vacancy, and therefore enhances
Detroit’s representation, on a small scale, without any state or city sponsored support.
Though I applaud the governor’s attempts at revitalizing urban places in the face of
staunch opposition, the Cool Cities Initiative fails to support organic entities, creations
that meet the Cool Cities’ goal better than the projects that received grants.

The willingness of Zana’s guest DJs to perform for a much lower fee than some
could command in other places is caused, as Zana mentioned, by a desire to play for a
home town crowd. The musicians have a love for Detroit that you can hear in their song
selection, the way they play the records, as well as in their interviews. Norm Talley, the
DJ whose performance prompted the dance floor I described earlier, is a Detroiter, born

\(^5\) The guest DJs include Mike “Agent X” Clark, Kenny Dixon Jr, Al Ester, Mike Grant, Alton Miller,
Minx, Theo Parrish, Stacey Pullen, Norm Talley, and Rick Willhite, many of whom travel to perform at
gigs across the United States as well as in all parts of the world. All of these names are the DJs’
performing names.
and raised, who has been mixing records since he was 15, for almost 20 years now. During his early years as a DJ he won second place in a turntablism contest, which prioritizes the DJ’s skills at performing fast moving tricks. His past experience results now in house music sets that are consistently smooth and supple. His personality mirrors his style as a DJ – I’ve never seen him angry or rattled. He always has a big smile and a kind word for friends and acquaintances. When I belabored a point with a follow up question, he seemed only momentarily taken aback:

CV: Have you ever considered living anywhere else besides Detroit?
Norm Talley: I like Detroit. I love Detroit. So I’m not leaving.
CV: Do you mind if I ask what keeps you here?
NT: I like Detroit, I like the environment. I mean, don’t get me wrong now, it’s gets cold and all that, but we are in Michigan so that’s to be expected. I know a lot of people here, my family’s here, I like Belle Isle and the city itself… I’m happy. I don’t feel like I want to leave. I’m enjoying myself and the environment here, and hey, I’m happy.

Even after I pushed the issue and asked, “Do you mind if I ask what keeps you here?” Norm’s answer remained simple, speaking of people and places that make him happy. I could see Norm becoming slightly exasperated for my pushing and the truth is I should know better – I love Detroit for what it is. My answer of the things I like about it wouldn’t include heavy usage of the word “despite,” which is what I guess Norm might have gleaned I was getting at with my follow up question. Expecting such from Norm was slipping, for a moment, into the social scientific methodology noticed by Robin Kelley that I discussed in my first chapter. The music is what keeps many of the DJs and other types of participants of the community here, but its in addition to rather than despite
what it here in Detroit for these city residents. This is because city residents are more likely than their suburban counterparts to think of Detroit in terms of presence rather than the all too common misconceptions of absence and decay.

"Distribution is my main concern"

The grumblings surrounding the Cool Cities Initiative are symptomatic of a tendency in the suburban satellites of Detroit to consider their well being, their livelihoods, and most importantly, their obligations as separate from the city. They are, at most times, disconnected from the present Detroit, and engaged only, as I discussed in my first chapter, with nostalgic associations of when Detroit felt more like theirs.

Karen Miller’s article “Whose History, Whose Culture? The Museum of African American History, the Detroit Institute of the Arts, and Urban Politics at the End of the Twentieth Century,” is an excellent analysis of the complicated discourse regarding the city’s and the suburbs’ claims and attachments to cultural institutions located in Detroit. Miller examines the ways in which two unrelated developments in 1997, the expansion of the African American History Museum and the financial struggles of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, launched a public debate about the management of the city where both institutions were given political and metaphorical meanings. The financial struggles of the DIA led to an attempt to sever the ties between the museum and the city and hand over management to the Founders Society, the non-profit organization that included some of its largest benefactors. This attempt of the DIA was fought against by the Detroit City
Council, with concerns in regards to the privatization of a public institution. According to Miller, within the public debate carried out by pundits, journalists, and politicians, the Museum of African American History became a “cultural representation for black political power and black control in the city” while the Detroit Institute of Arts became “the metaphorical embodiment of white, suburban, middle class culture and (supposed) white political powerlessness in the city” (141). Her detailing of the arguments over control of the city’s cultural institutions demonstrates how deeply divided and disconnected suburbanites feel from the center city. Ironically, in a later debate over a proposed regional ‘culture’ tax that would fund museums, the DIA shifts in meaning to suburban opponents to become, “cast as Detroit institutions that, like welfare recipients, were turning to public trust for their own, selfish benefit” (Miller 150). Miller’s careful analysis of the terms of public debate demonstrate that suburban residents’ ties to city center institutions are both contested and quite changeable depending on their perceived obligations towards the maintenance of institutions located in Detroit.

There are exceptions during which suburban residents still find themselves attached to small parts of Detroit, such as entertainments venues like the Fox Theatre, or the football and baseball stadiums relocated to Detroit, or the casinos. In the first few months of my residence in Detroit, a downtown shopkeeper remarked to me that the only people of color near the Fox are in uniform. A few years later I heard this as a point of contention at a community meeting on police brutality hosted by a city councilman. One woman approached the microphone to say that she sees six police officers watching people walk across the street in front of Tiger Stadium when we aren’t safe in our neighborhoods. She continued that the problem isn’t whether there are enough police
officers in the city, but that they are positioned where they aren’t needed. Her final statement, “Distribution is my main concern,” met with substantial applause. It is to assuage the fears of the suburban visitors that the city musters up such a huge presence for situations that are merely a traffic issue, and ignores the neighborhoods.

The slow moving Hunter House patron showing off her or his fabulous car in front of the plate glass windows is motivated by entirely different reasons than the suburbanites who refuse to find alternate routes to freeway on ramps because it will take them away from police surveillance. The fear that keeps suburbanites in their cars, as well as along specific traffic-snarled routes, demonstrates how disconnected they’ve become to the central city. Their ability to drive in and out, is enabled by the ubiquity of the freeway in Detroit (which is incidentally the reason why I would hop on a freeway for my short drive to Hunter House; almost everything is connected by the freeway). They may have temporary ties to each other during their time in Cobo Hall or the Fox Theatre, but the moment they leave the event their ties to each other are immediately broken and their ties to the local community are shown to have never existed, as they are cocooned behind locked doors and police surveillance.

In his article, “Driving While Black,” Paul Gilroy’s explanations of how a car could both liberate and disenfranchise African Americans detail why the two car trips I’ve described are so different from each other:

... [I]t would be the same motor car that provided both blacks and whites with tacit, complementary solutions to the discomforts of traveling in close proximity with each other. For blacks, driving themselves could be part of liberation from their apartheid, while for whites, this tactic supplied a legitimate means of perpetuating and indeed compounding segregation in the new forms created by
essentially privatized transport between suburban dwellings in ‘race’-homogenous neighbourhoods and distant employment opportunities. White flight from urban centres was not just accomplished by means of the automobile, it was premised on it. (94)

The distribution, as subject of complaint at the community meeting on police brutality, stands in here as the cause of the Detroit area’s disconnects and problems. The racially segregated distribution in city and suburb creates the fear and animosity. Gilroy’s contention that the automobile is more than just the means, but the premise of white flight adds a symbolic layer to Detroit’s Motor City moniker. It should be no surprise, then, that the nation’s car capital is also the most segregated.

The segregated distribution of the metro Detroit area makes Detroit’s battle for changing representations even more difficult because the harshest critics are usually the nearest neighbors. As should be obvious from the challenges facing the Cool Cities Initiative, state sponsored resurgence in Detroit needs the support of the surrounding municipalities. The task taken on by State Senator Buzz Thomas of the 4th District in Detroit is therefore also a difficult one: he fights for changing Detroit’s representation, both as an image and with respect to more tangible gains, within the state legislature. Senator Thomas’s legislative work pushes for the revitalization of Detroit. His main agenda is to promote urban reinvestment over suburban and exurban sprawl by promoting the importance of Michigan cities, as was evident during our interview:

I use my office more as a “bully pulpit” to promote regionalism, to promote reinvestment in cities. I will propose an alternative budget in the next couple of weeks that would spend state dollars directly in inner ring suburbs and urban core cites instead of promoting growth amongst townships and others […]. I think that the majority of our
gross state product is generated in cities. We should spend dollars where communities are generating the support. We are the economic engine of the state so we should invest more resources [in cities]. That’s my agenda.

One site of interest for Senator Thomas is connecting the city’s music scenes with the city’s image and attractiveness to potential new residents. Though Detroit electronic music is extremely localized, in that the political and cultural particularities of the city contributed to its original sound, its appeal is sometimes stronger on an international rather than local level. I had to agree with Senator Thomas when he noted

I’m always amazed when I look at the popularity worldwide of some of these DJs that are here that play in obscurity. If Derrick May walked right through the halls of the Fischer building you and I would probably be the only ones that know who he was. If he does that in Amsterdam, or some other European city, or in Japan, that wouldn’t be the case.

Senator Thomas’s legislative work is an important site for combating electronic music’s local invisibility and illuminating its potential contribution towards revitalization efforts.

Senator Thomas’ efforts are well timed in that he believes house music is as popular now as it’s been over the last decade:

I attribute it to Theresa [Hill]. I attribute it to some of the folks that are just hardcore house heads that very slowly built up loyal followings. If you go to Agave on Sunday night or the Hunter House on Friday they have a very steady crowd. I’m amazed at the number of folks that heard me co hosting After School Groove.

Part of the reason that I contacted Senator Thomas for an interview was that I also caught his one time visit to Theresa Hill’s After School Groove show on 90.9 WDTR, discussed in Chapter One. His stop at her show, on which she daily plays house music as well as
hosts guest DJs weekly who bring in their mixes, confirmed what I had suspected seeing
the Senator out and about – that he is himself a hardcore house head (meaning a fan of
house music). I'd learned from his visit to the After School Groove show, that he was
part of the host committee for the opening celebration of the Detroit Historical Museum's
exhibit, *Techno: Detroit’s Gift to the World*. The Senator’s current work in the Senate, as
well as his past work in the House, shows a strong commitment to developing an
awareness of local arts and culture:

I was a founder and chairman of the Arts Caucus which is
designed to bring legislators together that support public
support of the arts and culture and build our tourist industry
around arts and culture. We've got a lot of work to do in
Michigan in terms of increasing awareness about the
importance of arts and culture and reminding folks that
music is a part of the arts and culture community. In other
words, why the exhibit at the Historical Museum is
important is because it mainstreams an underground music
and defines it as an art form.

Senator Thomas’ championing of Detroit electronic music will not only help define the
music as an art form, but also emphasizes its importance to Detroit’s potential
revitalization.

Coupled with his work promoting Detroit’s interests with regard to the
distribution of the state’s capital, Senator Thomas suggests promoting Detroit as a
cultural draw for tourist dollars:

16 Billion dollars a year is spent on cultural tourism in the
United States. Detroit, given its musical heritage with
Motown, Civil Rights pioneers that started here, great
moments in Civil Rights history that were here – I see just a
great linkage that can be done there. We can really market
Detroit as a cultural tourist mecca. I think that we miss the
boat if we don’t do that.
Senator Thomas has worked to locate Detroit electronic music within Michigan’s cultural legacy, along with Motown and Civil Rights activism. When in the House of Representative during the second Detroit electronic music festival, he and colleague Bill McConico, wrote state resolutions which honored the local musicians working to organize the festival. His support of the artists helped legitimize their position as part of a cultural legacy within Michigan as musical innovators. He has a strong belief in what the musicians will be able to accomplish for the state through the annual electronic music festival:

I think it’s a great opportunity to promote the city as the music capital. The eyes of the electronic music world kind of focus in on Detroit over this weekend. [...] In the future I hope that there are some resources dedicated to it, some true sponsorships so that they can do the worldwide promotion, get the MTV’s back here, get the folks coming from around the world. [...] It’s a great opportunity to spotlight that Detroit is fun. You miss an opportunity if you don’t do that – that Detroit’s fun and Detroit’s a little bit different.

Distribution sums up Senator Thomas’ main concerns. His attention to where state funds are spent emphasizes that the distribution of resources has real effects on city residents. Distribution of resources, away from the communities that as Senator Thomas argues are the economic engine of the state, create inequalities. For the good of the state, Detroit must again become the central draw, to tap into national and international cultural tourism dollars. Senator Thomas links techno, Motown and civil rights as the particulars of Detroit that should catch non-Michigander interest.
Despite the Historical Museum’s exhibit and the annual electronic music festival the musicians still lack the kind of local recognition that would facilitate their contributions to Detroit’s comeback. What Senator Thomas participates in on a local level, building recognition for electronic music, Detroit electronic music has already done globally for Detroit. For example, as discussed above the success of the first year of the DEMF with attendance in the hundreds of thousands, demonstrated that the Detroit electronic music industry has maintained, for many years, a counter narrative to Detroit’s notorious reputation made popular in national and international press. Rather than being a central city that not even suburban residents would enter, Detroit during the DEMF became a major destination for electronic music fans, a mecca of sorts for the dedicated who traveled thousands of miles to be in Hart Plaza. Artists have noticed that the festival creates a resource for the city and the state; for instance, Terrence Parker, a DJ who has performed in 57 cities in other countries, responded to my question of whether the electronic music community has a role to play in the city’s urban revitalization by saying:

> You have to draw on all the resources. The music festival alone, the electronic music festival, raises anywhere between 80 and 100 million dollars every year. I'd say that's a pretty significant financial gain that comes in from the music. From one weekend. That in itself qualifies that the music be taken seriously and duly noted as a viable resource.

Terrence stressed the financial contribution of the festival goers, and by extension Detroit electronic music, to the city. The Detroit electronic music community reestablishes, for the short term during the festival weekend, the central city as the economic core of the region, a project taken on long term by Senator Thomas’ work in the senate and Zana’s
entrepreneurial efforts. A home-grown arts community is once again centralizing attention to Detroit, and as will be shown in my final chapter, maintains international connections with an extended global music community.

“Persistent and Consistent”

Zana Smith and her event, Beautiful Fridays, are exemplary of the kinds of business that maintain a local Detroit, and that counteract the popular misconception that Detroit is a place of absence and cultural impoverishment. Her relationships with the people who attend her event are warm, productive, and meaningful. Though she is operating a business endeavor, her motivations are never solely about profit. Her retail boutique is a similar kind of venture. When I asked Zana about her business in downtown Detroit, I expected her to talk about the city’s meaning to Spectacles and she surprised me with a discussion of Detroit’s youth:

My motivation behind being entrepreneurial is to let people know, young inner city kids, that you can be entrepreneurial and not be a drug man. You don’t necessarily have to do illegal things, you can sell Piston jerseys when the Pistons win the pennant or the Tigers win, or just be persistent and consistent, keep good hours…and you know throw it out there, you’ll never know what you get back. I think most of them they find me very serious. I don’t play. I don’t kid with them. I’m very up front about how it is.

I’m hoping that that’s the example.

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Within a music industry stereotyped as vacuous, and a city misconceived as empty, Zana brings pride and commitment to her work and her community.

In her own contribution to the influential volume she edited, *Decolonizing Anthropology, Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation*, Faye Harrison uses her fieldwork experience in a politically disenfranchised neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica as an example of how ethnographers with what she terms a “multiple consciousness” play an important role in moving the discipline towards a democratized field premised by equality and justice. Harrison’s concluding words balance what a researcher’s contribution to a field site might be, with the effects the people we work with can have on us: “While multiple consciousness can engender more perspective and socially responsive field research, ethnographic experience can, in turn, enhance consciousness and commitment, and consequently influence the direction of long-term political activism and career development.” (Harrison 105) In my own work, I feel like the balance of my contribution against what my ethnographic experience has given me weighs more heavily on the side of the latter. While I hope that my project will work towards dismantling the deeply held and racially inflected misunderstanding heaped on Detroit, I am indebted to my field for what Detroiters have taught me about how community building and civic pride in the face of regional hostility are activism in and of themselves.

The challenges facing Detroit – a diminishing tax base, a struggling school system, insufficient structural improvements – are best met by building on local

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6 “Multiple consciousness” is an idea that Harrison builds on DuBois’ term “double consciousness” to reference researchers with experience of national, racial, sexual or class oppressions, 90.
community networks already in place, such as the electronic music community. The largest mistake of Granholm’s Cool Cities Initiative is that it is, in current form, focused on supporting projects that are generic markers of what makes a city cool – lofts, promenades, art studios – rather than supporting the specifics of what makes Detroit appealing. The thousands of fans who participate in the annual Detroit electronic music festival do so because of what has been created by the originators of this musical genre. They are brought to Detroit by their long distance interest in a locally originated art form. That a community exists for these folks to visit every year is because of day-to-day participation by local unsung heroes like Zana Smith. This chapter has been about a local arts scene, as exemplified by the entrepreneurial work of a scene promoter. Through Zana’s “science of promotion” we have observed what it feels like to attend a party and what it means to be a part of the electronic music community. In the next chapter our perspective will rest on the other side of the turntables. The specifics of one DJ’s story will build on the information in this chapter about the community’s concerns by offering a case study of one individual’s connections to the community.
Chapter 4

“We Want Women on Wax!” DJ Minx as Both Exceptional and Exemplary

“I kind of feed off the crowd, ok? First of all, I know if it’s something I like, that they’ll probably like it. Because when I play, I dance to what I play. And they’ll probably join me. It just always works. You know… they like to see you enjoying it.” DJ Minx

Dancing in the street changes something in the way that the crowd on the makeshift dance floor interacts. Maybe part of it is the unusual pleasure of lingering in a space across which, as a pedestrian, you would normally hurry. Dancing, chatting with friends, or just standing and looking all come easily to the crowd in the midst of a 40 mile per hour cityscape that normally relegates them to the periphery. Detroit, an American city that fails particularly well on the matters of public transportation and walkability, compensates with many summer street festivals. Making a city street a pedestrian zone for a day reverses the physical reality of Detroit, a city scaled to more readily incorporate cars than people. Redefining the use of a landscape, in this case making a dance floor out of a five-lane street, requires some instruction for participants, in the sense that a few changes need to be put in place for them to realize that they are not simply supposed to cross the street or wait for a bus. A few of these cues are physical and visual – a raised stage covered with a tent, concession stands lining the street just at the sidewalk’s edge, a sound system, as well as signs reading “Fresh Lemonade,” or “Diamondancer wearable
art.” At this kind of event the most important cue is aural, and I was particularly happy
that day to know that DJ Minx would be in control of putting out the audio cue that
today’s use of the street would be different, and today’s main purpose for the asphalt was
for us to dance.

DJ Minx, the third DJ of the day, arrived about 45 minutes before her scheduled
performance and weaved her way through the crowd. Minx arrived with some friends
toting a camcorder and her personal demeanor reflected the excitement she had
mentioned to me a few weeks before about being asked to play the event. Minx stands
out even when she is not on stage. She is extroverted and gregarious which serves to
emphasize rather than downplay her over six foot stature. Before I really knew her this
combination made me a bit intimidated, but Minx is so gracious and kind that when I first
interacted with her I felt completely comfortable. It had turned into a beautiful late
summer day, the kind of weather where you are comfortable but not too hot and not too
cold. That weather would hold one more week for the wedding at which Minx and I
would be bridesmaids together. Though the bride did not want to ask Minx to DJ at her
wedding, because as matron of honor, she’d done quite a bit already, I encouraged Minx
to play a few records. I just thought it would be interesting to be to be at a wedding in
which the matron of honor performed as a DJ. As a fan of Minx’s talent, I also wanted to
hear her play. Minx must have planned not to heed the bride’s instructions because she
had a crate of records with her. It looked to me that Minx enjoyed throwing a few
records on, as I’ve noticed many if not most DJs find themselves itching to play
whenever they are not scheduled to perform.
The free street festival brought dancers to the floor that wouldn’t be as likely to venture out, late at night, pay cover and spend the early hours of the morning sweating, smiling, and dancing to electronic music. On September 14th, 2003 the dancing crowd on Second Avenue, two blocks south of Wayne State’s campus in what is called the cultural center of Detroit, was a mix of both electronic music fans who had come specifically to check out the DJs that day, as well as people who looked new to the experience of electronic music in Detroit, but who seemed to be enjoying themselves at least on par with those that had come out purposefully to hear DJ Minx and the others.

The stage was set up two blocks south of where Second Avenue, a five-lane, one way street, is interrupted by Wayne State’s campus. One side of the dance floor was bordered by a parking lot and people used the concrete parking edges as seats to rest and take in the dancers. The west side of the street had some of Detroit’s few large apartment buildings. During Dally in the Alley, residents either turn their apartments into festival rest stops, get out for the day, or find a way to manage the noise because the event lasts all day and can be quite loud. This one stage looked very different from the other three stages at the Dally, because two turntables and a mixer were set up on a raised table, at the very edge of the stage, taking up most of the length of the stage. This served to illustrate that the featured performances at this stage were of DJs as artists, rather than DJ as support staff to a larger band, or as simply background dancing music. In fact, one of the disadvantages of putting a DJ on a stage, as compared to many small bars and nightclubs that have DJs at dance floor level, is that the inevitable crowd of aspiring DJs who crowd the turntables to watch technique or check record labels of the tracks that pique their interest are thwarted when a DJ performs on a raised stage. This also changes
the intimacy that a DJ can have with a crowd at a smaller club when their instruments are
set up on one level. In Detroit there is much to be missed from having the DJ's hands out
of view. Detroit house and techno DJs, more than in other cities, incorporate into their
performances turntabilist tricks usually associated with hip hop DJs. It’s not enough to
blend records; Detroit DJs who perform in public are expected to have mastery over some
basic tricks that make the records sound new, that give turntables the actual status as
instruments. Minx is no exception to this rule. Detroit DJs are also across the board very
good at making their performances interactive, vibing off what the crowd needs to hear
and changing their record selections accordingly. Minx is exceptional in this regard only
in that she makes a more intense, more concentrated effort and excels at pleasing the
crowd without compromising her talent.

The raised stage, though it was bad for fans trying to spot labels or watch
technique, made for a good perspective from the crowd for Minx’s friend who began
recording Minx’s performance with the camcorder from street level. I took up a space
near her and began to dance, appreciating the summer sky and the other cautious dancers.
At this time of day and in this place, the dance floor won’t have the same energy as a
dark, enclosed space in the middle of the night. It’s not just that there is more light; it
has partly to do with the way music, in an enclosed space, wraps around and encircles the
dancers gathering them into a single entity.

Later, but still during her set, Minx took the camcorder with her on stage and
pointed it at the crowd in between changing records. This was an extreme example of
what is so wonderful about Minx and what she does possibly best of any Detroit DJ. All
DJing is an interaction between DJ and audience. The ultimate goal of a DJ set is to keep
the audience dancing and so it is a participatory performance. It requires the appreciation of the audience. Therefore a DJ must pay attention to what a particular crowd wants and select records accordingly. Minx, however, adds physical interactions with dancers – eye contact, vocal acknowledgements, sometimes dancing more vigorously than anybody on the dance floor – more often than other DJs. This in turn inspires the dancers to follow suit. Because Minx relies on both physical interactions as well as record selection, it seems to me that the audience interaction is at the forefront of her mind.

Minx is exceptional in another way that is indisputable. The fact that she is a female DJ in a male dominated industry plays a huge part in how she sees herself: as a performer, a business woman, and a musicians’ advocate. Her story manages to be both an exception to the rule of the typically male electronic music DJ, as well as an exemplary story of how one manages to become a part of the Detroit electronic music community. Her words from our interview follow.¹

*CV: So I’m starting out with the basics, where are you from?
Minx: I’m from Detroit, born and raised. My entire life, I’ve lived here.
CV: And where’d you go to school?
M: High school I went to Pershing High.
CV: Oh I knew this!
M: You do? Oh yeah that’s right! (Laughter from both)

¹I’ve used ellipses to denote pauses in the conversation. Bracketed ellipses denote omissions. Bracketed text is added for clarity. I’ve used parenthesis to clarify the way in which some things were said.
I went to Pershing. In the 9th grade I went to Henry Ford because I was living on the West side with my mother and then I came back. I went back to the Northeast side so I went to Pershing. And after that I went to a business school, just on my own because I wanted to get some more skills, get a better job.

CV: I’m sure that works for this then too.

* 

My inelegant use, in my last spoken sentence, of the word ‘this’ forces the pronoun to stand in for a substantial amount of DJ Minx’s achievements; by ‘this,’ I referred collectively to: Minx’s career as a DJ, her record label through which she releases her own and other artists’ music, her role as an occasional party promoter, and her instigation of a DJ collective that shares the name of her label, Women on Wax. Minx and I both laughed when I interrupted her to exclaim, “Oh I knew this!” because we were both remembering that she and my partner went to high school together, but did not know each other there. I laughed partly because of my embarrassment for interrupting her, something as an interviewer I should know better than to do. But Minx, a skilled storyteller, recovered from my interruption and relayed a cohesive narrative that required few of my planned questions and very little prompting. As I do with all interviews, I had shown Minx the questions I intended to ask. Minx had read over my questions and proceeded to address all but one in her life history style narrative. I’m still amazed when I think of how she did this while also caring for her two year old and tuning out the children’s shows on her television.

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CV: When and how did you start DJing?

M: I started playing in like ’89, the early part of ’89, because I absolutely disliked house music and my friends talked me in to going to the Music Institute. And after seeing the line outside that door I was too anxious to get in. When I finally got in, I started absolutely loving the music. “We call it Acid,” first record I heard. And once I realized Derrick May was on the radio and he was at this same club, it was the same guy, I started becoming a little more interested in it. And I decided that I wanted to try to learn how to be a DJ. The first person I mentioned it to was Derrick. And that’s because I used to sneak and go up into the DJ booth every weekend while he was playing. And one week he asked, you know, “what are you looking at?”

I said, “I’m looking at you, I could do that.”

He’s like, “You think so?” I said, “yes.”

He said, “Ok, I’d like to see you do it.”

Then the following week I’m back up in the booth and I’m just concentrating on what he’s doing, I’m looking at all his moves and stuff. Although he’s like a little firecracker and you can’t really keep up with him. He looked and said, “Hey! Are you doing this yet?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Well, I don’t want to talk to you.”

I said, “Excuse me?”

I don’t want to talk to you until you are doing it!”

I said, “Well, OK,” so then that was the challenge. I told a couple of friends about it and they got turntables for me. They were JVCs. And I would sit on my floor...
for hours at a time trying to mix two records. It was not easy. First my friend tried to show me a little bit but that can be quite frustrating on both parts, the teacher and the student. So, we gave up on that and I just taught myself.

*

That Minx first learned to like electronic music at the Music Institute, a short-lived club in downtown Detroit, locates the beginning of her career in the most legendary of local clubs. No other club, including ones that were longer running or better equipped, is more referenced or revered than the Music Institute. It was a club that built on the society of a Northwest Detroit high school social scene but grew to draw international attention. It helped solidify the reputation of Derrick May, the first person Minx expresses her interest in DJing to and who takes her seriously enough to issue a challenge. Though May instigates the challenge and though Minx does enlist friends to help her, the task to learn to DJ for Minx becomes a solitary one.

*

M: After a few months of practice I started getting it - not that I wanted to display it, I wanted to keep it to myself (laughter) to just do it at home, you know. The only [female] DJs I knew out at that time were Stacey Hale and Kelley Hand and no more, so I just kept it to myself. Uh, one day, I don’t know who told Stacey, but she called me and was like, “Hey, may I speak to, uh, Minx?” Just this name that I’d just come up with. “I’d like to speak to Minx.”
“Speaking.” No one’s ever called me by Minx.

“Hi, this is Stacey Hale.”

“And this is Kelley Hand.” They’re on a 3-way.

“Hi how are you?”

“Ok, we heard that you could, uh, get down on the turntables.”

I said, “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Who told you that?”

“Well, a few people.”

“OK” (with trepidation).

“Um, what are you doing?”

I said, “Nothing really.”

She says, “Well, why don’t you come over?”

(Laughing) I’m going, what’s going on.

She said, “Just come on, let’s just talk, let’s hang out.”

CV: And you’d never met them?

M: No, I would hear of Stacey Hale on the radio. At first I didn’t know it was a girl. I thought it was a guy because I know mostly guy Stacey’s. But I did know of Stacey Hotwax Hale on the radio on FM 98, that’s when the Wizard used to be out spinning his stuff. So, I went over there, went to her house she had like 15 people at her house, turntables set up, I had my records and everything. (Laughing) It was pretty much like an audition. I was looking at all the people that were there and going, Oh my
gosh, I'm supposed to play in front of all these people. So she's like, "C'mon let's see, what you got?"

I said "Excuse me?"

"Well, I just want to see you play."

"Ok."

So Stacey would put on a couple tracks, Kelly would put on a couple tracks, then I would. You know we'd all just tag blending. Then she goes, "It looks like you're not afraid of what you're doing here."

"No."

"Oh, OK."

So, I figured, like, OK this was some kind of audition, this is crazy. Anyway, I stayed a little bit and I left. Then I really got on the practice tip, I wanted to stay up on it. And I did it as often as possible.

* 

Minx learns two important aspects of DJing. The first is that she teaches herself the mechanics of mixing records. More importantly she demonstrates in her narrative the importance of the community of DJs who share their work. Stacey Hale is a pioneering Detroit female DJ who has not only mixed music in nightclubs but also appeared on five different radio stations acting as the Mix Show Coordinator for one of them. Kelli Hand, DJ, music producer, and label owner, released her early records under the name K. Hand to avoid gender stereotyping. One can assume these two women called Minx because they had heard that she was a woman who could get down on the turntables. There is still
a hint of a challenge or at the least, an audition as Minx calls it, because there are others present. However, the two women remain encouraging of her because they, with Minx, make up a very small minority of female DJs. Even the way they audition Minx, tag blending, highlights symbolically the importance of the DJing community. Tag blending means that instead of merely one DJ using a mixer to blend the two sounds emanating from two turntables, two or more DJs use the same set up taking turns mixing records together. For instance the first DJ will mix the first two records and leave her second record for the other DJ to step up and mix her record into. This cycle continues either every few records or every other record and tests the DJs' skill because they are forced to beatmatch records that belong to someone else, that they may or may not be familiar with.

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M: And one day someone else discovered I could play, and I played out. I was so nervous, I couldn’t really play what I wanted, how I wanted to play, I should say. But it went over well, after they gave me a hard time getting in. The ladies at the door – “We don’t know of any DJ Minx. No, I don’t see a DJ Minx down here, do you?”

“No, I’ve never heard of her.”

I said, “Well, they asked me to come,” I mean, I’ve got like 5 people for support, big time support. I said, “Well, they asked me to come down here, the guy’s name is Bruce Bailey.”

“I don’t see anyone by that name.” And then,

CV: What club was this?
M: This was at a loft on Livernois. It was Livernois near Outer Drive. The White Loft, they used to have parties. Then Bruce, I’m sorry, Buzz Goree came to the front, “Minx! Where you going?” I didn’t know who Buzz was and I don’t know how he knew me.

I said, “Well, they’ve asked me to leave, they don’t have me on the list.”

“C’mon in here. She’s a DJ, guys!”

“Oh! We’re sorry.”

So I went in the booth, you know everyone’s talking to me and stuff, you know and I’m standing there like a statue going, Oh my god, I’m so nervous, I got to play for all… this place is packed. There had to be like 300 plus people in this place, stuffed! Hot, sweaty! So I’m going Oh my God, when I get on the turntables everybody’s going to probably stop dancing. Listening to the stuff – everything they’re playing is vocals, I don’t like that vocal stuff. How they going to take to it? I mean, totally critical of myself. And so I went and I played. You know, and people started climbing – (explaining) you had to climb into the DJ booth – they climbed the ladder and was coming in. Even the people that were at the door giving me a hard time. They were hugging me and kept saying “You were great!” So there was a lot of people that, you know, supported me and said that I was doing a good job. So that made me want to do it a little more but I didn’t really know how far I would get with it being a female.

* 

Though Minx’s apprehension is aggravated by the reactions to her gender, her concern is well founded. It is a general case that musicians must attain a level of
competency before performing in public. Detroit, however, has an incredibly high standard of performance for local musicians. What might be acceptable in other cities as public performance usually won’t cut it in Detroit bars and nightclubs. Detroit DJs must reach and surpass a bar set higher than in other places or do not perform outside of their own basements.

Minx’s feeling of success arrives only when she sees the crowd continue to dance and have a good time. This is a very accurate indication of how extremely participatory an audience must be for a DJ’s performance. Without the crowd’s approval, manifest in their dancing feet and sweating bodies, there is no DJ performance. Even her moment of success, however, is tainted by contemplation of the limits that restrict her as a female DJ.

* 

M: I know that people were very judgmental because the way they were when I would play, like I’d where like a skirt, cause I used to be all about the tomboy thing, you know jeans, T shirt, nothing else, nothing extravagant, no make up, nothing. And I hated to look at people I was so shy! I mean, I couldn’t tell you who was at any given party, when I first started playing cause I wouldn’t look at anybody. And they’d just look at my hands like “Wow!” Looking at me, all the guys are trying to see if I had an Adam’s apple. Like at one point, people thought I was a man! You know it was cra-zy! But just seeing and listening to the things that people were saying to me, when I would play, I said ‘Ok, this is a man’s thing. They feel like I can’t do it. So I feel like Ok I gotta show these people out, really!’ These people would come and say things that were very gross
what they wanted to do with me, licking their lips, “I could have you for lunch,” stuff like that and I’m going “oh, huh” (nervously).

Then one night I went to club Parabox [on Michigan Avenue, near Tiger Stadium in Detroit] and he asked me if I wanted a residency and I told him yeah.

“What night?”

“Monday nights.”

Nobody does anything on Monday, I know that now. But at first, of course I didn’t, just starting out. I said, well I’m going to have a party, you know, I’ll have D-Wynn as a guest, I’ll have Kevin Saunderson as a guest, you know I had different people different weeks. ‘I’ll have just like one or two guests.’ But it was good DJs. Al Ester would come play with me. It was a small crowd. Parabox is a pretty big. Then one week I said I wanted to have lady DJs. I had a girlfriend Ethereal, she said she was learning how to spin. I knew that Korie was learning to play. I had met Jennifer Xerri because I saw her name on a flyer. I called her. She called me back, screamed, “Oh my god, I can’t believe you want to work with me!” But that was just nothing, you know (laughing). I was at a club one night talking to Keith Worthy and Korie came in, was sitting down. [I was] talking to my other friends, you know, about this party I wanted to have with all women, just got to come up with a name for it. And Keith was going, “you know that Korie is trying to spin a little bit.”

I said, “really?”

She said “yeah.”

“So Korie, I’m having a party on” (breaks into quote) whatever date, I forgot the date, February something - “you want to play?”
She’s like, “Yeah, sure!”

I had Korie, Kelli Hand, Ethereal, Jennifer and myself.

CV: What year was this, about?

M: That was, about, I think about ’94, maybe ’94, ’95. We had the party, it was a very small crowd that came. And Norma Jean Bell even came. And you now after the party, I was going, “Next week’s guest is” – on the microphone – “next week’s guest is” – you know whatever the person’s name was.

They [the crowd] were going, “No! No!”

And someone yelled, “We want women on wax!”

I was going, “What?!”

“Women on wax! Women on wax!” The whole crowd was saying it.

I was going, “Wow! Ok, um maybe I’ll do something with that, we’ll see, next week.” So the following week, of course, I didn’t diss my guest but I was just thinking, I was brainstorming the entire time, what can I do with this?

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These two instances Minx describes create two interesting poles. In one, she is harassed, inspected, and disrespected for performing what some consider man’s work. Some are so surprised to see a female DJ that they assume she is more likely to be a man in drag than a female DJ. The ones who do believe she is a female DJ attempt to intimidate her by making lewd comments while she is performing.

At the opposite end, a crowd that she manages to draw to her residency on Monday nights – no small feat in itself because as she notes Mondays are not a popular

150
night to go out – demands to hear more female DJs. Their use of the word “wax,” a term for vinyl records, denotes their support for and desire to hear more women DJing. The spontaneous chant, useful both for its alliteration as well as the acronym it forms, gives Minx the inspiration to continue her DJing and delve further into the music industry.

*M:

I called some people that had done a flyer for a friend of mine. They were in Denver, Colorado and I told them, “look I want to have this really big party. The party is called Women on Wax. I need an acronym, W.O.W, wow -- says it all. I need a logo for this. Can you hook me up with something?”

They were like, “Well, tell me about the concept.”

So I said, “It’s all women, it’s all female performers, DJs, etc.”

They called me at least 7PM, I must have talked to them early in the day. “Minx is your fax online?”

“Yes.”

And they faxed me the Women on Wax logo just as it is today. Actually I asked them to add the eyelashes, and I told them to put some flowers on her pigtails, cause it was looking kind of boyish. And they fixed that for me. [interruption]

Ok, they hooked it up, and I thought it looked great. And that, was the Women on Wax logo. I got this spot called the Gold Dollar [on Cass in Detroit]. This guy named Neil, he owned it.

CV: In the Cass Corridor, I’ve been there before it closed.
M: Yeah, yeah. He let me have the night. I got a sound system in there, Mark Duncan gave me a sound system. A lot of people sponsored. I had Planet E sponsor, they did all color flyers for me, double sided. KMS sponsored, he gave me money. Recordtime. And I played, Jennifer Xerri, DJ Cent, Ethereal, and oops I can’t remember the last person. And we had this party at the Gold Dollar. I had like a silhouette dancer. I had like a sheeting laid across one side of the wall and all you could see was her body shape. Oh that was so live, that was my girlfriend who lives in Vancouver now. People stood there and looked at that silhouette dancer, that was just like a hot part of the night. It was a well received party. A lot of people came. And a lot of people asked when are you going to have another. So that’s when I started to expand it, y’know. Any place I went people were asking about Women on Wax. A lot of people knew about Women on Wax. So it was like the first collective. But, I didn’t take the initiative to do anything with it, so I kind of let it slip through my fingers. All that I could have done… there are so many women collectives now, y’know so many female DJs now.

* 

There are many collectives of female DJs. Sister in San Francisco, and SheJay in London are two examples. The participants work together, thereby weathering the difficulties of breaking into the business together. They sometimes sponsor parties, both one time events as well as recurring weekly events. They are often booked together for other promoter’s events, or singly based on the strength of the reputation of the collective. At this point I feebly interrupted because I took umbrage at Minx’s suggestion that she hadn’t been working to build Women on Wax. I see now that she
meant she’d wished she worked to build a stronger collective, though she is proud of the
record label that has come out of the Women on Wax concept.

*

M: So what I could have done, and what I didn’t do, other people are doing. So...
CV: But you’re still doing it, I mean...
M: Yeah, yeah... but I flipped it now, and I flipped it into the record label because
after Kenny Dixon would wait at parties I did... it’s like, Laura Gavoor gave a party at
the State Theatre, I played with Genesis and Lady D from Chicago, and he was sitting,
like, in the audience area with sunglasses on and this afro.

And he’s like, “Uh, Minx are you ready?” when I got done playing.
I said, “Ready for what?”

“Are you ready to start your record label?”
Everywhere I went he was there! He said, “I’m going to stay on you until you
start your label.”
I said, “Are you serious? I can’t produce tracks. What are you talking about?”

“You never know until you try.”
I said (hesitantly), “OK, Well, I mean, like what would I need?”

Kevin Saunderson had told me some things that I would need to start my own
studio. So, I got a lot of advice from Kevin, I got a lot of advice from Jerry the Cat, and
now Kenny Dixon’s like, “Call me whenever you need, I can answer any questions. It’s
so easy to start a label, it’s simple. And like I said, I’m going to stay on you.” He said,
“I’m going to stay on you until you do it.”
I said, (hesitantly) “Oh, OK.” So then one day I called him, I said, “OK Kenny, what does it entail? What do I need to know? What do I need to do?”

He gave me the basic information. “It’s that simple. If you any need help with anything else, Tracy can help you.” That’s his assistant.

So, Ok, I started producing tracks. I said, “Well, what do you think about this? Or this one?”

He’s like, Ok, bah bah bah, he picked three of them. “This is your first EP. Take it down to Archer, have it pressed up, put it out.”

I said, “Are you serious?”

He’s like, “Yeah, yeah, this sounds good.”

I put it out, I got a licensing deal from over in Germany for it, from France, a licensing deal. And I went, “Woah, woah. I cannot believe that.” People pay for licensing. Then, I decided... I had already decided that Women on Wax was not just going to be for women. That’s just the name of my label because it recognizes me, and uh some of the ladies here in Detroit. Then I pressed up my second EP. I was pregnant and I couldn’t do anything for a while, but once I had the baby and I got the next EP going, I only did a couple copies but the distributor said “Minx we need some more records. Do you have any more?”

“Yeah.”

“We sold out.”

And it was like five days after I sent them. They sold out the first day they got them. And I was going, “Yeah, I can send you more.” So I sent them a hundred more. They sent me an email, “We sold out. Do you have any more?” I’m like, “No, I don’t.”
And I just figured I didn’t want to do anything else with it. Then, Magda sends me an email from Germany, going “What’s going on with you and this Women on Wax stuff, girl?”

I’m like, “What are you talking about?”

She says, “Ricardo Villalobas and Richie Hawtin are playing your shit, like 5 times in one set.”

I’m like, “What are they playing?”

She says, “I don’t know the shit with the heavy bassline.”

I’m going, (incredulously) “Naaaa... Oh OK.”

[whispered] I’m saying to myself ‘I did that track in 15 minutes! I was doing laundry when I did the track. I had no idea. So now it’s licensed to Minus, it’s going to be out on Minus with Matthew Dear and Magda did remixes. And so that was the second EP.

*

Minx’s experience is typical for electronic musicians in that many transition from playing records to making records. She is encouraged by a musician who has already found a fair amount of success selling records. She asks another successful music producer for advice and begins teaching herself the process, as she did with mixing records. Her first record’s success is measured by the amount of times other DJs are playing it, which leads to larger record labels licensing her music. Though her experience is a typical story of the successful transition from DJing to producing records, her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are aberrations. Though it is possible that
male musicians make records while doing laundry, it is highly unlikely that they would describe the experience after the fact. Minx’s roles as a wife and a mother are intimately connected to her musical work so that her domestic labor is weaved into her descriptions of the work of starting her own record label in the same way that her daughter’s voice waxes and wanes against Minx’s narrative on the interview tape.

* 

M: So now the third EP is just completed, I played it last night and I gave a copy to Kelli Hand cause she really liked it so things are picking up. I’m doing a lot of projects. I’m doing an EP called a Taste of the Honeys. It’s going to be all female – performers, DJs, everything, singers. Jennifer Xerri is going to produce a track. I’m working with Lisa Ross. Diviniti is going to sing. Diamondancer is doing a poem. Barbara Deyo will probably do something on it, just uh speaking on introducing the EP, things like that. I’m just trying to incorporate a lot of people that have talents here in the city that don’t get the recognition, like the trouble I went through when I was trying to play: “You can’t play! You can’t spin!” “Give me cassette and let me hear!” I would give them a cassette, but then I started saying, “You know what? I’m not giving you anything. Did you ask him or him for a cassette? I’m not giving you anything. Do you want me to play or not?” And they would go, “Well, I mean if you can’t give me anything…” “Well, forget it!” But then later on, after they heard me play, then they were after me, you know. It flipped like that. I started taking the crap, people will step over – they tried to step all on me. It’s like, “Yeah you can’t spin. You’re spinning first, or you’re doing this…” Like I was in a DJ contest, a spinoff. Ten DJs, I was the only female. Gary Chandler, Kim James, everybody – there was a couple more judges.

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CV: Oh, they were the judges?

M: They were the judges. I forgot who was in the contest.

CV: Was this early in your career?

M: It was early, yes, it was in like the early 90s. I came in second place. Because I was just flipping and switching up records, you know just kept going into whatever. And everything was on the beat. I made sure I concentrated. I blocked everything out, and I came in second place. Well one of the females that actually threw this whole shindig, a couple of days later, called me and said, “We are going to have the contest over because one of the DJs lives in Lansing and he couldn’t make it. And I know he would have won.”

I said, “Excuse me? How could you guys have an entire contest over because of one person?”

“The weather was bad, it was icy outside and he could not make it. I just know, I know he would have won.”

I said, “Well, that’s not right. We are supposed to have round 2 next week.”

She said, “Yes, we are going to have round 2, but he’s going to be in it. I bet he wins.”

It was only one female on the panel of judges and that’s the one that called me with the problem. I also, there was a lot of animosity with the females, none of them liked me. We had the contest a second week. He won. I came in second place again. Three or four of the guys in the contest complained to the people that ran it and said, “you know what? I don’t why you guys picked Minx, it’s probably because she’s a female.” Everybody’s got a problem with me! But that kind of stuff only gave me more
power, it only made me stronger. Y’know that kind of stuff was really a mess. And it was so sad, that people were like that, y’know but what can you do? It’s just sad, when I worked at the Warehouse I used to play like every Friday, with the WJLB live, Gary Chandler and TJ, he was called the Troublesome Juvenile at the time, and Reggie Reg, we all did this party. Reggie would be on the microphone, he had a cordless, he’d walk around the crowd. Gary would spin, I would spin, TJ would spin. TJ would open, then I would play, then Gary. So I would be playing, and females knock on the booth door, “Yes?”

“I would like to talk to the DJ.”

I said, “I’m the DJ.”

“No, I’d like to talk to him.”

“OK.”

Then Gary Chandler – I don’t know if you want to put this on there but this is what he said – (intimating yelling)“Didn’t she tell you she was the fucking DJ?!?”

(hesitant)“Yes.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you talk to her then? Don’t disrespect my girl, What the fuck you want?”

Girl, he was crazy! Gary is crazy! He always stuck up for me though, because all the females would always give me a hard time. And at one point I said, “you know what, I’m not going to be dealing with the, I’m not going to do this.” I said, “I’m not doing this. Y’know people just give me a hard time, I’m through with this crap.” And uh, Jerry the Cat, my mentor, was like, “I don’t’ know what the hell your problem is but you’re going to do this. You are going... you got this far, you are going to fucking do
this. And you are going to be somebody.” Y’know stuff like that, so he was such a motivation, that’s my boy.

And y’know, I have wanted to shut down many times, but there’s my husband, “Jennifer, you have got to do this, you have got to do that - - y’know, you are making a name for yourself, you are finally just blowing up, y’know this thing with Ritchie, you need to just go for it.” So one day, he asked me, he called me at work and he said, “Honey, y’know I’ve been thinking a lot and I’d like to know if you would please quit your job.”

I said, “What? ... Woah, what do you want me to quit my job for?”

He says, “Well, if you look at it, you being a DJ – you DJ, you travel the world DJing, you got all your studio stuff up running, you can make your music and put your records out. Why work? Stay home and take care of the baby.”

I said, “I am not a stay at home mom.”

He said, “I’m not saying you need to be a stay at home mom.”

“What do you think I’m going to be like a maid?! I mean, I’m so defensive, I’m getting all on him. “I’m not going to be like a maid! You can forget that!”

Y’know and he’s going, “Just calm down, just think about it.”

And so later on at home, “Did you think about it?”

I said, “Nope, it is nothing to think about.” So we went over this for about a week. And after thinking about it, I said, “You know what? You are absolutely right.” I said, “You are absolutely right. We need...”

CV: (Interrupting ) Wow it was your husband’s idea
It was his idea. And I couldn’t believe he asked me to quit my job. I was offended. “How the hell can you ask me... hell no I’m not quitting my job, what are you talking about! Y’know making money...” He’s like,” We don’t have to worry about babysitters or babysitter money. You can stay at home and you can run your business at the same time. And anything you need help with, I’m there for you.”

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Minx’s early experiences of gender discrimination encourage her to showcase female talent in her collaboration, A Taste of the Honeys. She asserts that her skills are not good for a woman, but good for a DJ period. Her confidence in herself as a musician, performer, label owner is incredibly strong, as is her independence. When her husband suggests she quit her job in order to work on her new business, she misunderstands his suggestion and reacts vehemently against the idea of becoming a housewife. Minx’s husband’s offer to help her expand her business rankles her sense of independence but she eventually agrees to leave her job and work at home. Our conversation ends shortly after this because she needs to leave to pick up her older child, a hint that her abrasive response to her husband’s suggestion may have not been too far off considering the difficulties of managing the domestic work and the challenges of running a small business at the same time. She had time for one more quick question and because she had answered all of my prepared questions in her flowing narrative, I asked for clarification of a statement that had caught my attention. When describing her first trip to the Music Institute to hear house music, she had said, “because I absolutely disliked house music,” and I wanted to know what kind of music she listened to before house music. She answered by question as well as one I didn’t ask by explaining what changed
in her thinking about house music. Her description of how she came to love electronic music touches on a popular complaint about it's repetitiveness and then demonstrates a powerful but typical description of why so many people who like house music incorporate it into their lives as something more than a mere musical preference.

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M: I would just listen to R&B, jazz, I was mostly a jazz head. And as far as not liking house music, I was kind of being judgmental ahead of time. I didn’t really hear it. It would always be [...] like this repetitious sound, of beats, I mean - - is the record ever gonna end, is that the same record? I mean nobody ever knew mixing like that. And I just didn’t know too much about it so y’know I was just being judgmental. Until I saw how people were living off of it. I was in the Institute and was going “Wow! Geez this is a party!” Y’know so I just felt like, y’know eventually I felt like I just want to make people dance like that too and make people feel good. Because when I dance, like for hours like that, at the end of the night, I was relieved, I had my exercise, it was super live, everybody was loving each other, hugging each other all the time - - it was so many friendly, wholesome people. I was like, “This is a new world.”

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Minx entered that new world and never left, but slowly built up her participation and contribution to the Detroit electronic music community. The example of Minx’s role in the community demonstrates the commitments and values discusses in Chapter Three. From her personal experience of a very typical entrance and extended contribution to the scene, we will move in the next chapter to the electronic music community’s collective experience and success in international pathways. The experience Minx mentions of
feeling overseas success straight from her own basement studio is reaffirmed in the next story of a distribution company's homemade success. Started in the basement of the mother of one of the owners, the record manufacturing and distribution company known as Submerge now has products sitting on record store shop walls around the globe and in the UPS mailers of countless international fans.
Stepping off the plane after more than half a day’s travel he might have been a little shocked at the shabby interior of the Detroit Metropolitan Airport. At the time of his arrival in the summer of 1999, travelers arriving to Detroit’s major airport were greeted by deteriorating chairs in waiting areas, old fixtures in bathrooms, and creaking baggage carousels. Using his limited English, he gave the cab driver an address he’d found on a website. It was not the address of a hotel, a rental car lot, or a tourist welcome center. It was not a museum, a major corporation, or a university. The Chilean tourist was a techno fan, and like others, his appreciation for the music drove him to Detroit.

His 25 minute cab ride ended at a small business. He reached his hand past the sign on the door that read “BY APPOINTMENT ONLY,” and rang the bell. When the workers answered the door, they were not entirely surprised by the immediacy of his unexpected arrival direct from an international flight. They did not, however, know how to deal with his limited English because most of the others who’d arrived in a similar fashion spoke at least a little. No one at Submerge, at that time, spoke Spanish and so they called for my help. They welcomed and visited with their guest from Chile, and then drove him to a motel just east of downtown where I would later pick him up for a
car tour of the city. I modeled the tour on the one that I had been given two summers earlier during my first visit to Detroit. Many had arrived to the doors of Submerge in a similar fashion before us, and hundreds would continue to arrive just like we did — uninvited, unannounced, but not unwelcome.

Detroit is not a primary tourist destination for international visitors. In 1999, only 1.7 percent of overseas travelers to the U. S. visited the state of Michigan.¹ The tall, constantly smiling Chilean who figured into that 1.7 percent made his trip to Detroit solely for a chance to meet some of his favorite electronic musicians and the opportunity to see the city in which they made some of his favorite records. However, his arrival at Submerge is part of a larger pattern of international fans intrigued enough by the way the musicians represent Detroit to want to see the city for themselves. Submerge is a logical first stop from the airport because it is Detroit’s major independent distribution company exporting about 80 percent of the city’s electronic music labels to the world. The Submerge building houses the distribution company’s mail order operations, its manufacturing division, the “by appointment only” record store, as well as recording space for a few of the artists on the independent record labels it distributes. Submerge’s workers are of critical importance in maintaining the Detroit electronic music community’s relationship with international fans through their distribution not only of music but of information, cooperation, and good will. In this chapter, I explore a network of international connections, forged by an underground music scene that kept Detroit connected through some of the years in which the city was most maligned by regional and national media. The foundation for Submerge’s independently created global fan

¹The top three states visited by overseas travelers were California with 25.5%, Florida with 23.7%, and New York with 23.7%. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001.
base was laid by the musicians’ decision to forego major label record contracts in order to build distribution relationships with mom-and-pop record stores in other countries. Building on that foundation and incorporating the reach of the World Wide Web, they have now amassed a network of fans that stretches to all parts of the world. Submerge’s international acclaim is made all the more interesting by its local invisibility. Detroiter are unaware of Submerge because techno is not as successful in the national market as it is internationally. Suburbanites are doubly unaware because they share a similar ignorance as that of Detroiter that techno came from the very city in their midst with the compounded misconception that there is little of consequence remaining in the city many left behind. My research seeks to explore the added significance of connections abroad in the face of disavowal at home.

During the car tour, the Chilean fan beamed with pure enjoyment despite Detroit’s sometimes dreary city streets and neglected architecture. He brightened further when we returned to Submerge. His expression resembled those of other techno tourists who see their time in Detroit less like a vacation and more like a kind of pilgrimage. In order to consider the importance of the local electronic music community’s international connections, the final chapter of my dissertation counterposes the international fan’s adoration of Detroit, learned through their admiration of Detroit artists, to the disdain Detroit often faces on a regional and national level. I explore these international networks to illuminate the ways in which local community building can be buoyed by reaching across regional, national, and international lines. Is this a necessary step for those who find themselves disregarded within their regional setting? Was it inevitable for Detroiter confronted with the physical, deeply symbolic borders that divide the city
from some of the most affluent suburbs in the country? Though my research is localized, it converses with other efforts to understand systematically neglected cities. The Detroit electronic music community and its international fans demonstrate the possibility that if people thousands of miles away can admire the city, individuals without the same geographic handicap can learn a similar love for Detroit.

Submerge: Record Distributor and International Nexus

At the time of the Chilean fan’s visit, Submerge was located downtown in a warehouse on Grand River Avenue. The place he had flown over 5000 miles to visit occupied the ground floor of a three story, corner building with exterior walls of discolored brick exposed by the demolishing of two adjacent buildings. Crowded with record bins, turntables, wall-hung record racks, and a few desks the combination office space/record store was in direct contrast to the expansive mostly empty warehouse space in which it was nestled. My memories of Submerge’s Grand River location are closely tied with my memories of my first glimpses of Detroit. Grand River is one of several major streets that radiate outward from downtown’s center like spokes on a wheel: East Jefferson and Gratiot to the east of Woodward, and Grand River and Michigan to the west. When Submerge occupied the building on Grand River, the six lane street was rarely traveled by cars. Instead, opaque steam billowed out of grates in the street. Downtown Detroit had more than a handful of vacant lots where vegetation completely covered the property giving the illusion of rural fields sprouting up to interrupt the urban
landscape. The lot across from the Submerge building was so covered by vegetation that individuals cutting through it would disappear for moments at a time. City sidewalks were ruptured by weeds that broke through the concrete and grew almost as tall as my shoulders. The rural interruptions within the urban landscape were simply striking.

The tourists who come to Detroit now and go on the requisite car tour are still overcome by the lack of downtown development and the way the city seems to be crumbling in places they are not used to seeing cities falter. They see the lack of pedestrian culture, the vacant downtown buildings, the debris littering cracking cement, asphalt, and concrete. But in the six years I have lived in Detroit much has changed. Downtown now houses three casinos and two new major stadiums for baseball and football, joining Joe Louis Arena, the hockey stadium. A handful of businesses have relocated downtown which now boasts a Hard Rock Cafe, a Borders, and an Au Bon Pain all centering around Compuware’s new corporate headquarters. The empty lots that once interrupted the cityscape with small approximations of rural space are now paved over and function as parking lots for the stadiums and theatres. The sidewalks still have deep cracks in many places but have been trimmed of weeds. Some small, long standing businesses have been squeezed out of their spaces by the returning investment which consists of larger, national companies. Some have been forced to close after many years maintaining a part of what little business downtown had. In 2000, Submerge moved from their rented space in the downtown Grand River location to a purchased building on East Grand Boulevard, three miles north of downtown in an area called New Center.²

² The New Center area’s name reflects its beginnings in the 1920s as an alternative to downtown. The anchoring development in the area was originally called the “New Center Building” by its developers, the seven Fisher brothers, of the Fisher Body Company. Designed by Albert Kahn, the Fisher building remains an Art Deco landmark in Detroit’s “second downtown.”
Submerge’s move from Grand River, one of the city’s radiating spokes, to Grand Boulevard, a thoroughfare that arcs to connect all major spokes, resulted in a more unified, cohesive organization. The move from property rental to ownership also marked a continued establishment of Submerge’s foothold and foundation within the international electronic music industry. Submerge is a major crossroads for electronic music’s international connections, as well as, arguably, the heart of techno in the city. As a business, it gives independent Detroit labels the chance to sell their products worldwide, thereby allowing the musicians to maintain control and ownership of their art, control they would not have with major label contracts. The Business Summary on their company website demonstrates the breadth of their work within the independent music industry:

Submerge was established in 1992 by Christa Weatherspoon Robinson and Michael Banks as an administrative hub for Detroit's independent dance music labels. As a manufacturer, it administrates the production of 12" records, compact discs and merchandise. As a wholesale distributor, Submerge ships these products throughout the United States, Europe and the Far East. Retail stores can order these products from various retail distributors all over the world. The current line up of Submerge labels includes, Black Nation, Diaspora, Electrofunk, Final Frontier, Hipnotech, Hitechfunk, Ignitor, KMS, Los Hermanos, Metroplex, Motech, Red Planet, Renaissance, Submerge Recordings, SUD Electronic, Transmat/Fragile, Tunnel 7 and Underground Resistance. Submerge's online e-store allows customers from every corner of the world to shop from the catalogs of Submerge labels and from other labels Somewhere In Detroit. Submerge also specializes in the marketing, promotion and publishing of the labels under its management - giving artists the ability to raise the profile of their music and maximize the income from their recorded works. (“About Submerge”)
Multifaceted, including manufacturing, distribution, online retail as well as artist
development, Submerge manages to be small and dynamic as well as broad and well
rounded. Marked only by the sign from the building’s previous occupants, a Laundry
Worker’s union, Submerge is a quiet but energized nexus for international business, and a
welcome center for those who know. As we shall see, Submerge is important to Detroit
not simply because of its location on a sparsely populated segment of East Grand
Boulevard, but because of its orbit of fans, which includes not only local, but also
national and international customers.

**Exhibit 3000: a Place for the World to see the Music’s History**

2030 and 3000, the numerical addresses of two of Submerge’s locations, are used
as affectionate shorthand for the buildings and find their way into song titles, artists’
performing names, as well as the name of the historical exhibit that fills the first floor
reception area of the present location. The company’s website connects the relocation of
the business to the New Center area to the creation of *Exhibit 3000*:

Detroit techno has a home in Detroit at 3000 East Grand
Boulevard. A home built on vinyl sweat and percussive
dreams. The newly renovated Submerge operation
reopened its doors in 2002. Submerge's three-story music
building is in the heart of Detroit's cultural center, a short
distance from Berry Gordy's original Motown headquarters.

In 2003, Submerge debuted its *Exhibit 3000* a museum
highlighting the behind the scenes work of Detroit techno.
Electronic instruments, rare record pressings, artwork and
media are on display, giving visitors a unique look at the
solid foundation that keeps this music alive. ("History")
The mention of Submerge’s proximity to the Motown Museum, formerly Motown’s headquarters, introduces the importance of historical memory within the 3000 East Grand Boulevard location. In conjunction with a second floor conference room referred to as the Metroplex Room, the goal of Exhibit 3000 is to collect and disseminate historical memory and current developments to the music community and to interested newcomers. In the Metroplex Room, Submerge has hosted multi media performances, as well as panel discussions ranging on issues from the future of the electronic music industry to the interchange between music and graphic design in a founding artist’s recent project. The Metroplex Room, like Submerge’s entire building, functions as a gathering place for the community. Exhibit 3000 is an invitation to learn about the history of electronic music in Detroit and its entry level location draws interested newcomers into an understanding of the music’s deep connection to Detroit.

Exhibit 3000 mirrors Submerge’s Do-It-Yourself approach to the music industry. Submerge’s exhibit came into existence a few months after the Detroit Historical Museum’s exhibit on the history of Detroit Techno, called “Techno: Detroit’s Gift to the World.” Though the historical museum worked closely with musicians to create the narrative of their exhibit, Exhibit 3000 is distinct: it is an organically produced collective history generated by the participants themselves. It was the idea of Submerge’s co-founder, Mike Banks. His materials make up the bulk of the collection, and the exhibit’s archive. Mike asked me to be a part of the team, along with his sister and Submerge staff member Bridgette Banks, to organize and display the materials.

Exhibit 3000 includes an extensive sweep of artists, as well as behind the scenes contributors. It tells a broad, inclusive story of Detroit techno’s evolution, showcasing
how Detroit’s particularities influenced the sound now imitated around the world.

*Exhibit 3000* is housed in the reception area, an L-shaped room roughly 40 feet by 20 feet. The materials are displayed in eleven wood and metal cases, with front glass display panels opened and closed by hydraulic jeep parts. The carpenter commissioned to make the cases worked with industrial surplus materials and matched the aesthetic of the brick walls and exposed rafters within the reception area. All cases are about three feet tall and less than a foot deep. Nine cases are about four feet wide, while two are only two feet wide. All shelves are 12 inches high so that they can accommodate record jackets.

The first case a visitor to the exhibit encounters is one of the two smaller cases, called the Influences case. In it are housed influences on Detroit Techno, including photos of Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown, and Coleman Young, Detroit’s first African American mayor. The case also pays homage to Kraftwerk, a German band, and George Clinton’s Parliament Funkadelic. The next case that follows, the Submerge case, details Submerge’s history, including maps of previous locations and photographs of employees and staff members. The third case, called the Metroplex case, showcases one of the music’s originators Juan Atkins, and his label Metroplex. The Manufacturing case, the third case on the innermost wall, shows photographs of the manufacturing process at the two plants with which Submerge does business, Archer Record Pressing and United Record Pressing. Included in this case is a tribute to Ron Murphy, a record cutter who has mastered many important Detroit tracks. A small wall partition holds the second small case, the UR case, dedicated to the collective of musicians known as Underground Resistance, one of whose members is Mike Banks. These first cases are in a kind of
hallway which has been opened to make it an alcove within the larger rectangular reception area.

Dividing the alcove and the large space of the room is a small wall partition on which are hung three cases. The first case on the interior wall partition is the Equipment case and holds some of the early tools of Detroit techno’s creation, including a 303 synthesizer and a 909 drum machine used by the originators of Detroit’s sound. The middle case on this partition wall showcases stampers and lacquers from the manufacturing process, as well as early sketches, and original artwork from album covers. We call this the Concepts case because it details the way in which Detroit electronic music is closely related to graphic illustration and creative writing. Many records are meant as art projects that imagine futuristic worlds with high tech solutions to contemporary problems. The last case on the partition is filled with record sleeves belonging to early Detroit techno classics, including some of the tracks made on the very equipment held in the equipment case. The first case along the opposite wall displays international and regional media relating to Detroit’s music scene. It includes texts written on the history of the music, such as Sicko’s *Techno Rebels*, as well as texts written by British and Japanese authors. The next case, the Map case, continues to affirm Detroit music’s international acclaim through a visual representation of the places the music has reached. A mounted, global map is covered with push pins that demonstrate points of interest for the Detroit electronic music scene. Different colors are used for where Submerge distributes, where they do mail order sales, and where their associated DJS have traveled to perform. The last case on this wall showcases three current Submerge labels: one based in the label owner’s Albanian roots, the second a project
between black and Latino artists called Los Hermanos meant to convey a harmonious interracial approach, and the final project a label called Red Planet that evokes the continent’s Native antecedents.

During the last weekend in May, 2004, the ideas celebrated within the Concepts case were also relevant in the Metroplex Room because of an art show related to the thinking and imagining of Detroit techno. In conjunction with Exhibit 3000, Bridgette and I planned an exhibit featuring artists whose work is inspired by electronic musicians. We included three artists, one of which, Abdul Haqq, has been designing artwork for record sleeves since the early years of techno. Haqq showed paintings and prints, including some original label artwork. Naheed Choudry and Gustavo Alberto Garcia Vaca showed digital prints that highlighted the innovation and movement of electronic music. Asked by an interviewer from the website Techno Tourist.org for the linchpin between himself and the other two artists Abdul said, “Our perception of the music and the concepts that go into. I concentrate on the conceptual imaging of Techno music and the other 2 artists have abstract imagery of Techno based on its inspiration.” (“Abdul”)

We held the opening event early Friday evening, during the weekend of the 5th annual Detroit Electronic Music Festival, called the DEMF for short. Complimenting that year’s DEMF title, “Movement,” we called the show “Translocation.” Each year the DEMF brings hundreds of thousands to a Detroit downtown plaza drawing fans from around the country, and a substantial amount from around the globe. The event boasts four stages on which Detroit artists, as well as national and international guests, perform from noon until midnight. Each of the three days end with at least ten after parties at which attendees with sufficient stamina will experience a more typical electronic music
venue. Bars, clubs, lofts, even art galleries and restaurants host the parties that feature loud music and dancing until early morning hours. Bridgette and I had picked Friday evening in order to avoid conflicts with the festival that started the next day, as well as the pre parties that would begin much later the same night. Without having substantial experience in event promotion, we had lucked into a perfect time for our event to function as a welcoming party to the international DEMF attendees, many of whom do not visit Detroit without making the Submerge building a stop, if not their first stop.

The first guests arrived promptly at five, which was the start time posted on the fliers. Fliers had been dropped off at local restaurants and bars, and an e-flier had circulated on Submerge’s mailing list. A Submerge staff member greeted the guests at the front door and instructed them to take the stairs to the second floor Metroplex Room. The Metroplex Room is directly above and shaped similarly to the Exhibit 3000 space. Two of the first guests at our art show opening had come directly from the Detroit metro airport, and their journey had begun in Japan. Though jetlagged, both were palpably excited about their presence in Detroit generally, and, more specifically, in the Submerge building itself. I did my best to be hospitable through their jet lag and while I asked how their trip was, and how they were feeling, I found out that one of the two was making her first trip ever to the United States.

The south wall has a large picture window under which Bridgette and I set up a table with flowers, light appetizers, and sparkling juice. The Metroplex Room has a similar aesthetic to the Exhibit space, as well as the rest of the building, with polished wood floors, brick walls, and exposed rafters. Along the rafters closest to the walls we hung copper pipe from which the framed pieces hung a few inches off the wall.
Gustavo’s pieces hung along the walls near the picture window. Naheed’s prints covered the West wall. Abdul’s work greeted the visitors at the entrance and hung along the east and north walls. After the first guests’ arrival, the room filled up rapidly. Bridgette and I had been worried that no one would come, and so we were pleasantly surprised to find ourselves busily rushing downstairs to the kitchen to replenish the beverages set out on the table. Within the first twenty minutes the room swelled to moderately full. This may have been due in part to the mystique attributed Submerge – the guests must have been excited to be invited into a space that is usually by appointment only. Everyone on Submerge’s mailing lists was included as was the general public through the fliers left at various Detroit locations. Twenty minutes more the room was totally full of people chatting, eating and drinking. Languages spoken included French, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch. The attendance was more or less evenly split between local and international visitors.

Many of the international guests had long relationships with local electronic music fans, and with each other, from meeting on the occasions of this and other festivals. For instance, the first guests, who had arrived from Japan, were friends with one of the showing artists, who lives in Los Angeles. A French film crew was also among the early arrivals. They had already been in Detroit for several months shooting a film on Ade Mainor, a staffer at Submerge, as well as musician and owner of the label, Electrofunk Records. An Italian group of party promoters showed me a flier for an event they had had months prior at which a Submerge label artist played. Some of the guests knew each other from previous events, but even folks who had never met still knew that they were part of an extended international arts community in which they all shared an
appreciation for Detroit electronic music. Because of the shared sense of an already
existent community, people meeting for the first time felt like something more than
strangers. The room buzzed with comfortable chatter, and groups moved excitedly up
and down the stairs to admire Translocation and Exhibit 3000 as a collective
representation of electronic music’s visual arts. Both the temporary art show and the
permanent historical collection, housed within Detroit’s electronic music cornerstone, are
dynamic nodes of the sizable map of Submerge’s international connections. Because the
global community is used to imagining its connections despite long distances between
respective homes, moments of interchange, like the opening event for Translocation, exist
within a social network of friends not yet met and familiar places not yet physically
experienced. The primacy of their community’s interest in Detroit make for a charged
event, fueled with the exhilaration of a kind of family reunion in which more than half of
the family has never seen each other. In turn, Detroit as a city benefits from the increased
international scrutiny, loaded with respect and admiration.

Benefit Parties and T-shirts: the Exhibition of Detroit Music’s Broad Appeal

The vibe of shared creativity did not end when we said goodbye to our last few
guests of the evening. The same collective experience, and shared acknowledgement of
ourselves as an arts community despite the immense distance between our respective
homes, permeated the days in the festival plaza and the nights at the various after hours
events. On the last night of the festival fans enjoyed the performance of classics by a
collective known for its innovative techno as much as its reclusiveness, Underground
Resistance, UR for short. UR is tied very closely to Submerge, the distribution company. Their practice space was in the same room that eventually became our art gallery. The rare live performance by UR was a benefit for an organization called Detroit Summer, a youth based community organization created by Grace Lee and James Boggs. Contrary to most common perceptions in regards to electronic musicians, the ones in Detroit are also musicians in a more traditional sense – many play keyboards not simply computer programs, bass guitar not only synths, drum sets not just drum machines. Though non fans tend to think of electronic music as repetitive, unnuanced or soul less, Detroit techno’s distinct sound is funky, while simultaneously human and otherworldly. Some of the classic tracks from the early 1980s still sound futuristic, fresh and forward thinking.

One musician controlled the decks, mixing CDs so that the tracks moved without break from one to the next. Two performers played keyboards, one providing the bass line, the other providing the melody. The final musician played a digital drum pad. His drum line was steady and fast and like all the performers he was close to flawless while playing known tunes with just the right amount of alteration to make them a new experience for their long time fans. The audience that night consisted of many of the same fans who attended our gallery opening and was similarly international. In the next few days attendees buzzed about the performance on the 313 list, which is a web based discussion list, named after Detroit’s telephone prefix, made up of fans of Detroit techno music. Contributors post from Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany. Probably the greatest concentration of contributors is in Great Britain which is why the previous year’s annual list member event was held in London. They debate the merits of the latest Detroit releases and post notices as well as
reports of Detroit artists’ performances around the globe. They engage in frequent side conversations about Detroit civic politics, urban development, and history both pertaining to the music scene as well as the city at large. After the UR performance a happy jetlagged poster from the Netherlands wrote in to requests from other members who had not attended the show with a list of the tracks UR had performed followed by this comment:

I know i am repeating the 500 other listmembers who where there but i want to say it anyway that it was an amazing liveset! I wished more people danced instead of stood in front of the gear and looking:-

Still an amazing night, was this the first time in 12 years that UR played live in Detroit? (KJ)

A poster from Great Britain who had not attended wrote with an understanding of the fact that not only did he miss the performance, but if the band were to play in his area it still wouldn’t replicate the experience of UR performing at home in Detroit.

Sounds ACE.
I'd say, "Oh maybe they'll play over here"
But I can't imagine you could beat watching them in some sweaty smoky room in Detroit.
also, to compound the feeling of missing out on things, my mate graciously phoned me up from a Pixies concert in London last night. (alex.bond)

The 313 list discusses Detroit as a special, sometimes fantastic, place at the same time that their music interest makes them incredibly informed about local changes. The discussion of the UR event is merely one example of this. The party was held in the venue for which the funds were being raised; Detroit Summer is trying to renovate the warehouse style building into a youth-led community center called the LOUD&Clear.
Independent Youth Media Center. Information circulated at the event, as well as on the
313 list, informed UR fans and listmembers about this project, an example of work that is
being done by a community group to strengthen the inner city communities. It is one
example of many cases in which listmembers, the majority of which are not in the Detroit
area, become educated about Detroit community growth and urban development. Some
313 list members are more accurately informed about actual life, consequential changes,
and realistic approaches toward urban development than some of the nearby suburban
residents who refuse to enter city limits.

By participating in the DEMF once a year and sharing ideas on the 313 list, fans
outside of Detroit maintain their connections to Detroit as both a music scene and a
physical place. Fans from other places show their admiration by purchasing t shirts and
other apparel with Detroit slogans. In the past few years a bevy of small companies have
begun producing apparel with the words 313, Detroit, or a slogan that emphasizes
Detroit’s industrial aesthetic. For instance, the first of these companies, called “Made in
Detroit,” uses a logo consisting of a strong armed worker holding a large socket wrench
with the company’s name circling the image. During the festival countless fans, both
local and from abroad, can be seen sporting newly purchased Detroit shirts. Sean Santo
is the owner of a small chain of retail outlets called Pure Detroit which specializes in
Detroit apparel. Her store also stocks Detroit foods including locally made Fudge and
soda, as well as Detroit music including both electronic as well as the city’s also
internationally popular garage rock. Interviewed by the Christian Science Monitor during
one of the festivals, Santo reported that her store's website had more hits from overseas
than the US suggesting that the global interest in Detroit themed apparel continues all year round.

Shawn Santo, owner of Pure Detroit, a store that specializes in city memorabilia, says her stand at the festival was doing brisk business in selling anything bearing the logo. "It's the insiders' code for techno," she said. "We generally get a lot of Germans, some from the UK, and we had a guy from Spain in the store the other day." Ms. Santo noted that her store's website had more hits from overseas than the US. "The Netherlands is first, followed by Australia, then the UK and Japan, and then from within the United States. It's really kind of shocking."(Chinni 2)

I'm surprised to find out that Santo is shocked by her product's expansive appeal and imagine that she may have been empathizing with the news outlet's readers rather than registering the emotion herself. Any one who spends ample time in and among Detroit's music scenes knows the kind of appeal that artists who receive little to no local recognition have in other places, becoming almost pop stars abroad but still able to walk the streets at home unknown. The artists in a sense represent their city well, a city that exists in a social terrain in which it is locally disavowed and disregarded on a regular basis. The visibility of their interest in Detroit, splayed across their chests while outside of the U.S., mark these fans as the physical representations of the network of international connections created by Submerge in particular and Detroit electronic musicians in general.

Though international techno tourists seem enamored of merely being in Detroit, their excitement grows when they reach famous techno locations, such as buildings that house early record labels or musicians' studios, treating them as if they were historic
places. Because of this, many were thrilled and inspired by *Exhibit 3000*. Referring to a reel to reel audio tape for the track, “Seawolf,” a 313 list poster expounded his excitement at viewing early tools of the techno trade:

> the submerge 3000 exhibit was definitely inspiring to say the least...i couldn't believe i was standing 2 inches from the original reel of seawolf...and the plates to the other 2 W.P.A records.....those tracks are so freaking epic, as well as being some of my favorite records of all time....it was just really cool to see it all.... (MM)

The exhibit case that interests the visitors the most is the one that houses some of the early equipment used to create early Detroit techno tracks, including a 303 synthesizer and a sequencer used by the originators of Detroit's sound. The sequencer was used in a studio belonging to Juan Atkins on West Seven Mile. Atkins welcomed other early originators into his studio therefore this particular sequencer was used to create Eddie Fowlkes’ and Derrick May’s first records, as well as Kevin Saunderson’s “Big Fun.”

Roland 303 is a dedicated sequencer/bass-machine (transistor bass) created to inexpensively replace a bass player. The one in Exhibit 3000 was used by techno musicians as an instrument to create the bass line of several signature tracks, including the track referenced above by the 313 poster, “Seawolf,” as well as Red Planet’s “Star Dancer,” and Mike Banks’ “Hi Tech Jazz.” The equipment and earlier forms of recording technology, such as the reel to reel, are revered by current fans in part because computer programs have made the work of making electronic music far easier than it was for the originators. The collection of these pieces serves the dual purpose of impressing

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3 All four artists honored in the Detroit Historical Museum’s “Techno: Detroit’s Gift to the World” exhibit as the four originators of Detroit techno. “Big Fun,” by Kevin Saunderson’s group Inner City, reached the Top Ten in the UK in 1988.
fans with early artifacts and also informing the uninformed that Detroit techno is created from instrumentation rather than from samples.

While the Influences case and the Equipment case focus visitors' attention towards the origination of Detroit techno, the Map case visually displays the end result of an extended international fan base. The Map case consists of one object: a mounted world map the height and length of the case. It very simply captures the extent of the international community created by a shared appreciation of Detroit electronic music. Brown pushpins indicate distribution points and cover Asia, Europe, South America, as well as various parts of the United States. Green pushpins indicate mail order clients and are by far the most numerous, popping up on cities and towns on all continents, including smaller outlying islands. In these more remote locations, the marker represents a single fan, unlike the other green pushpins which indicate multiple mail order customers. Black pushpins indicate where Submerge DJs have flown to perform and their spread over various countries hints at why the other color pushpins manage to reach so many places. The combination of the density of the pushpins representing mail order customers, and the breadth of the pushpins representing artist appearances and retail distribution conveys a visual representation of Submerge's, and by extension Detroit electronic music's, global reach.

With song titles like “I am from Detroit,” and “Schoolcraft Bump,” as well as liner notes that feature the Heidelberg Project, Renaissance Center, or the Motor City’s car culture, Detroit artists teach international fans a techno language with which they can understand a city many have never visited. During the 1980s, the decade after which

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4 Schoolcraft is the name of a road on Detroit's northwest side. The Heidelberg Project is an important art space that makes one block in a neglected east side neighborhood a destination for tour buses, school kids
Detroit was bestowed with the title “America’s first Third World City,” Detroit electronic musicians created an art form that is currently respected and imitated worldwide. Their connections and underground fame evaded Detroit's national and local invisibility, to keep Detroit plugged in internationally. A major link from the Detroit electronic music community to its international fans was created in 1992, when Mike Banks and Christa Weatherspoon established Submerge. Years of hard work and perseverance led to the Submerge that exists now, a stable business that also functions as a central community space and, occasionally, an international welcome center. For all of these reasons, Submerge is a good representative of the Detroit electronic music community’s local struggles and international successes. I will now discuss Submerge in more detail in order to demonstrate its crucial role in the local business community as well as its pivotal position in connecting Detroit to the global electronic music community.

**Submerge and the Extensive Reach of Independence**

Detroit techno innovators were attempting to expand the borders of accepted thought, both musically as well as cerebrally. Creativity was not limited to musical innovation; each early track released was also an inventively constructed project. Referred to as the Godfather of techno for his originating role, Juan Atkins’ earliest project, a duo with Richard Davies, called Cybotron evoked futuristic ideas; Atkins told music journalist Jon Savage, "We had always been into futurism. We had a whole load of concepts for Cybotron: a whole techno-speak dictionary, an overall idea which we called

and international visitors. It was created by Tyree Guyton and is located on a residential block in Detroit’s east side, http://www.heidelberg.org/. The Renaissance Center is a five tower business park at the foot of Woodward Detroit’s main thoroughfare.

the Grid. It was like a video game which you entered on different levels" (qtd. in Savage 20). Atkins would continue conceptual projects as a solo act; the 1985 “No UFOs,” released under the moniker Model 500, indicted governmental control of the public. Atkins, quoted in music journalist Dan Sicko’s historical account Techno Rebels, said of it, “The government always tells people what to think about, and seems to cover up the existence of UFOs. [‘No UFOs’ is] about thought control – taking away people’s hope so that they don’t look towards the future” (77). Sicko noted that Atkins’ peers sometimes call him “Obi Juan,” remarking on his spiritual leadership. Sicko maintains that this is a reflection of Atkins’ contributions as an instrumental founding musician and that “…his work would continue to help keep techno conceptually complex” (76-77).

Pressing the musical as well as the cerebral boundaries demonstrated a creativity and flexibility that would become part of the artists’ business approach. They applied their creativity not only to musical tracks, but also to the development of their small businesses. Rather than seek major record label distribution most early electronic musicians founded their own labels. Releasing music on one’s own label meant that the artist would maintain not only creative control, but ownership of their art. The founding musicians had great difficulty maintaining their labels because they were facing busy touring schedules in Europe, the place where their music was most enthusiastically picked up by a growing electronic music fan base. This left a kind of vacuum, where other new Detroit artists were unable to go to the early founders for advice or potential record deals. Sicko finds this to be the case for various smaller record labels that popped up while the originators were traveling. He relays Juan Atkins’ story about how he inadvertently helped created the record label Underground Resistance.
Jeff [Mills] and Mike [Banks] came down and brought a tape, which was their first record — they wanted me to release it. But there was so much going on... I was flying all over the place. I didn’t get to it [the record] quick enough, and they eventually dropped it themselves. I guess they have me to thank for that. (Atkins qtd. in Sicko 144)

Perhaps witnessing first hand Atkins’ struggles to maintain his music label while traveling overseas to perform encouraged the thinking of Mike Banks not only in starting the record label, Underground Resistance, but also in creating Submerge, the distribution company. Beyond the challenge of busy overseas schedules, he noticed that artists were not adept at distributing their labels due to lack of business experience and the limited resources of small companies.

Mike, quoted in the history section of the company’s website from a 1994 interview, explains Submerge’s origins as a way to address these needs:

Submerge was founded out of a need. There were a bunch of small, unorganized labels struggling to survive. None of them had any formal business classes, and for any record label to survive, you have to produce music. Jeff (Mills) and I were signing acts, back when he was here, trying to collect money, bill people, send invoices, and it was cutting into our music. We couldn’t afford a staff. So my idea was to accumulate all these labels and one person run the ship as far as distribution, paying bills, invoices. Christa Weatherspoon runs Submerge and she is co-owner. It can’t work without her. She runs it completely. (“History”)

The idea to accumulate the labels into an administrative hub resulted in cost sharing and labor reduction for each small independent label. As Banks points out, the administrative work kept the musicians from producing music. Additionally, one label did not require enough work to hire a complete staff. The Submerge staff is, in a sense, shared amongst the small labels it works with, making administrative support an affordable possibility.
while also centralizing and streamlining the efforts of distributing music from independent labels.

Christa Weatherspoon Robinson, referred to by Mike Banks, did in the beginning "run it completely." Christa became a co-founder of Submerge while concurrently receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration (Corporate Finance) from Wayne State University in 1992. She echoes, in an interview conducted via email, the need from which Submerge was born and adds information about how she stepped in:

Actually, Submerge was born out of a need more than anything else. Many smaller unknown labels were making music in their mama's basements or garages and after they made this music they didn't know how to go about selling it. Even if they did want to sell it themselves, musicians usually don't have the time or knowledge to perform the day to day, meticulous duties of selling records. It takes the full administration process to successfully make a living at it and that's essentially what I did at Submerge, I ran it. We offered smaller labels that met the criteria, a hub to have their records pressed and distributed which increased their label's profile; all for a minimal administration fee. This gave the musicians, producers and artists the freedom to make even more music and also the ability to tour around the world while we pressed and distributed their music.

Christa's reference to Submerge being a "hub" for labels to find a concentrated center through which they could release their music is accurate about both the service Submerge provides as well as the community center it has become due to its success. We have seen how Submerge acts as a hub for international visitors, we shall now see why local artists also visit Submerge as a center for seeing friends, finding inspiration, or finalizing business relationships.

All members of the Submerge staff stress the service that they provide the artist including my Exhibit 3000 co-curator Bridgette Banks, currently head of manufacturing,
and formerly the mail order specialist. Bridgette, like much of the past and current staff, is a born and raised Detroiter. She attended Renaissance High School and has continued her schooling at first the University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor campus, and currently attends its Dearborn campus. Bridgette is soft spoken, but her dedication and hard work make her a dynamic force at Submerge. As a staffer and non-musician Bridgette knows how important yet distracting the administrative aspects of the music industry are.

Whenever we are meeting to work on Exhibit 3000, I am amazed at the multitude of responsibilities Bridgette balances. She coordinates the delivery of the original tracks to the mastering studio. She then is responsible for working with two record pressing plants, Archer Record Pressing in Detroit and United Record Pressing in Nashville, to secure the manufacturing and delivery of the pressed records. She also manages any backorders of released titles. Her duties are demanding and time sensitive, and require constant coordination with clients, service providers, as well as other Submerge staffers.

When I asked her to describe what Submerge does, she did not, however, focus on her work and responsibilities but on the service they are able to provide for the artists:

Submerge gives independent labels an opportunity to be independent. The labels do their own promotion but we make sure that their records get out there. They’re able to do what they are supposed to do. That’s how I look at it – Submerge manufactures and distributes the records; we ship them where they need to go. But the artist is able to do what the artist is supposed to do – which is be an artist. The musician can – instead of trying to chase money down, and chase invoices down and doing the managerial side of it – they are able to do the artistic side and it allows them to do that.

In relaying how Submerge makes it possible for artists to make art, Bridgette points us to the advantages the business affords its clients. Submerge provides musicians with the
flexibility to remain label owners as well as the services that allow their companies to remain in business. The kinds of things that Christa, Bridgette, and the other Submerge staffers do are the kinds of organizational tasks that musicians may not have the time or the business experience to accomplish.

Submerge was started and built on determination and continued struggle. For instance, Bridgette describes how the company was structured in the very beginning:

Well, it was in my mom’s basement. When it was coming right out of my mom’s basement […], they did everything pretty much by fax and orders would come in by fax. They would ship the records out from our house by UPS, out of the basement. That was Michael and Jeff. And then Christa came in, and Christa put it into what it is today, which is – let the business side be business, and artistic side be artistic. And she put all that stuff that Mike and Jeff did and made it into something that was a reasonable [business model]. She did all that. And then it grew into this

Christa echoed Bridgette’s sentiments by writing, “We didn’t have any business loans or our parents’ funding either. We did it all with a lot of hard work and a dream.” The Submerge founders and workers are incredibly proud of their beginnings and their progress. The early space of the “mom’s basement” becomes a motif within their accounts of their company history, representing the hard work required in the earliest stages of Submerge.

The themes of hard work and self reliance remain actively important to the progress of the company from its earliest stages through their latest move. This description is from the Submerge website on the challenge of moving from rental property to the building they presently own:

The task of converting an old union hall into a multi-purpose management and distribution company took nearly
2 years of persistence and working on an 'inner city budget'.
There was no corporate money to fall back on and no
professional architects or contractors on the payroll, just
family and friends willing to put in some time. ("History")

The phrase “inner city budget” describes a mentality that the company members have
carried from the original basement space all through the progress of their organization;
they see themselves as an against-all-odds success. In order to show the progress that
they made in the building, the company showcases on their website before and after
photos. The before pictures show a building in the kind of condition that many, if not
most, businesses would pass on. Rooms with peeling plaster filled with debris,
deteriorating windows and walls, old scratched floors. The Submerge building can
operate as a gathering space and welcome center now because the years of hard work
resulted in sparkling, refinished wood floors, new track lighting and ceiling fans hanging
from the exposed rafters, exposed brick complimented with freshly painted new walls,
polished wood banisters, carpeted stairs with decorative brass stair rods. The workers in
the building can feel the satisfaction of knowing that their surroundings were created by
themselves, their friends and family, their hard work. The transition from rental space to
property ownership shows fierce independence, community reliance, as well as practical
approaches within reduced access to resources.

Christa’s narrative of her early involvement with the creation of Submerge
demonstrates the unusual but successful strategies employed by the founders. Her
delineation from the very beginning gives a good account of what they did and how they
did it as well as an excellent example of the progress, tenacity, and creativity within the
company.
Where do I begin? I got involved when my partner Michael Banks, who was a musician friend of my brothers and our childhood neighbor, found out that I would be graduating from college soon. Desperate for management help with his small but successful techno record production company, he asked me if I would help him. After a few weeks of studying what these guys were doing and the market in which they sold to, I was truly amazed at what they had done. Nothing, and I mean nothing that they did was standard business procedure! But it worked! It went against everything I had been taught in school but at the same time utilized conventional manufacturing and shipping resources while being operated out of their mother's basements!! It was bizarre and extremely interesting not to mention these guys were weekly traveling all over the world playing in front of huge crowds of fans!

As co-founder, I implemented a more traditional business structure to it. Submerge Mgmt started at our former location, 2030 Grand River in a small loft on the first floor. We were located in the Cass Corridor during the early pre-loft era of Detroit's then abandoned Downtown. The space fit our needs nicely and the rent was cheap and our overhead was low. We, over a ten year period were able to save money and eventually purchase and restore our current building; a 3 story 6500 sq ft historic, former Union bldg located at 3000 E. Grand Blvd in Detroit's northend neighborhood.

I wore many hats on a daily basis from: manufacturing, (vinyl, cds, merchandise) invoicing, buying, accounts receivable/payable, and setting up the various departments that have evolved throughout the years and that are still in place even now. These departments have expanded and are now run by managers who possess the necessary skills to meet the changes and growth of our company with new faces and expertise which only enhance the overall business.

Heck, in the early days and even more recent, I'd lay background vocals on some of the records such as a house record titled "Share This House" by Trendsetter Records produced by my brother Scott Weatherspoon and Michael Banks and even more recent on UR titled "Transition" which was created when we (Submerge Mgmt) made our
transition from 2030 Grand River to this new 3000 E. Grand Blvd location. It’s a lot of fun and I’ve always loved singing and acting which I did a lot of before starting this business. I sang in a church choir for a number of years and also had an acting role in a play three years in a row called A War in Heaven performed at the Rackham Auditorium here in Detroit, MI. So you can see, that I’ve always had entertainment and business administration in my background and Submerge gives me the best of both worlds!

Christa’s multiple hats – vocalist, co-owner, accountant, co-founder, manager – are exemplary of the multiplicity of roles everyone at Submerge plays. Artists and businesspeople are equally important. Creativity, flexibility and, most importantly, uniqueness contribute towards the progress and success of Submerge as an international distributor.

The transition from humble beginnings in a basement to the present operation which functions as a community cornerstone was derived in basic approaches such as trial and error, and adaptation to changes in technology. Christa wrote:

While I had a lot of book knowledge, the real world was quite a different story. I learned the music and the market hands on with no techno business manual…. a “learn as you go” method. There was no other company in this industry doing what we were doing, building what we were building.

Bridgette describes the biggest changes to the business since she joined the company in 1992 as “fine tuning.” She describes a “learning process” in the beginning with trial and error, that has now been replaced with an organization that is “that much more tighter.” One of the largest changes to the company has occurred because of the most dominant recent technological change. Bridgette remarked, “there wasn’t a mail order when I first started. There was just shipping to retailers and distributors. And then the internet came,
and that’s when the mail order [started] and they put me in that position.” The value of
this change is physically demonstrated by the fact that the global map in Exhibit 3000’s
map case is dominated in both amount and expanse by the pushpins that represent mail
order customers. Mail order customers are the ones that make Submerge a truly global
company. Selling directly via the internet to their extended global fan base enables
Submerge to reach all corners of the globe with both musical missives as well as
information.

Mail order customers also are folded into the extended Submerge family by the
kind of care and attention that only a small company can give. For example, during the
years she worked as the mail order specialist Bridgette went to great lengths to get
Submerge’s music to all parts of the globe, no matter how remote from Detroit. This
description of receiving an order from a fan in Turkey shows the closeness and concern
she showed for her customers:

I’ve always loved [getting orders from] the most obscure
place and getting it to that person. I’ve had customers…
there was one, he [had attended] the University of Indiana
and he was Turkish. There was an earthquake in Turkey
and he called me from his cell phone, and I said “Is your
family okay? Are you guys all right?” And he said, “yeah,
I’m fine but I want some records.” You know, I made sure
he was okay, but I can get them to Turkey just as easily as I
can get them to the University of Indiana. That was the
challenge to me, was getting it there.

Bridgette’s dedication, evidenced in her determination to “get it there,” no matter where
“there” is, also came through in her storytelling. Her eyes lit up when she talked about
the challenges she faced and how much work she put into sending the packages. She
mentioned a customer on a tiny island off the coast of Scotland to whom she was happy
to be able to ship. She showed satisfaction when describing how she used the US postal
service, instead of Submerge’s regular shipping company, to ship to the military members
that can only receive packages from USPS. Finally, she described figuring out the import
tax for various countries so that she could advise her customers the least expensive way
to place their orders, for example how many records per order would minimize their
expense. When I asked if she ever received gifts or thank you’s in return from customers
who realized that she had gone to such an effort to get them the records she said that she
occasionally does, however “[t]he biggest gift is them spreading the music. When they
spread that music, and that other person from that country calls… that’s great.” As the
first mail order specialist, Bridgette took on the massive challenge of shipping to the most
remote locations, which played a large part in allowing such a wide distribution of the
music.

Submerge has exported more than simply their stock of 12 inch records, CDs, and
clothing. Their approach to avoid the major music industry has been admired and
imitated in other places, inspiring similar operations in other countries. Christa noted:

People view us Detroiter as a model of determination and
independence against all odds. While some of the global
community were busy studying or imitating the sounds
coming from Detroit’s electronic musicians, others noticed
the independent machine behind it and it too was
duplicated by inspired European, British, Japanese and
Australian kids tired of waiting for Major record companies
to recognize their skills. In fact, every year we get
hundreds of people who visit our small outlet store located
in the basement of our building and make their pilgrimage
to Detroit to visit the source of their inspiration and to buy
the records that many say changed their lives forever.
Christa and Bridgette have both witnessed countless of these pilgrimages from international fans. Before the record store and the management offices were on separate floors as they are in the present building, they often made up the welcoming committee. They now do business with small international companies inspired by Submerge’s model.

Sometimes, it seems international customers may be a bigger source of word-of-mouth information than local Detroiters. Bridgette mentioned that the business receives calls from local individuals who want to purchase the latest rap artist requiring the workers to explain that they make and sell techno music, often prompting the question “what’s that?” Bridgette concluded that, “I think when people do find out what we do, they are amazed.” It may be amazing to Detroiters unfamiliar with Submerge, or Detroit electronic music as a whole, for a number of reasons. The first is the lack of local recognition for Detroit artists – most residents have little knowledge of the local art form. Second, in the absence of widespread local recognition, it is impressive how widely Submerge distributes locally made music. Finally, Submerge’s history is one of humble origins: this is a small business built out of one of the co-founder’s mother’s basement, now enjoying a moderate amount of success with a growing international fan base for the artists involved.

It was partly on the off chance that a Detroiter unfamiliar with techno, like the callers mentioned above, might make her or his way into the building that Bridgette and I decided to include the visual representation of Submerge’s reach in Exhibit 3000’s map case. This global illustration is meant to demonstrate techno’s impact on the world, as an ambassador, of sorts, for the city. As amateur curators of the exhibit, Bridgette and I assigned ourselves the almost impossible task of reaching both a specialized audience of
knowledgeable insiders, as well as the masses of Detroiters that have no idea of the magnitude of the organization located in their midst. An extended goal of the exhibit is to include workshops for local school aged children to learn about the electronic music industry.

In fact, the goal of reaching out to local kids is the main motivation for Bridgette’s participation in Exhibit 3000. Her reasoning gets at the heart of why the Detroit electronic community is grounded in Detroit concerns, ideals, and strategies:

My idea is to get the kids before they get corrupted, before they get MTV’d out. They can see – not to say that other forms of music aren’t intelligent – but you do need to have a clue to make this music. You have to know your way around some equipment. … Let them see that there is work, there is stuff that you can do and use your head instead of all that crazy stuff, but to reach those kids and let them see that you can do this, from your mom’s basement sometimes, get it going. And then have your own stuff, and you don’t have to be dependent on other people to do things for you or wait on the government to take care of you. You can do these things yourself.

It’s all in here, it’s in your head and in your heart, and if you’re able to put those things together you can be successful. And you don’t have to do bad things. Be a strong individual, but you don’t have to be that street person. You can have your own, by yourself, or with people that you trust, or your family. Which is what we consider this is like a family, instead of ‘oh I gotta go to work.’ No, it’s not that kind of thing, it’s more like a family here. That’s my goal for it, just to reach the kids.

Because Submerge started with no resources, as many Detroit electronic artists started out, Bridgette emphasized that this could be a source of inspiration to school-aged visitors. She argues that the visitors will understand that this music making requires skill and intelligence. As a small business with a global reach, Submerge can inspire Detroit
youth to put their energy into legitimate enterprises rather than be lured by the gains of street hustling. Additionally working for a small, family style business like Submerge encourages pride in a tangible product and the opportunity to associate faces and names with the customers. The theme of independence, which is the basis of Submerge’s business strategy, comes through in Bridgette’s answer as an individual’s goal, as well as a lesson for the community as a whole.  

Christa also hopes to be inspirational for other inner city residents. Responding to a question regarding the greatest challenges of running a small independent business she replied with an assessment of inner city challenges and potential inspirations:

I would say the main challenges are trying to gain access to the United States Urban market. Something which unfortunately we have had limited success (with Electrofunk being a rare exception) due to the way American Radio/Video and retail works. It’s sad to say but it costs millions of dollars to play the urban radio game even though most stations by law are required to play a certain amount of homegrown talent, this is usually easily circumvented by playing locally produced gospel music at 4:00 am Sunday mornings to fill the quota.

So once again we will be looking for advances in technology like satellite XM radio and the MP3 digital download websites to help level the playing fields. If there’s any one thing that we learn is that technology, if employed correctly, can give economically challenged people a shot at the American Dream. We hope that our music if and when it ever reaches the inner cities of America will inspire people to embrace the available technology for this very reason.

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6 Though she cautions against waiting for the government to take care of you, I believe that Bridgette’s comments have less to do with a broad based repudiation of the welfare system, than an understanding of the limits of the system as it exists. The challenges facing the central city are discussed within the city in terms fluid enough to incorporate both self reliance and the necessities of public policies that redress inequities of opportunity in urban neighborhoods.
Christa’s hope to reach inner cities audiences with her company’s music and message of technologically inspired self reliance is hampered by the obstacles of the American media system. Though their main customer base is international, Submerge’s existence in Detroit will hopefully work to encourage similar technological circumventions of mainstream systems within the urban inner city.

Bridgette’s and Christa’s answers to my questions regarding specific goals and challenges facing Submerge spontaneously included larger issues connected to Detroiter’s challenges because these are a major part of what motivates members of the electronic music community. Bridgette’s response to my question regarding her goals for the exhibit stretched to include her positions on everyday life in Detroit. I expected Bridgette to talk about reaching out to a youth audience when I asked her about her goals, because I already knew a bit about how she saw the exhibit. She surprised me with her larger description of her vision for change in Detroit. Christa’s response to the challenges facing the company were similarly not limited to Submerge itself but included the social terrain in which all economically challenged people find themselves. Their commitment to Detroit is deeply embedded in, and inextricable from, what they do. The Submerge staff members are experts at both the local necessities for maintaining a small business in Detroit as well as the global expansiveness that is at the basis of why they connect so intimately with such a widespread music community. Though their customers are worldwide, their concerns remain with their community and a city that is more than mere location. Their interest in Detroit is symbiotic, in that Detroit is on the one hand the basis of how their music sounds and the model for how they conduct their business, and
on the other hand Detroit is also the motivation for their success as well as the community towards which they hope to be inspirational.

The success of Submerge as a business, a family, a welcoming center, and the nexus of an international arts community is largely due to its Detroit approach towards business creation and community development. Like the music it distributes, Submerge is creative, flexible and based in a broadly appealing foundation. Submerge acts throughout the year as a beacon, bringing global attention to a locally disregarded place. It operates as the node through which an extensive, international community participates in the sharing of music and ideas and as such maintains the creativity that allows electronic music to continue to evolve. Once a year, during the annual electronic music festival, Submerge’s building becomes a physical manifestation of the innovative spirit of the global electronic music community. The Submerge staff are supremely busy at this time of year, sometimes bothered by the barrage of sights and sounds that invade their normally peaceful space (if one can consider a building where the basement is constantly filled with booming bass a peaceful space). They are, however, never irritated with out of town guests because they realize the magnitude of their journeys to have arrived at the building – both the journey required to become a fan of an underground music as well as the actual flights capped off with the obligatory direct-to-Submerge taxi ride.
Conclusion

In February of 2006 crowds of celebrities, journalists, and Pittsburg Steeler fans traveled hundreds and thousands of miles in order to fulfill the unexpected task of making downtown Detroit feel safe for residents who live 20 minutes away. A Detroit Free Press article published two days before Super Bowl XL, and only one half day into the Motown Winter Blast festival organized around Ford Field, demonstrated how deeply disconnected many suburbanites remain from their central city. Free Press Staff Writer Tamara Audi noticed that the Super Bowl drew suburbanites into Detroit who hadn’t spent much time in the city in recent years apart from the occasional sporting event. In the article entitled “Detroit Brings ‘Em Back: Like tourists in own town, suburbanites gape at view,” Audi discusses the wonderment on the faces of suburbanites who normally avoid Detroit because they believe it is unsafe and not worth visiting:

That unease is why 49-year-old Sean Carney and his family, from Harrison Township, have "spent more time on the streets of Chicago than we have on the streets of Detroit," Carney said. He did his best to make up for it Thursday. He gave his daughter, 7-year-old Katelyn, her first tour of the city, pointing out the streets he visited as a child.

"It's great to be able to finally show her this stuff," he said. (Audi)
Carney's words along with the words of the other returning suburbanites quoted by Audi resonate with the nostalgia of the written responses to Lowell Boileau's *Fabulous Ruins of Detroit* website that I discussed in my first chapter. The writers to the website refuse to physically return to Detroit and use Boileau's virtual tour as a substitute to show their children who they were and where they come from. Fear of being in Detroit is a common enough story within the Detroit metro area that the Free Press journalist had little difficulty locating suburbanites within the first few hours of the festival who were using the Super Bowl and their increased sense of security to introduce their children to the city they knew as children.

The Super Bowl allowed suburbanites to let their guard down as evidenced in another story quoted by Audi:

...Jim Stachowski, who lives in Warren, said the last time he took a walk in Detroit, it was a tense 3-block march from his parking spot to Comerica Park for the All-Star Game last summer. He carried a concealed .38-caliber handgun -- he said he didn't feel safe without it.

"We were the only people on the street," he said. "It was desolate."

On Thursday, Stachowski said, he walked the streets unarmed. He didn't feel like he needed the gun. (Audi)

Stachowski's "tense 3-block march" was in the same neighborhood, Harmonie Park, where I attended the event described in Chapter Four, a Friday night weekly event at the Hunter House featuring house music. For a year and a half, most Fridays found me parking my car some time before 11PM and walking a few blocks to the restaurant. I sometimes ran into people that I knew, I always exchanged smiles of hello with the valet.
parking attendants working at Intermezzo next door to the Hunter House, and I often returned to my car alone just after 2 AM, although sometimes I walked with a girlfriend who had parked her car near mine. It is an urban neighborhood and of course not perfectly safe so I was always aware of my surroundings and walked quickly with keys in hand, however never did I feel the need to carry a weapon. In the year and a half after the weekly event at Hunter House ended and before the All Star Game weekend, the neighborhood benefited from major developments including a downtown YMCA and a new Hilton Garden Hotel as well as a smattering of small businesses including a coffee house and a sports bar. Stachowski's need to carry a concealed weapon during a major national sporting event that draws about 30,000 visitors, 2,000 journalists, and included 1,500 volunteers who acted as greeters around Comerica Park was surely more a matter of perception than necessity. Six months later the Super Bowl, an event that usually draws 125,000 visitors and 3,000 journalists, must have changed his perception enough to walk, as reported, “unarmed.” Stachowski and his concealed weapon are an extreme representation of the hostility that suburbanites feel towards the city; though most suburbanites do not unnecessarily arm themselves, many share his exaggerated perception of danger in Detroit.

The extreme case of the pistol packing suburbanite occurs because of a more mainstream tolerance of hostility towards Detroit. While it seems I am condemning suburbanites for their attitudes toward Detroit, I really mean to call into question the broad cultural acceptance of wildly exaggerated perceptions of urban places. In a class focused on urban issues in general, and Detroit in particular, during a discussion of inner city perceptions, I have had a student announce with no shame or embarrassment, “it’s
like how in Detroit, y’know, there are no red lights.” She was apparently raised to believe that her personal safety was so threatened by driving through Detroit that she could completely disregard the safety of other drivers and pedestrians. While I find hers and Stachowski’s attitudes heinous, their actions carry far greater consequences. Because of social acceptance in the Metro Detroit area of hostility towards the city, whether average or severe, Stachowski, my student, and others like them feel entitled to perpetuate reckless actions and behavior in Detroit.

Detroit city officials and the organizers of the Super Bowl recognized that the Super Bowl weekend’s success depended on how out-of-towners would feel about the city upon their arrival and during their visit. Their focus on how Detroit as a city would be received in the eyes of the visitors, as well as within television and newspaper reports, demonstrates that they understood that this was their opportunity to change the representation of Detroit within public discourse, thereby developing potential investment in a city no longer perceived as damaged and decayed. Similarly to the Detroit Electronic Music Festival promoters discussed in Chapter Three, they recognized that a large part of their work was to change perceptions about the city. The interesting part about the Super Bowl was that the intense national scrutiny leading up the event, including jokes about the city’s condition and questions about whether the city could pull it off, rallied suburbanites to the city’s cause. Feeling implicated in the unflattering national spotlight, they were reminded of the ways that they are connected to the central city. Some of the connections were half hearted, as in a conversation I heard on the street on Friday afternoon while the Winter Blast was in full swing. Three women walking behind me on the sidewalk appeared to have recently met. One woman asked the other two, “So you
are from Detroit?” One of the other two hesitantly answered, “Well that’s always the question... I am from the suburbs of Detroit.” The first woman followed up with, “But you work in Detroit?” The second woman acknowledged: “that’s right. I work in Detroit, and pay taxes in Detroit. I guess I am half-Detroiter.” She laughed as she admitted to being a half Detroiter. The power of a positive event enhancing Detroit helped her consent to being part Detroiter, to owning part of the identity that she at first tried to downplay.

More premeditated and less hesitant acknowledgement of the social indebtedness suburbanites have to their central city was demonstrated by the Super Bowl Host Committee’s recruitment of over 8000 volunteers to become “Metro Detroit Ambassadors.” The ranks of the volunteers, made up mostly of suburbanites, were easy to spot in their uniforms consisting of bright red and blue Super Bowl XL jackets. They were trained, as was reported by the New York Times, to “say nice things about Detroit.” Their decision to do so firmly establishes their social connection to the city. They realized that if the visitors to the city left disgruntled, the perception of Detroit would extend to include themselves in their suburban homes. Hoping that visitors left the area “saying nice things about Detroit,” implies a connection to the city in which they see themselves as part of Detroit. Though it should seem obvious that there is a connection between a city and its suburbs, the Detroit area has one of, if not the most, complicated relationships between city and suburb; in the conversation of the women walking down the street during the first days of the Super Bowl festivities it was the visitor who had to convince the local that she was a Detroiter – and she could only agree to a half-Detroiter identity.
On the Wednesday afternoon before the massive amounts of out-of-towners had arrived it was easy to distinguish the Detroiters from the early arrivals. The Detroiters nosed up to the brand new plate glass windows in the shops on Woodward Avenue. They cupped their hands to peer through the glare and their jaws dropped almost imperceptibly. I noticed though, because I too had cupped my eyes and peered through the glass a week before when walking down this same block. Two friends and I had taken advantage of an unseasonably warm afternoon by walking around downtown. We noticed the urgent construction in storefronts on Woodward that had been empty for decades. We could see temporary bars and restaurants being built. That week later, when most work was finished and I saw the other Detroiters making their way up the glass to look through in surprise, I followed them up. From one week to the next the proprietors had cleared out debris, constructed bars, brought in tables, chairs, stools, and couches, hung Super Bowl banners, and installed sound systems. Despite the fact that I had seen the beginnings the week before, my jaw dropped just a little bit with the sensation of surprise because Woodward had been mostly vacant all the years I had lived here. It was bittersweet to see bars and restaurants opening for people who would be in town for only one weekend. One proprietor was watching his sign being hung in front of his temporary bar, a plastic 3 foot by 4 foot sign that read “1215 Tavern, Food and Spirits.” The tavern’s impersonal name was taken from the numerical address on Woodward. A few days after the Super Bowl all that remained of the 1215 Tavern was the empty storefront, with no sign, but just the ironic words, “Open to the Public,” assembled out of stickers in the empty window. In many of the storefronts all that will remain is the sparkly, brand new glass including the piece unfortunately marked by a sign that the business cannot live up to.
The temporary bars reinforce that downtown Detroit cannot sustain economically the amount of restaurants and bars that even a small college town like Ann Arbor can. Part of this is because of the refusal of people like Stachowski or Carney to come to Detroit. Though of course it is important that a national audience left the area, “saying nice things about Detroit,” I hope that the suburban volunteers believed themselves enough to come back often, and that other suburbanites who made their first trip into the city in years were convinced that they cannot or should not continue to live disconnected from their central city. If there will be a new spirit of regional cooperation built on the social connections rediscovered during Super Bowl Weekend, it must rest on a foundation of economic and political cooperation.

The economic revitalization of Detroit – and by this I do not mean temporary bars to go with temporary casinos and downtown development at the expense of neighborhood development – must build on the cooperation of the city and suburbs. If the magnitude of the Super Bowl weekend was necessary to drive home for suburbanites their social and cultural indebtedness to the city, breaking the economic and political barriers to regional cooperation will be at least as difficult. Some urban researchers have suggested that suburban residents have more than moral or social reasons for taking an interest in revitalizing urban centers; they’ve found that suburban residents do better financially and regions as a whole are more competitive in a global market when the central city is prosperous.1 Increased regional cooperation leading to the development of Detroit must,

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however, proceed with caution in that it is important that what has made Detroit unique and original be honored and maintained. A revitalization must be built on the organic communities that already exist.

Chapter Four’s description of a Detroit community reinforces why urban development is best achieved on a foundation of organically created groups. Zana Smith’s work as an electronic music event promoter and downtown boutique owner helps to maintain a community with deep civic commitments and connections to Detroit. The people who attend her events, as well as other similar music events, develop a relationship to each other and the city of Detroit that encourages small business development and grassroots urban revitalization attempts. The large scale downtown projects like the casinos and stadiums are useful for bringing in non-Detroiters, both local and out-of-the-region visitors, occasionally. What might make them want to stay or consider relocating is contact with an established community like the one created by Zana and other electronic music promoters. The electronic music community, and others that are also organic to Detroit, will bring the most long term success in urban revitalization.

The locally built, organic communities are an important foundation upon which to revitalize Detroit because they carry on the characteristics that make Detroit special. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Detroit electronic music community has historic connections to the city’s essential characteristics. Because Detroit’s electronic music scene is an evolution of what has made Detroit unique, it is a viable place upon which to build some of the revitalization efforts. Suburbanization has reached a level at which exurbs and outlying cities can provide residents with most of their needs making central cities less critical for day-to-day necessities; therefore, urban revitalization across the
country needs to be centered on what each city provides uniquely. In a sense, central
cities must provide a kind of niche reason for their viability. In the case of Detroit, the
city should showcase its most important characteristics — blue collar work and musical
expertise.

The nostalgia former Detroiters feel for Detroit is based in what they perceive as
what once was its vitality. The techno music community is a continuation of what still is
Detroit's vibrant nexus between technological innovation and humanistic activism
discussed in Chapter Two. My second chapter started with Diego Rivera’s murals in the
Detroit Institute of the Arts because they captured Detroit’s particular characteristics
demonstrating the interrelatedness of technological advances and human needs, while
centralizing what is at the heart of Detroit — work. Rivera’s murals represented Detroit’s
main concerns well in the 1930s and to this day represent a continuity that, despite
suburban Detroiters’ nostalgia, keeps Detroit’s central concerns in the heart of the city.
The chapter moves from work and Henry Ford and builds towards two musical
innovations precisely because as the century progressed a second important vital Detroit
characteristic attached itself to the blue collar work ethic: musical expertise. As the
century came to a close, and massive disinvestment led to high unemployment in a town
where a job on the line had guaranteed a middle class lifestyle, the blue collar work ethic
added another dimension of self-reliance. Self-reliance factors into a strong part of why
the Detroit techno innovators and later producers have maintained their own record labels
and control of the distribution of their work. The unfortunate part about the
misconceptions about electronic music is that many Detroiters and most people around
the country have no idea how tied to the city’s characteristics the music is. Detroit is an
essential part of what the music is, why it sounds the way it does, why it has been produced the way it has, and why it is independently maintained and distributed. A Detroit work ethic, technological innovation, and self reliance are at the base of how the musicians conceptualize their music and their work to promote it.

The centrality of Detroit to the music is why, as I demonstrated in my first chapter, the community stays in Detroit. They express the importance of their own connections to the city and recognize it as central to their work. They know that being in Detroit ("being here") is a commitment as well as a sense of pride. Being in Detroit became immediately important to my project. Because of the hostilities that exist in and around Detroit, "being here" was the only means to accomplish my ethnographic goal of "being inside." The three ways that I acknowledged, in my first chapter, that "being inside" became particularly important within my project remain integral to it now in its conclusion. "Being inside" has been crucial to understanding the consequences of the ways in which suburbanites talk about the city and the daily commitment that Detroiter engage in to counteract its reputation. As a new homeowner in Detroit I have a better understanding of the sometimes ambivalent relationship city dwellers can have with the city. In my first few years in Detroit, I was a single-mindedly passionate defender of the city. With time and particularly with the responsibility for inordinately high property taxes, I've softened on my position as consistent defender. In such, I've become more like a Detroiter – the kind who defends her city to all outsiders but can spend hours complaining with other Detroiter about the lack of services for which we have the privilege of paying very high taxes. In the city, we have the lived experience to understand the realities of Detroit – that yes, we are in crisis but no, it is not as a result of
a lack of hope, concern, and commitment on the part of city residents. I think we refrain from discussing these complaints with outsiders because they are likely to jump in without the concurrent understanding that people in the city care, are working hard, and have in many cases remained not without but because of civic commitment.

There are many reasons that people choose not to purchase homes in Detroit; besides the high property taxes there are also exorbitantly high rates for both home and car insurance. But for my fiancé and I, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. We are lucky to live in the kind of neighborhood that hardly exists any more in the country. We have tree lined streets with harmoniously balanced, well maintained 1920s and 1930s tudors and colonials. Walking through my neighborhood helps me tangibly understand the ways in which architects of the time period conceptualized a sense of place by making sure that the individual houses evoked a collective harmony. The houses maintain individuality but share decorative elements. They have been built into the natural setting; we have seven ancient oak trees and one walnut tree on our lot alone.

The balance of the architecture in my neighborhood is matched by a diversity of race, economic class, and age group. Sprawl in outlying metropolitan areas usually cannot provide either diversity in architecture or diversity of population. The natural land is razed because it is cheaper for developers to build over rather than into the existing vegetation. Uniform houses are dotted with store bought plantings making these neighborhoods look the same in Michigan as they do in California, or North Carolina, or Missouri. Sprawl has gone hand in hand with stressed out children, booked to within a minute of their days with playdates and extracurricular activities. They grow up in homogenous places, similar to their neighbors in socioeconomic class, racial background,
and often in a house built so identically it’s impossible to tell one from another. In my racially diverse urban neighborhood, there are young families with infants, more established families with school aged children, and retired people whose children have already left the house. Children in our neighborhood will experience all the things that have made cities attractive – density, diversity, and a sense of place.

I was attracted to Detroit by the electronic music community and decided to stay because of Detroiter’s commitment to and passion for their city. I am not the only outsider to have been drawn here by the music. The musicians manage to draw outsiders, like the one whose story began my final chapter because he took a taxi straight to an electronic music distribution company from his international flight. The visitors’ sense of immediacy does not go unrewarded as they are met by a group of people who have a passion that matches the intensity of their desire to be in Detroit. During their visits they get to experience what eventually led me to stay: the kind of attachment that electronic musicians share with other Detroiter’s for their city.

Detroit electronic musicians, while maintaining a historic link to the city’s legacy, are in a position to participate in the city’s future progress in that they already attract outsiders from all parts of the globe, as discussed in my last chapter. If it is true as suggested by some urban researchers that regions will be more competitive in a global marketplace with a strong central city, then Detroit already has one international economic network in place in the electronic music community’s connections around the globe. The international networks built by the Detroit electronic music community can be used to attract international attention, business, visitors, and immigrants.
The company detailed in my last chapter, Submerge, is but one example from a community that maintains an international network of interest in Detroit. Submerge is also an example of how Detroit can grow and support independent businesses. As demonstrated in the chapter, their reach is far more massive than the size of their business would lead one to expect. The network they've created is extensive and their fan base is incredibly committed. They have always operated against the odds. For one, they built their business on their own without grants, loans, or a support structure. Second, they operate in Detroit which is a city notoriously difficult for starting a business. Detroiters considering opening a small business in the city regularly complain about the incredibly slow pace of the bureaucracy in Detroit for obtaining the necessary permits and licenses. This seems counterintuitive for a city that needs local development. Tax breaks and ease of operation are happening for Compuware, the casinos, and the stadiums. While I am not advocating for these businesses to be turned away I am suggesting that small, local businesses should have the same incentives.

The Detroit electronic musicians, promoters, and participants are but one example of an organic vibrant community that is connected to what makes Detroit unique and therefore a viable place upon which to build urban revitalization. I've discussed this community at length because they are a relatively unknown yet positive example of how to keep Detroit vibrant. They maintain continuity with Detroit values such as work, self reliance, technological innovations, and social activism. They remain committed to a place they could easily leave for more fame or remuneration. They do so because they recognize the important of their connection to Detroit and what Detroit means to their sound. They are but one example of numerous community groups that are connected.
intimately to Detroit’s historical characteristics maintaining the unique, organic qualities of the city. The Detroit electronic music community’s vitality, within the country’s arguably most complicated city, reminds us that cities are far from obsolete and remain centers of diversity, anonymity, creativity, and vibrancy. There is a spirit in Detroit, which Detroiters feel, international techno tourists want to be a part of, and that can be the foundation that builds successful change in the city.
Appendix

Some Notes on Methodology

The information in this project is based on fieldwork conducted in Detroit from 1999 to 2005, in the form of both participant observation as well as formal and informal interviews, including interviews conducted via email. Though some of the work of this project began before, the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted after I moved to the city in August of 1999. Because Detroiter are well aware of the perception of the city outside of the city, this work could only have been conducted from inside Detroit. Living in Detroit was of course essential to conducting participant observation, however it also aided in the informal and formal interviews because Detroiter were more easily convinced of my seriousness after learning I lived in the city. Moving to Detroit became important to me for the success of the project concurrently as it became attractive to me as a person.

I spent many, many late nights in bars, clubs, and restaurants listening to electronic music. Some of those nights stretched far into the next morning and it was only sheer will power and appreciation for the music that kept me up because I am not a night person. It may seem to the uninitiated a wild time and therefore a “sexy” research interest. For those who have been doing this for more than a decade like myself, and even more so for those of my friends now in their third decade of going out to electronic
music events, it can almost begin to seem ordinary, simply a part of our lives. I try not to take it for granted, because while it is mundane, in that it is a part of my ordinary life, it is an important part of my life through which I am connected to a vibrant, civic minded community of interesting individuals.

Establishing Rapport

I am thankful that fieldwork has been demystified so that my generation of academics have had the opportunity to take classes with thoughtful discussions of methods. My first interactions with the electronic music community in Detroit were influenced by a field methods seminar that I took in Ethnomusicology. I believe I am the only student from the seminar whose dissertation project is the same as the one worked on during the seminar. The others were able to “practice” locally before moving on to their dissertation research projects in other places in the nation as well as around the globe. In hindsight, I probably should have chosen a different subject matter in which to practice because I did not have the rapport built yet with the people in my field to ask for interviews, one of which I needed to fulfill the requirements of the class. The interview that I did for that class was with a musician who I was meeting for the first time. Though he was an excellent interview, it was a sharp contrast to the interviews I would do later with people who were used to seeing my face around and who treated and greeted me as a friend, rather than a stranger.

After that first interview and after moving to Detroit, I tried to develop a relationship with the musicians affiliated with Submerge, the company discussed in my
fifth chapter. I gave them a paper that I wrote for a seminar discussing my attempts to work with them. It crossed the line for some of the people there and I was put on a kind of probation. After years in Detroit, the person mainly responsible for turning down my working requests asked me to help create the exhibit I describe in Chapter Five. He said to me, "you've paid your dues." I hadn't done anything different really but live in Detroit. Yes, my perspective had changed but as far as anything tangible I really can't imagine what he meant by dues, except for years. I had proven I wasn't coming in to grab some quick information, use it for my professional gain, and move on. So I went from being rebuffed to being allowed access to the company's archives. That moment helped validate for me my early inclination that intense long term participant observation was necessary because of the history of this place. Soon after that, I asked if I could interview some of the staffers about Submerge, the distribution company. Originally I had wanted to interview the musicians; when I asked about Submerge it was clear I was beginning to "get it" – I was interested in the people that maintain the foundation in Detroit, rather than the stars (of course on an underground level) who fly around the world.

My experience with the people at Submerge delineates the beginning and the end of my struggle to build rapport for this project. They were the first people that I met and they provided the boundaries for acceptance that required time. Over the time period during which I paid my dues, much of it was spent hanging out with people who go out regularly in Detroit – the people described in Chapter Three. In the beginning I participated on the periphery, by keeping myself informed through local entertainment weeklies and attending any electronic music events listed. At those events, I would
receive flyers for other events and in that way started getting in the loop. I attended by myself or with a friend who was not into house and techno music but came out with me just to go out. I attended both house and techno music events. The techno events were more likely to be attended by younger, suburban participants. The house music scene had a mix of people but as described in my third chapter it was mostly people of my age or older and who lived in the city. During the year after my field exams I regularly attended house weekly events such as Deep Heat Detroit’s Wednesday nights at the Lager House, as well as Zana Smith’s Beautiful Fridays at Hunter House, and Beatdown Sounds’ Sunday night event at Agave. It was at these events and others like them where I came to know the people who inform this project. Despite the fact that I still arrived alone, becoming a regular incorporated me into the community so that I became part of the dance floor, part of the conversations, and part of the vibe of the music event. The interviews that I conducted after becoming a part of the community were very different than the one that I did “cold,” so to speak, for the field methods seminar during my first year in graduate school.

The Use of Names

The interviews with the people I had come to know were different than the first one I conducted, but the first one was still an excellent interview because the members of the community with which I work are quite accustomed to being interviewed. Aside from Zana, Bridgette, and Christa, many of them have been interviewed multiple times in
the music press and so our interactions were always framed by their previous experiences.

In many ethnographies, the writer will change the names of the subjects in order to protect their privacy. I realized early on in my project that this would be impossible because of the underground fame these artists have. People who are unfamiliar with the Detroit electronic music scene would not have been able to guess the identities of musicians with pseudonyms, but any fans would easily know to whom I am referring. For instance, anyone with even a minor appreciation for Detroit electronic music would know that the major distribution company in Detroit is Submerge and from there have been able to easily identify Bridgette and Christa by their positions. I have chosen to use the musicians' performing names, such as Minx in Chapter 4. Some musicians chose to use their full names as their performing names and they are included as such. All of the people that I worked with understood that their names would be used in the project, signed a consent form, and none expressed any concerns in regards to the use of their full names.

Fieldnotes

During the year after my field exams and before I began writing I took extensive fieldnotes detailing my experiences with the electronic music scene. The process of writing fieldnotes helped me work out ideas while researching and I used them as way to write about researching itself alongside recording data. I worked out my worries and concerns of the ethics of what sometimes felt like spying on friends. I came to reflect on
and understand my own assumptions and misperceptions about Detroit that were dissipating the longer I was a resident of the city. I never coded my fieldnotes, nor attempted to find quantitative patterns. My fieldnotes would likely have rebelled against any attempt to codify them as they are incredibly subjective; I did not maintain a separate field diary. I probably did not look back at my fieldnotes as much as I could or should have as I wrote up my findings in my chapters. Ethnographic fieldwork for me has been a very subjective experience. Because it requires close relationships – in the case of my project relationships of connection over barriers of distrust – part of the work of the research is an attachment that doesn’t for me even flirt with objectivity. I believe the relationship is interesting in its attachments and connections, rather than as an attempt at objective detachment. I have tried to be as upfront as possible about the connections.

**Interviewing**

Most of the interviews occurred after the subjects already knew a great deal about my project and my interest in Detroit. I chose people who could elaborate on issues I noticed during my many nights of hanging out. For instance, I knew that Submerge was a very interesting institution within the scene specifically and Detroit in general. Submerge represents the broad connections that the small scene in Detroit is able to maintain internationally. My hanging out led me to understand how pivotal their role is in the international network of connections. From the time I spent at Submerge, working
on a historic exhibit of the history of electronic music in Detroit, I was able to
contextualize the interviews into the broader issues most important to the people in the
company. I chose from their interviews the points that most clearly demonstrated the
foundation I had seen. I offered to do a face to face interview with Christa but she chose
an email interview. I think that was an interesting way to see someone in the community
writing and reflecting on her experience. The importance of how they see their work in
their communities comes across in both Bridgette's verbal and Christa's written
interview.

**Gender**

Despite the fact that I ended up working and interviewing women in the electronic
music scene, I originally believed I would be mostly working with men as most
performers are male. The first time it occurred to me that this might be a problem was
during an interview for a seminar paper on a completely different subject when the
subject of the interview angrily slapped at my leg. I was alone with him at his house, but
had felt safe because of our introduction through another researcher. After that
experience I wanted to find information about the circumstances surrounding women
interviewing men. There is an absence of information on this subject, despite the recent
willingness of researchers to discuss research trials and tribulations. This may be because
most female ethnographers are working with women, partly the reason why scholars
whom I asked for information pointed me toward *Feminist Dilemmas in the Field*. The
edited collection dealt with "research by women, with women, and for women," and so
did not include a chapter referencing my dilemma. I found a useful article by Joan Neff Gurney entitled “Female Researchers in male-Dominated Settings” in *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside view of Qualitative Research*. I hope that others continue to write about their experience in order to help further Gurney’s most useful piece of advice:

Finally, female researchers need to recognize that instances of sexism, sexual hustling, and sexual harassment do occur in the field. Some consideration should be given to how best to respond to hypothetical instances of these behaviors before the fieldwork begins. Having some notion of how these situations might be dealt with ahead of time may make it easier to respond to them when they do occur. (61)

I was fortunate to have the only occurrence of an uncomfortable interview occur outside of my dissertation subject. I was also lucky to experience no sexual harassment within my field; everyone I worked with treated me with respect and concern. There was an element of something that I hesitate to characterize as “sexual hustling” because it was more akin to the lighthearted flirting that people do when they are out and about listening to music. It was a part of being in the community and did not create limitations or hamper fieldwork relationships.

**Connection/Difference**

I have been asked, less than I expected, but more than once, why I did not choose to work with a Latino community. This question is based on the assumption that minority researchers should work with their “own” minority communities. My position as a Latina ethnographer researching a community that is made up predominantly of
African Americans means that my identity within my field is one of both sameness, as in the case of citizenship and minority status, as well as difference, in the case of ethnic group and hometown. I have never conceived of my project as definitive and see it offering one perspective – that of someone who started off as an outsider and slowly became a Detroiter through long term residence, homeownership, and, soon, marriage. Perhaps the next stage for "native ethnography," as well as race and ethnic studies in general, is to build on the foundation of researching underrepresented communities without a self imposed restriction to work solely with our "own" communities. As an important part of the struggle against racism, minority scholars need to build bridges of understanding between our communities as part of a larger effort to make clear that our interests and concerns for equal opportunities belong to everyone, not just us.
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