

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“DETROIT CAN’T WAIT”: LOVE AND WAR AT THE BRINK OF MUNICIPAL DEATH

(AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTING OF EMERGENCY)

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2019

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Abstract

This dissertation offers an ethnographic accounting of state intervention into financial crisis in Detroit that tracks the fiduciary and actuarial restructuring of the body politic's assets and obligations alongside the conceptual and affective restructuring of its foundational narratives and exclusions. While the economic heft of the city's industrial legacy has been restructured outside of the City's taxing authority and state's regulatory reach, its majority-black, working-class constituencies have persisted in fighting for self-determination for the embattled municipality and a fair share of the American prosperity. While the city's reputation has been sensationalized by images of industrial ruination and criminal corruption, these headline-grabbers did not force the low-income city into its acute cash crisis: rather, structural insolvency was precipitated by predatory refinancing of critical infrastructures and public pensions that crashed along with subprime mortgage markets. Facing its own deficits and falling behind in the accelerating global competition for technological innovation, the State of Michigan declared emergency for its largest city in March 2013, courting controversy by authorizing an emergency manager with extraordinary powers to bypass city charter, elected officials, and collective bargaining agreements, so as to remake structures of governance from the balance-books up. As protests mounted challenging the compromise to democracy disproportionately borne by African-American citizens and the integrity of state promises to workers, Detroit's emergency manager heightened anxieties by filing for Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy, threatening to liquidate invaluable public assets and decimate retirement benefits promised to a civil service integrated by the city's first black mayor. Yet, the court's redemptive legal arc served to air and relieve these anxieties, while forcefully offering its closed-door negotiations as a means of adjudicating historical disputes and building consensus around

promise revitalization. By November 2014, the City of Detroit successfully exited Chapter 9 as the largest and most complex case in US history, in record time.

This ethnography illuminates Detroit's case as: 1) a precedent in legal practice, in subsuming constitutional principles of citizenship into contractual standards of due process; 2) a model for municipal governance, stewarded by expensive experts, oriented by private investment, and consumed by public safety. While the technical and procedural content of bankruptcy proved opaque even to stakeholders in the process, I show the court's process offers its own pedagogy of post-bankruptcy citizenship in its dramatic staging of the city's fall from financial grace and resurrection to a life of renewed credit. I argue the story of the body politic imposes a locus of identification through which to conceive the differential status of debtors, overdetermined by a virtue-ethics grounded in white normativity and decontextualized from the entangled histories and predatory markets by which debt is valued. The image of survival by which the city escapes fiscal death thereby renews the conceptual armature of the American social contract, while offering a feeling of rupture from its protracted structural contradictions: a hyper-masculine ideal of self-sufficiency and tamed risk, predicated on writing off bad debts of slavery and settlement, feeding off reproductive labors of care, and riding on a secular claim to divinely-authorized domination. I suggest it is easier to reject this ideal than the embodied disciplines, anticipatory logics, and racial calculi of emergency management that protect it, structuring the very rules of the game of surviving restructuring institutions, whether as investors/workers, citizens/scholars.

Keywords: temporality, politics, crisis, authority, bankruptcy, emergency management, debt, survival, restructuring

DEBTS*

Creditor Class: Family

Ancestors, Mama, Papa, Big Brother, Little Brother, Aunties, Uncles, Cousins

Year-to-Moment Assessment: the closeness to God in honoring you; the bedrock of unconditional love and support; the power you allow me; the reason I fight; the reason I study

Creditor Class: Detroit Ancestors

Rakiba Brown, Charity Hicks, Belinda Myers-Florence, Ms. Ethel Bussey, Ms. Grace Durr, Ms. Gloria Benberry, Tangela Harris, Nicole Cannon

Year-to-Moment Assessment: leaving light that continues to refract with God's most beautiful and merciful attributes

Creditor Class: Master-Teachers

Joseph P. Masco, Hussein Ali Agrama, E. Summerson Carr

Year-to-Moment Assessment: teaching me the constellations, guiding me through struggle, challenging me to find my own way

Creditor Class: Midwives

Tristan Taylor, Kaya Williams, Ella Butler, Karma Frierson, Kai Parker, Emily Bock

Year-to-Moment Assessment: breathing with me, thinking with me, laboring with me, plotting with me, arguing with me, sitting up with me, being blunt with me, riffing with me, goofing with me, becoming undone with me, getting it together with me

Creditor Class: Block Family

Jennine Spencer, Toyia Watts, Daisy Jackson, Felicia Denson, Maria Thomas, Mary Nelson, Pat Smith-Maxwell, Toni Raines

Year-to-Moment Assessment: opening up home to me, showing me love, showing the patience, mentoring me, schooling me, feeding me, nurturing me, teasing me, getting real with me, chilling with me, praying with me, riding with me

Creditor Class: Detroit Friends, Family, Fighters, Thinkers, Dreamers, Scholars

Aaron Handelsman, Allison Laskey, Amy Krings, Anthony Grimmett, Baxter Jones, Bill Davis, Blair Anderson, Bill Goodman, Bill Wylie-Kellerman, Bryce Detroit, Curtis McGuire, Dave Sole, Demeeko Williams, Dennis Black, Eric Bradley, Fayana Richards, Gui-Sok Hong, Jack Schulz, Jamie Fields, Jarret Schlaff, Jerry Goldberg, John Philo, John Royal, Jose Alvarenga, Julie Hurwitz, Kathy Quackenbush, Kate Levy, Kim Sherobbi, Kristian Davis Bailey, Lish Hilgers, Lola Gibson-Berg, Lucianna Sabgash, Mike Mulholland, Nakia Wallace, Peter J. Hammer, Rashida Tlaib, Reg Flowers, Rich Feldman, Robert Grant, Rosalyn Walker, Sarah Chelius, Shane Bernardo, Shanna Merola, Shawn Vaughn, Shea Howell, Tawana Petty, Tom Stephens, Tony Paris, Valerie Jean, Verlina Brewer, Walter Gary Knall, Yvonne Jones

Year-to-Moment Assessment: provocation, conversation, collaboration, information, inspiration, celebration, determination, translation, imagination

Creditor Class: Experts

Hon. Stephen Rhodes, Kevyn Orr, Dan Kinkead

Year-to-Moment Assessment: offering your method and worldview with generosity of mind and spirit

Creditor Class: Detroit Community

Boggs Center for Nurturing Community Leadership, By Any Means Necessary, Charlevoix Village Association, Community Development Advocates of Detroit, Detroit Active & Retired Employee Association, Detroit Eviction Defense, Detroit Future city, Detroit Water Brigade, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, Eastside Community Network, Field Street Block Club, Michigan Citizen, Moratorium NOW!, National Lawyer's Guild, Occupy Detroit, People's Water Board Coalition, Retired Detroit Police & Firefighter Association, Sugar Law Center, United Community Housing Coalition, Voice of Detroit, Wayne State University Damon J. Keith Center, We the People of Detroit, WDET

Year-to-Moment Assessment: sustaining critical nodes of public engagement, learning, and connection

Creditor Class: Anthro Kin

Ali Atef, Adam Baim, Adam Sargeant, Alex Blanchette, Alex Shams, Ali Feser, Andrea Ford, Anna Jabloner, Ayesha Mullah, Cassie Fennell, Christien Tompkins, Colin Halverson, Erin Moore, Hannah Woodroffe, Jay Sosa, Jerry Zee, Kate Mariner, Kristen Simmons, Lee Cabatingan, Matthew Knisley, Nick D'Avella, Nida Paracha, Ray Noll, Stephanie Graeter, Vivian Choi

Year-to-Moment Assessment: the wild strength of wandering with unicorns; taking so seriously the making of intellectual genealogies we do together; hugs and kisses and singing and dancing

Creditor Class: Faculty Champions

Miyako Inoue, Tim Choy, Jean and John Comaroff, Lauren Berlant, Alireza Doostdar, François Richard, Kaushik Sunder-Rajan, Sean Brotherton, Darryl Li, Natacha Nsabimana

Year-to-Moment Assessment: the impressions you have left on my thinking; the aspiration to be your colleague

Creditor Class: Chicago Community

Anthropological Students Association, Graduate Students United, Indiana-Illinois Regional Organizing Network, Southside Solidarity Network, Workshop on US Locations

Year-to-Moment Assessment: the lessons that come only with both the good times and the bad

Creditor Class: Students

Anthropology of Debt Crisis, PIR Section 19 2018-2020

Year-to-Moment Assessment: sticking with me through the open-endedness of exploration; committing to the project of learning beyond a grade

Creditor Class: Research Assistants

Sarah Kwon, Kelli Bartoletti

Year-to-Moment Assessment: bailing me out; warming my heart

Creditor Class: Financial Support

Michael and Ling Markovitz Dissertation Fellowship, University of Chicago Division of Social Sciences, Mark Hanna Watkins Post-Field Fellowship, Pozen Family Center for Human Rights, Sperry Fund, Kappa Kappa Gamma Foundation

Year-to-Moment Assessment: the means of inquiry; the faith of investment

Creditor Class: Healers

Good Tree Institute, Joel Hall Dancers Center, Lynette and Lisa Hish, Ta'leef Chicago

Year-to-Moment Assessment: opening me to the potential of full intelligence of body, mind, and soul; space for the breathing of spirit; time for exploring other dimensions

Creditor Class: BFFs

Amber Campbell, Natasha Dar, Charles Maalouf

Year-to-Moment Assessment: opening up the growing up

Creditor Class: Backstop on Value

Anne Ch'ien

Year-to-Moment Assessment: from the first smiley-faces to the last, the days on the end of my life you have saved by relieving the stress of institutional urgency and professional uncertainty

*These accounts are only a scratch on the surface in acknowledging the mentors, friends, neighbors, strangers, family, colleagues, comrades, teachers, students, lovers, leaders, and laborers who have made this dissertation possible. For those debts left unacknowledged, uncounted, unpaid, and unthought – I beg forgiveness but not a write-off. Please excuse the failure of classification to capture the singular place you hold in my heart; and the failure of assessment to express all I owe.

Preface

This dissertation offers an ethnographic accounting of the financial crisis declared by the State of Michigan for its largest municipality, the City of Detroit, in 2013. The declaration served to put into effect a Michigan law authorizing the governor's appointment of an emergency manager to restructure municipal operations from the balance-books up in a statutorily-limited term, subject to renewal. This law represents the most radical form of emergency receivership in the country, empowering unelected appointees with unprecedented powers of bypassing locally-elected officials, rewriting locally-legislated ordinances, and restructuring locally-contracted bargaining agreements. In only 18 months, an appointed emergency manager is mandated to implement budgetary, fiduciary, and hiring adjustments to reorient the municipality's core organizational mission around fiscal self-sufficiency and service provision. Detroit's emergency manager took a further unprecedented course in his tenure by drawing upon his statutory prerogative to file Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy representing the City of Detroit.

Federal bankruptcy law offers a remedy to debtors unable to sustain regular payments to their creditors in lending agreements, as the court has the authority to reduce the amount contractually-owed whether by mediating a negotiated resettlement between the contracting parties or by "cramming down" a rewritten, impaired contract upon objecting creditors. In either path toward a successful exit from bankruptcy, the court's judicial prerogative is to apportion a reasonable amount of sacrifice from both parties, calibrated to the fiscal rehabilitation of the debtor to lending markets. Detroit's case would prove the largest and most complex in US history, resolved in the record time of 18 months and closing out the tenure of the emergency manager.

Such a high-profile case has been subject to a proportional amount of accounting already:

- As his first major act, Detroit's emergency manager produced a comprehensive audit of the City's finances, operations, and infrastructures;
- Actuarial experts followed in turn, accounting for the disputed size of the City's long-term debt obligations, owed largely to retirees of the municipal civil service but also to Wall Street bond issuers and insurers;
- Legal experts representing creditor claims against the City in bankruptcy assembled archives of contractual transactions with the City, producing an evidentiary accounting of their clients' claims on the municipal budget;
- Business reporters accounted for the twists and turns of legal and legislative procedure as the City's fate unfolded, broadcasting legal outcomes, public statements, and political controversies that signal to investor publics the speculative dimensions of the case's market implications;
- Journalists offered human interest stories that accounted for the human side of state experts and the human costs their work entailed for vulnerable populations impacted by debt collection and debt adjustment;
- Activists launched counter-narratives, historical critiques, and political analysis, accounting on the record for the state's and big banks' responsibility for the very conditions of crisis they were punitively remediating upon the city;
- Only three years after the case's close, it has already been canonized as US history in two major publications:
 - *Detroit Resurrected*, which begins and ends with the bankruptcy filing and includes

retrospective interviews with key players who offer dramatic accounts of the behind-the-scenes negotiations that produced successful legal outcomes for the state (Bomey 2017);

- *The 50 Year Rebellion*, which called to question the very declaration of crisis, contextualizing the state takeover with an account of the city's tradition of black political power as it has weathered and withstood a white supremacist war of attrition, and accounting for a crisis not of municipal finance but of US politics (Kurashige 2017).

The already-rich historical record on this case is thereby marked by a profound, multidimensional disagreement. The bankruptcy itself produced a remarkably consensual outcome among creditors agreeing to settlements of pennies on their previously held dollars and among politicians agreeing to cooperation in implementing the emergency manager's post-bankruptcy plan. These creditors have lost legal grounds to appeal their claims, with remaining dissenters dismissed all the way up to the Supreme Court. These politicians have held electoral ground to carry out proposed redevelopment, albeit through reduced voter turnout.

Yet as these legal and electoral facts of consensus get taken up as the "happily ever after" of Detroit's financial crisis, the accountings of Detroit's financial crisis do not even accord on what is being accounted for, a disagreement that unsettles the very terms, "Detroit's financial crisis":

Detroit

- Is the case's history locally bounded to the municipality, "Detroit," and the competence and character of its leaders?
- Or is the history constituted across borders of regional housing markets, denationalized

job markets, and the global financial markets, backing and betting on it all?

Financial

- Is the “financial” as transparent as an audit of revenues and expenses, as impersonal as a calculator and as colorblind as a dollar bill?
- Or is the avalanche of numbers and technical terms a legal and political alibi for evading histories of racial subjugation that structure those revenues and expenses, the functions the calculator executes, and the face on the dollar bill?

Crisis

- Is “crisis” an exceptional historical event, in which exceptional characters undertake exceptional deeds that restore norms of progressive time and rational value (Roitman 2014)?
- Or is crisis itself the norm, a democratically-delimited mode of governing (Masco 2017) that reproduces progressive destruction and dehumanizing rationalities (Baldwin 1963; Benjamin 1968; Wynter 2003)?

When Michigan’s governor declared crisis, the politics seemed to fall around traditional battle lines: the Black Metropolis versus the white surround; union versus corporate power; Democrat versus Republican. Yet disagreements about the very terms, “Detroit’s financial crisis,” persist across the forms of compromise and consensus forged across interested parties over the emergency manager’s tenure. They constitute a politics not reducible to interest or identity, entangled in the cruel optimism (pace Berlant 2011) demanded by projects of reinvestment, revitalization, and rebuilding. Linned sharply by both competing interest and differential identity, these disagreements unravel a politics of knowing – of locating emergency intervention in time and space. They beg questions such as: what histories matter to the present

and to the possibility of a future (Trouillot 1995)? How do we live with the uncertainties such temporal entanglements introduce? How deep do those uncertainties run in constituting (or unraveling) the subjects and objects of intervention (Hartman 1997)?

These are epistemologically-speculative questions to challenge the certainty that accompanies the economically-speculative projects that structure the ongoing retrenchment and cascading of global financial crisis. The expert risk assessments and growth projections that aim to predict, harness, and control for seismic fluctuations paradoxically produce intrinsic market effects by posing as extrinsic tools for measuring market effects (LiPuma 2017). “The market” itself ripples with epistemological politics – whether you take it as a definite, year-to-date phenomenon, or a dynamic accumulation of centuries of racialized dispossession. The rich cosmological grammars of market-speak (shot through with God and war, sex and death) belie the unknowable singularity that destabilizes the center of any form of market certainty (cf. Sharpe 2016). The speculative future-making and history-haunted load of these terms opens a profound ethnographic question of how they get produced as certainties, what affective charges make them effective, and how they are embodied and inhabited as such.

While this dissertation seeks to explore the very idea of “Detroit’s financial crisis,” this project would be entirely illegible without these terms – both to those skeptical of and faithful to the confidence of state actors, mainstream media, and market experts. These terms produce a reality that exceeds, even encroaches upon, the disagreements they conjure. “Detroit’s financial crisis” was adjudicated in terms of the reality produced by its very declaration. The interventionist assemblage of emergency management and municipal bankruptcy worked legally and legislatively to delimit the field of political action around its terms – making it possible that alternative accountings could enter the record but have no effect on the process.

The court's very authority as adjudicator – the setter of terms, the backstop on value – makes possible particular genres of dispute, while foreclosing epistemological challenge of that very authority. The terms of state intervention circumscribe achievable action around terms of the municipal/fiscal/exceptional, to the explicit and deliberate exclusion of the seemingly impossible, functionally gridlocked terms of the contextual/racial/political. Or at least, they do speculatively – the contextual/racial/political have a way of bearing in on the circumscribed municipal/fiscal/exceptional field, puncturing the linear narrative arc of crisis declaration/resolution with immanent threat and promise that make market futures on state interventions interesting.

In other words, we can speculatively track a legal and political calculus alongside state actors of what the body politic can and will bear, if we are mindful of the epistemic remainder being controlled for – that recalcitrant, persistent remainder to the accounting in which crises in capitalist accumulation are survived, as McKittrick puts it, appending an asterisk of black life to the archive's violently inadequate accounts of antiblack violence (2014). Whatever the accounts of Detroit's financial crisis have managed to record in tallying up the impact of intervention – in terms of pensions cut, water service disconnected, land transferred, houses knocked down, houses left to fester – Black Studies scholars thinking with the unthinkable (Hartman and Wilderson 2003) insist the substance of the violence is uncounted and uncountable; the substance of resilience, unaccountable, unaccounted for (Harney and Moten 2013; Moten 2013). Among these experts on the politics of governing racial difference, the very possibility of an accounting is itself in question.

So what could this humble ethnographic accounting contribute to an already-saturated, always-asterisked archive on "Detroit's financial crisis"? Ethnographic method is itself an

expertise in non-expertise, insofar as our *modus operandi* is to be outsiders to fields of expertise, so as to notice their constitution, attend to their assumptions, and feel out their practices (Carr 2010). Rooted in experience and relationships, it can only provide a deeply situated, socio-politically embedded, ethically-implicated perspective – without prerogative to judge among accounts, with only a tradition of investigating how accounts are inhabited, translated, and subject to re-signification (Asad 2018). The ethnographer learns by her ignorance (Rancière 1991), to search in the doing of accounting for how the making of sense comes to be policed, enforced, or subject to dispute and redistribution (Rancière 2013).

This dissertation therefore is not an argument for what sense to make of “Detroit’s financial crisis”; it is so very far from complete and comprehensive to dare. Rather, the writing itself has been a speculative experiment in navigating the shifting of disagreements (Rancière 2004), inhabiting the making of sense (Asad 2018), and tracing the exclusions and antagonisms that make sense common (Wilderson 2003). I thereby attempt to stay with the incomplete and non-comprehensive processes by which markets and elections are made definite objects of knowledge and kept indefinite loci of speculation. In this method of being present, I suggest an ethnographic accounting of emergency offers something adjacent to an accounting of “Detroit’s financial crisis,” less about the case itself than the conditions that destabilize its very boundaries. These conditions – at once global and local, historical and urgent – bring into view the case’s aftermath (Scott 2014), as a powerful ripple in the wake of American traditions of antiblack disenfranchisement, dispossession, and devaluation (Sharpe 2016).

Destabilizing “the case,” and along with it, a position of judgment, I pose a series of methodological quandaries of situating myself in respect to the disagreements disavowed by consensual settlement. These quandaries do not resolve easily as arguments but structure and

texture the ethnographic narrative that follows.

Detroit: inhabiting the body politic

As an outsider to the city and its lived history, I could only respect without fully understanding how high stakes the shared experience of surviving that history is to city politics. Detroit has long been subject to the stories, diagnoses, and projections of outsiders with no respect for the authority of this experience and little acknowledgment of the black Detroiters who have sustained the city against the odds (Boyd 2017). The politics of narrating the city have been consequential over the decades of black political power in which such narratives have shaped possibilities of investment, value, and self-determination. I was humbled and surprised by how warm and welcoming the Detroiters who introduced me to the city were, suspicious of my own entry with the bandwagon and career-making project orienting my trajectory. But what assumptions was I bringing that if I could not be assimilated, I could not be welcomed? Under what framework is outsider status presumed a threat, and shared histories require policed boundaries? My own grammars of the body politic proved to be in play in this politics of making sense of politics.

Detroit carries a burden as a quintessential emblem in romantic American narratives of redemption that serve to authorize the nation's project of pioneer self-determination – narratives that strategically empty the cityscape of its inhabitants (Safransky 2014). Such selective blindness consumes the city's authenticity while repressing how blackness disturbs the national narrative's dominant tense, color, social life, and relation to death. The city carries an affective charge outside its bounds: you don't have to say much more than the name, "Detroit," to conjure racialized projections of desire/threat around specters of the criminal/revolutionary. This affective charge works in organizing perception, directing investment, initiating risk

calculi; it is a real factor in speculative practices, concrete as the price of bonds, real estate, customer bases, debt refinancing, federal aid, and state planning.

At stake is the very content of the social contract the body politic serves to personify. Indeed, in classic social contract theory, the body politic is the acting form of political unity produced in the speculative act of exchange between the people to be governed (surrendering their natural liberties) and the sovereign thereby authorized to govern (offering security of person and property). Emergency management has been characterized by its undertakers precisely in terms of this people-constituting exchange: one of municipal services for tax compliance. The crisis diagnosis of emergency management is that this covenant has been broken; the work of restructuring serves to fix it. So it should be no surprise that revisiting the scene of the covenant to renew the act of exchange has produced a rich narrative terrain of the body politic – once dying, now reborn – and a fraught imaginary of “the new Detroit.” While the emergency manager’s team insists this new Detroit is for everybody, many activists and residents wonder precisely who counts as everybody: as the unifying force of the body politic in constituting such an internally universal citizenry has always entailed exclusions (Rana 2014). Critical race theorists have insisted these exclusions inhere to the conceptual underpinnings of the social contract, in the somatic norm of the white male body it presupposes (Mills 2014) and the grammatical erasure of the non-consent of black peoples traded as property in its foundational form (Wilderson 2003).

But the emergency manager does not fix the broken covenant in the state of nature imagined by liberal theorists. In revisiting and reenacting the scene of exchange, he also recalibrates the terms of the covenant to the contemporary setting for the story that animates Detroit as that protagonist, the body politic. In other words, municipal services these days are

subject to underwriting by global financial markets; the very possibility of tax compliance is structured by increasingly mobile populations and accelerating economic cycles. The question of who counts in the everybody included in the new Detroit reanimated by the interventionist return to the social covenant therefore hinges on who can keep up with the market mechanisms to which it is hinged in the underwriting and emplotted in the post-bankruptcy imaginary of citizenship.

I thereby leave to others the critical task of exposing and naming the neoliberal takeover of democracy and city governance (Harvey 2007; Brown 2015; Stanley 2017; Kurashige 2017). Instead, I aim to explore entanglements of the social covenant's fiduciary underwriting with its socio-culturally racialized imaginaries. And I mean entanglement: both the quantitative transparencies of fiduciary underwriting and the qualitative narrativity of socio-culturally racialized imaginaries represent a complex of linear progressions and cyclical reiterations; both, differently yet relatedly, producing an epistemic murk (pace Taussig 1984) that weighs on straightforward accounting. I deploy ethnography to stick with the entanglement, rather than trying to sort it all out (displacing and disavowing the epistemic murk for a false certainty of my own clear accounts).

In this respect, I am interested in the pedagogical force of the body politic narrative in somatically directing affect through the scene of submission to the state and producing particular forms of agency and responsibility realized through consent to the state project. It is less an empirical question of how captured my research informants were by this narrative than a speculative question of how the mechanisms of capture work, explored through my own body and my own sensibilities cultivated and disciplined through belonging in the unmarked white body politic. I thereby take up the socio-culturally racialized imaginaries of the body politic

forged in state intervention to better understand the otherwise inscrutable and opaque logics of fiduciary underwriting, which appear bounded to the municipality and year-to-date, yet are only conceivable in how they are tied to speculative market cycles founded in unrepaired/unreparable dispossession. “The city” and “the City” are thereby distinct but entangled realities throughout the text: the social, experiential, and historical forms that come together in that ineffable, incomparable locus of urban belonging; and the fiduciary, technical, and operational form captured and commensurated through state municipalization.

By fleshing out narratives of the body politic, inhabiting their romantic conventions, and exploring their naturalized settings, I seek to feel out this restructured form of citizenship that resonates well beyond Detroit – in which the racialization of exclusion and sacrifice is studiously cleansed of any legal traces of racism (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2006; Haney-Lopez 2014; Jackson 2010). I thereby seek to conjure the neoliberal bogeyman of risk, opportunity, personal responsibility, and rational choice, without the comfortable remove of critique – a genre of self-mastery too formally implicated in the heroic genres of political recognition under examination (Asad 2009). Because the body politic called to question by the state’s intervention proved often not to be Detroit, in particular, but of an unmarked white America that needs Detroit to prove its stories are true – that the exception it makes of blackness can yet be restructured to confirm its universality.

At the same time the very force of this narrative contains its immanent undoing as the bodies it hails turn out to be entangled and interdependent – a condition never fully cleansed by its disavowal in romantic narratives of a singular body politic. Inhabiting ethnographically the traps these narratives set, I probe my way toward interlocutors not so subsumed, reaching toward black feminist traditions in which such unassimilable difference is not threat but

strength (e.g., hooks 1986; Lorde 2012) and spiritual traditions in which the state cannot rightfully command total submission nor the power over life and death.

Financial: assuming expert confidences

I never intended to do an anthropology of finance and remain intimidated both by the calculative complexity and power-brokering that follow and make financial markets. I feel inadequate to the task of making arguments about how these operations are remaking the possibilities of life and collective death on this planet – whether as to the black-boxed content of proprietary algorithms and closed-door deals; or to the transparent white noise of financial data and market speak.

But I wonder whether this intimidated inadequacy might be the proper approach: whether a distance from insider logics might facilitate an understanding of the lived effects market games have. These lived effects become inaccessible to finance's initiates, immersed in the abstractions in which they deal. It proves a value-added (in the market-speak of leveraging investment) to approach finance obliquely – showing my work (in the math-speak of long division) as I have sought to understand financial abstractions through the concrete violences they produce. Key to my own understanding has been letting go of understanding – the epistemology of finance is an epistemology of movement, change, motion, and as such, becomes inscrutable for those it leaves standing still. This epistemological stance makes for an uncanny resonance with race, which scholars have shown to be a socially-constructed yet historically-effective reality in the world. Like money, its valuations make sense only in changing contexts of calculative regimes and power-brokering. Racial thinking that attempts to grasp, objectify, capture, reify – to stand still – may produce a sense of relief among the body politic's white publics; but the false sense of certainty generated by categorizing and labeling (so as to manage)

racial others proves another violently reality-making speculation.

The anthropology of finance denaturalizes the classic financial imaginary of the market as moved by Adam Smith's infamous invisible hand, revealing the deep rituality, social constructedness, and historical determinations through which that invisibility is produced, maintained, and undermined (Zaloom 2002; LiPuma 2017). It levels financial hegemony as culture, unveiling the wizard behind the curtain to be as human, flawed, subjective, and social as the rest of us. In her analysis of the habitus of Wall Street, ethnographer Karen Ho notes the racial dimension of this culture in the paradoxically universal-yet-privileged race of whiteness (2009:37). To counter the power of whiteness in its "representational flexibility" leveraged in financial abstractions, Ho intervenes by working to render it concrete and particular – tracing the race, gender, and class dimensions of the cultural values that dominate Wall Street (Ibid). As Wall Street increasingly dominates the terms of governance, there is much to be probed about both the concrete and particular coalescences of white supremacy across the interests of Wall Street, white publics, and the state that secures them both. At the same time, naming and exposing whiteness enacts a paradox precisely in the power of naming and exposing than can only ever have force within structures of white supremacy and grammars of white liberalism – the (in)felicitous conditions contextualizing any form of agency seeking to recognize whiteness (Ahmed 2004).

My ethnography attempts to explore the question of finance and whiteness in a very different context than Ho's Wall Street – a context in which whiteness (and its cultural values) is not the assumption. In the majority-black city disciplined by state intervention around Wall Street's white interests and norms, the politics of seeing race remain contested. In attempting to track the disciplinary logics of unseeing whiteness in state-enforced financial value, I am

interested in how the cultural values of whiteness are inhabited even when they are not willed (or resistant to willing, *pace* Ahmed 2012). I thereby track abstracting logics of instrumental calculation and numerical objectivity as they are articulated through cultural values of confidence and sincerity (Asad 2018) and of sin and sacrifice as they reproduce white embodiments and antiblack erasures. Such embodiments and erasures help us think with the affects of market-making (think: panic, hype) that economists work to model and predict so as to manipulate and manage. Such practices of modeling produce a transparent reality through the commensurability of mathematical calculation, while entailing assumptions and axioms that are often disputed and/or inscrutable and unleashing market effects of their own – their truth-claims proving interested, political, and sometimes devastatingly wrong (Poovey 2015). How do affective logics of market contagion mirror the mirroring habits of mass whiteness?

My translations of Detroit's financial history are not made up of commensurable perspectives and do not render a textual complement to the transparency of balance-books. Instead, my practice of translating entails sensing for the violences of actuarial and managerial calculations so as to think concretely about the sacrifices abstracted in bankruptcy and the indebted histories not included in the accounting. Unlike the journalistic, this ethnographic accounting of violence does not entail scenes of suffering and vulnerability to elicit sympathy or shock but rather seeks to demonstrate what is concrete and non-statistical about structural reproduction and reconfiguration (*cf.* Hartman 1997). Insofar as seeing is believing with value-laden markets in play, the optics of a situation – how it looks to mobilizable market publics – have become a critical site of management. In thinking with the guts that dwell beneath eyeballs, I experiment with what we might learn about such management by considering the differential ways in which we are part of the situation and discipline to being managed.

I thereby take sensing as a critical mode of examining financial processes of abstraction to draw out the embodied and historical materialities they entail, intimate to practices of surviving financialized worlds including universities as well as municipalities. I suggest we come ready with unrecognized financial expertise simply through such practices – not because our personal budgets are analogous to that of municipalities and other public debtors (cf. Wray 2009; Kelton 2016); but because of the sensibilities produced by playing the financial game from different positions, on who deserves pain and pleasure, what is the value of punishment and reward, how are honor and shame distributed.

As anthropologists denaturalize finance, scholars of race have been digging more deeply into how the seeds of both capital accumulation and actuarial science were sown through the transatlantic slave trade – materially embedding racial inheritances into not only the distribution of prosperity and harm but also the very epistemology of finance (Baucom 2005; Armstrong 2012; Ralph 2012). How those inheritances are lived undermines any authoritative grasping of the social and historical (Trouillot 1995). These categories are increasingly inadequate as a conclusion, but only open new questions: how might we conceive of social and historical entanglements otherwise than the transparent linear progressions of econometric thinking (Thomas 2016)? Such questions at once demonstrate and undermine the reality-making power of financial speculation – ripe territory for ethnographic method to illustrate and illuminate rather than analyze and argue.

Crisis: feeling excesses of urgency

I imagined the immersive work of fieldwork would be like wading into Lake Michigan: step-by-step, gradual, my body adjusting to the temperature; only after reaching the height of my heart would I take the plunge – and then (according to this romance), I would find a

happily-ever-after in Detroit, a new home, a self transformed and completed by the water. But I arrived to a storm – shortly after moving in the cool summer of 2014, ready to begin the slow, deep work of relationship building, everything heated up as the emergency manager undertook a large-scale residential water shut off campaign – a tidal wave of aggressive service disconnection upon Detroit’s neighborhoods. The water shutoffs unleashed an activist response that went global in its efforts to draw the line on austerity governance. The mobilization was like an undertow that knocked me off my feet and rushed me into a deep I was not prepared to navigate – unready to grow gills and submerge (Garriga-Lopez 2018) but unable to float along. Detroiters were deluged by media, academics, documentarians, and volunteers; I was long one among many newbies to this long-standing struggle – each of us bearing some sort of romance in which we had envisioned our parts in the crisis (witness, savior, ally). The content of our projects varied; but the form imprinted into the structural possibilities of mobilization. After all, we came bearing resources, connections, and investments. Only what were we asking in return?

The urgency of the action scrambled my wires, as I had neither a plan nor an ethic to undertake ethnographic reciprocity at this pace. I was everywhere I could be, feeding on the heightened sense of presence of political action and the uncertainty it entertained. I contributed as best as I was able – chanting, flyer-ing, transporting. I made some fast friends but was reticent to take up the time of activists leading struggle: my questions were not immediate, nor would be my writing; and everything else seemed to be. I was not equipped to capture the dramatic action from the perspective of those most involved but all too equipped to investigate the structural position of the spectator – the broader publics being hailed and recruited by those most involved, as well as by the state. In this competition for public sentiment, the urgency of crisis was real enough despite all the disagreements about its nature. The emergency manager

and activists worked to harness urgency with different intentions and forms of power; but the electricity was in the air.

Until it wasn't; or perhaps, where it wasn't, or when it wasn't. Which was often: Detroiters might pass through the crackling force-field of the drama political action conjured, unaffected by activist appeals to join in and feel it, too. I would be humbled by the ease with which Detroit activists could inhabit both globalized urgency and neighborly camaraderie – we outsiders might have been riding the most recent eddy of crisis, but there is an ocean of emergency we could not fathom. It was in this felt, temporal sense that the urgency seemed to fall along racial lines – in socio-historical proximity to the wake of anti-black violence (Sharpe 2016). When I was with other (white) outsiders, I would feel we'd been caught playing make-believe revolution, embarrassed that we weren't up on a stage for all our theatrics, but out in the world we cohabited with those for whom the emergency was not new, and the political action has high-stakes – life-and-death, not simply self-fashioning (Hartman 1997; Asad 2005).

Much of the dissertation is preoccupied with tracking the formal logics of the crisis as declared by the state as they work to produce and harness urgency around particular kinds of political projects and outcomes. I am not trying to get to the bottom of state authority in its power to do so, but rather to express ethnographically how urgency works to amplify particular stories of crisis over others, reduce complex entanglements into neat oppositions, and resonate with the always-already anxieties of white publics poised to seek assurance of the security of their (our) form of life. I attempt to illustrate in casting my chapters as dramatizations of the dominant affects of white publics to which the state and markets are responsive.

Like the body, like politics, like race, like finance, I think this urgency of crisis is best understood without understanding, without bearings (Sharpe 2016), without standing still long

enough to make a definitive claim. I am indebted to the critical thinkers and mentors who have posited such a method of survival and shown me what it means put into practice. I continue to struggle with it: the understanding that only comes when I let go; the clarity that only comes when I don't cling to any definitive accounting. It's a divine kind of struggle, and only by the power and mercy of God do I begin.

INTRODUCTION

O Ye Subjects of Restructuring

[what I found]

Former Goldman Sachs VP Wallace Turbeville has broken ranks from his Wall Street comrades-in-arms to translate the weaponization of fiscal gymnastics to lay-publics vulnerable to plunder, releasing a critical report of the declaration of financial emergency in Detroit, Michigan, and the blame laid on underfunded public pension systems. His report describes the conjuncture of declining revenues, exacerbated to the point of emergency cash-shortfalls by the State's own fiscal distress and the promised revenue-sharing it withdrew from the City in 2010, in the wake of the subprime mortgage bubble's burst (Turbeville 2013). At a 2014 forum on the bankruptcy at Wayne State University in Detroit, Turbeville described how states are more vulnerable to market cycles than the federal government because their balanced budget requirements force them to cut in bad times and spend in good times. He argued the recession did not create but revealed budget dysfunction across governmental units. He explained: *Fiscal stress rolls downhill, and cities are at the bottom. They have no legal sovereignty of their own, as municipalities authorized by the state; their economies are small but open, creating a mismatch between the reach of urban economies and the political boundaries of cities, cursed by the socially mobile who can free ride on municipal amenities and left to capture revenue from captive sources. Municipalities are thus forced to compete with their neighbors; to retain families and businesses, securing a tax base, local government needs an edge.*

Thank you, Wallace: this is where emergency management comes in. As a professional field, emergency management works in optimizing systems to not only remediate disaster but to do it in a way that assembles innovative surveillance technologies with self-reflexive data

collection to anticipate future disasters while restructuring operations to more effectively secure against them (Collier and Lakoff 2015). As a policy logic, it proposes to send professional emergency managers to where liquidity stops, where gravity pulls it downhill through legal infrastructures to the point of no authority. Their job is to restructure the downhill terrain by any means necessary, to get the liquidity flowing again, to prevent a flood of stormy, stagnant waters that could start rising quickly.

Fiscal stress rolls downhill, down to the least powerful. I suggest it keeps rolling, a responsibility for liquidity we take on if we are to remain aspirational within our means. In the diminished sense of the future weighing down on the post-recession present, we are directed to retroactively determined the more robust social contract of the past is the culprit for the suffering budgetary retrenchment (cf. Scott 2014). Emergency management, as a form of expertise, sounds technical. As a form of governance, it impacts a minority.¹

But don't get lost amidst the restructuring jargon: you already know how to emergency manage if you don't have enough time and/or you don't have enough money to flow comfortably above water. You might even be able to hear the emergency managers' whispers in your ear, telling you: *Go on, invest your little capital to leverage your little credit, while we cut away the pain of your previous failures. It might hurt now, but then it will be gone, and your little credit will be cleared to circulate in clean waters. Because better times are coming. Allow us to renew your sense of anticipation, to offer you a brand-new future for which to hope, for which to get out of bed in the morning, and go out and spend your little capital. This future is a credible future, not like the last one that let you down. The better times coming will result from your courage under the fire of this necessary sacrifice. So*

¹ Although Michigan's law has impacted the majority of the state's African-American minority (Lee et. al 2016).

make your calculations wisely: spend/cut, audit/plan, buy/sell. Live on that calculus, keep calibrating that future, let that promise determine the value of your time and obligations now. Sacrifice. Expect sacrifice.

Progress is on its way.

A Narrative about Narratives

[what I almost missed]

“Inevitably and soon, if it’s not too late, the government and the suburbs and the rest of the white establishment will realize that it’s in their best interest stop screwing Detroit...”

“Whether the problem is communicable disease or crime or drugs, it has been proven time and again that city limits don’t limit anything.”

– Mayor Coleman A. Young, Hard Stuff: The Autobiography (1994:293)

They tried to tell me Coleman Young had said this day would come. I was new to the city, blowing in on a growing storm of new investment, speculative interest, and anticipatory attention, the eye of which was the State of Michigan’s extraordinary intervention into the city’s governance. I call the intervention extraordinary not because of the exception it took to the ordinary course of market democracy but because it was no ordinary intervention: it had been crafted by consultants and an accountant who were self-proclaimed outsiders to the world of governance; the statute they designed to authorize the intervention had failed an extraordinary trial of popular referendum, yet been revived by the extraordinary legislative force of tea party insurgency; the federal bankruptcy that ensued would not only be the largest and most complex cases in US history but would also be resolved in a record 18 months through unprecedented forms of private-sector participation. As I tracked all the twists and turns of this restructuring plot for all their extraordinary details, I could hear a refrain of Detroiters who had weathered the drought of liquidity over decades of getting screwed by the white establishment: *Coleman said they would come for the water; Coleman said they would come for the art; Coleman said they would*

come for the parks. Coleman would be turning in his grave. The water; the art; the parks: they had indeed each in turn been restructured out of the city's control. The civil service Coleman had integrated would be restructured out of their health benefits and a critical portion of their pensions. Even Joe Louis Arena, which Coleman risked his career to build and named for the black community's hometown boxing hero, had been assessed as worthless and handed off to a private developer to restructure according to its best interest.

I anticipated this extraordinary intervention would be all about cuts, imagining the austerity agenda for the largely low-income city and its infamously beleaguered postindustrial cityscape would be brutal in slashing away the remains of the city's social contract. But this form of anticipation was a glass half-empty estimation of the famously abandoned city, which was still persistently, insistently half-full. It was one of the first lessons I learned about Detroit: whatever its credit rating or cash flow, there was so much wealth in the city, from the sturdy housing stock built to last longer than a mortgage term to the international trade route with Canada, the city's southern neighbor. Coleman Young, the city's first African-American mayor, had spent his two decades in office doing whatever he could – including regular rounds of emergency restructuring – to protect this wealth, defending against relentless assaults on the city's credit and cash in his two decades in office.² The auto companies went to the suburbs, then down south, then overseas, abandoning the city that made them possible and the black workers who sweated and toiled in the most dangerous yet necessary jobs for the least pay (Thompson 2004; Meier and Rudwick 2007). All but a few remaining white folks picked up every scrap of value they could for resettlement on the other side of Detroit's taxing authority.

² See Thomas (1997) for a critical history of his dealmaking approach; and Boggs (2011) for a trove of critical essays by revolutionary autoworker and community activist, James Boggs, offering community-based alternatives to reliance on corporate capital.

The local press reported on the city as if it were being occupied by a foreign power, blowing up every uncorroborated whiff of scandal they could (Young and Wheeler 1994). The federal government no longer found it fashionable to fund cities programmatically,³ and when large investments did emerge, Coleman had to fight suburban leaders over every dollar. Even the unions gave Coleman a hard time, forcing the City into expensive collective bargaining agreements by extorting its incapacity to sustain protracted negotiations (Young and Wheeler 1994).

Indeed, Coleman had been elected on the heels of a national wave of urban upheavals in which Detroit's had lasted the longest and entailed the most fatalities and incidents of brutalities by its closure through state intervention. He says of the time, "The consensus was that the black mayors, with rare exceptions, had been drafted caretakers for cities in critical, probably terminal, condition" (Ibid:218). The city's glorious mono crop – industrial auto – had passed its peak in the alliance of corporation and labor that had claimed the manufacturing triumph of the second world war (cf. Boggs 2011). Restructuring had already been ongoing as corporations competed according to their best interests and against the odds of the post-civil rights social contract modeled by federal investments in cities with the promise to remediate legalized racial exclusions from the postwar glut (cf. Katznelson 2005). I did not pay much attention to the history of Coleman Young's tenure as mayor, renewing the consensus that he had only ever been caretaker for a terminal patient. But what gets left behind, unconsidered, when judging political legacies not in the contexts in which they were conceived but from the analytical hindsight of world-historical necessity (Scott 2014)?

³ See Hinton (2016) on the federal shift in investment from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime.

I might have written Coleman off in my crisis calculus working the possibilities of this moment of intervention, but it was impossible not to notice, even 20 years after his death, the man's name was loaded with quite the affective charge in this region. Even if the white establishment had been passing off the financially beleaguered city for hospice care, it is apparent that nonetheless, white folks in Michigan took it personal when the city elected this black man in 1973. The history books are still playing telephone on what he said to make the suburbs so aggressively defensive in his 1974 inaugural address: "I issue open warnings now to all dope pushers, to all ripoff artists, to all muggers. It's time to leave Detroit. Hit Eight Mile Road."

There are two competing authorities on the history of this intervention that have to reckon with Young's legacy and his two decades holding office. The mainstream history focuses on the Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy filing; *Detroit Resurrected*, authored by a local business reporter who covered the case, writing his way to a job with a national news outlet in DC. This text describes Young as charismatic and polarizing, contributing to the political tension with his sharp rhetoric; but in citing the infamous "leave Detroit" statement, the author notes parenthetically, it was "misrepresented as a proclamation that white people should move out" (Bomey 2017:19). With a journalist's deft fact-neutrality, he paints Young responsible for the polarized political terrain but leaves ambiguous in what way, while waving a white flag on the most sensitive point. *It's okay, white people, you can come back! The city has always been your home!* In this characterization, the book models its central claim: that the bankruptcy serves not only to mediate creditor claims but also political antagonisms, producing a consensus based on compromise that releases the city into post-racial markets in American futures.

The alternative history only takes the bankruptcy as one tactic in a long-term counter-

revolutionary strategy to force white policing back on the black people who rejected it: *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*, authored by a professor who sits on the board of an esteemed Detroit grassroots organization from Washington state after over a decade in Ann Arbor. This text describes Young as unapologetically pro-Detroit and pro-black, a man who did not mince words; he cites the offending statement only after citing Young's set-up, when he called for an end to the polarization and racial division (Kurashige 2017:30-31). The author claims, "What Young intended as an anti-crime message in tune with the 'law and order' sentiment of the day was received as a declaration of war on the suburbs" (Ibid). The example thereby illustrates the stakes of the long rebellion in which being pro-black is enough to be at war, so no use compromising to antiblack sentiment in the name of embodying the consensus-building position.

It is fact, Young is polarizing; it is fact, Young spent his career trying to overcome this polarization. But what is the terrain being polarized? In what kind of politics is a declaration for white people to move out just as easily characterized as a declaration of war? How can such a politics (of home and mobility, law and order) hinge on the contested representation of a single declaration? "Racial politics" is the regional gloss for it, and it is used euphemistically – a polite alternative to Coleman's sharp rhetoric: "the white establishment...screwing Detroit" (Ibid:293).

What does Coleman have to say about his declaration? In his autobiography, it ends the chapter on "the Big Bang" of 1967, which provides the context that motivated it. "The Big Bang" is a fitting title for the events described therein, in evading the "racial politics" of characterizing them as a riot perpetrated by black looters or a rebellion waged by black citizens. If we must call it a riot, Coleman says, "let it be recorded as a police riot" (1994:174), instigated by white cops against a black community celebrating its troops' safe return from Vietnam, "the explosion" that

followed fueled by police brutality, its raging flames spreading as state reserves with no training in crowd control or love for black people declared open season. It was these police actors, whose “[combined] effect was like a white army of occupation,” had produced the confrontational parameters that made it “a winless situation in which peace would represent a surrender” (Ibid:176). Coleman credits the integrated Air Force paratroopers sent by the federal government for finally containing the situation after four days of a people and 43 dead. The only attempt at justice was for the most sensational case of brutality – the “Algiers Motel incident” when white cops discovered white women partying with black men and proceeded to terrorize and torture the entire party, murdering three young black men in cold blood. But justice would not be served. Indeed, neither would it be for all the black women sexually assaulted by cops in the streets, who even snapped photos of their extralegal gropings (Kurashige 2017). Such is the context in which Coleman is elected caretaker for the terminal patient: state authorities invading its own territory; white aggression expressed through one-way racial rights to women’s bodies.

Coleman claims the theme of his speech was unity, as had been his political theme his entire career. But when he describes his declaration, he adds the rest of the sentence omitted from the authoritative histories, which emphasizes the “all” qualifying pushers, ripoff artists, muggers: “I don’t give a damn if they’re black or white, if they wear Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges. Hit the road” (Ibid:200). He had thought it was “innocent enough,” playing “the new marshall” (Ibid:201). But the suburbs, aghast, believed he was ordering an invasion, “dispatching his hellions over the border to prey upon the wealthy white neighbors” (Ibid). It is striking how this white imaginary anxiously projects the inverted mirror image of its own invading force of extra-legal predators onto the body of the municipal

sovereign representing the still traumatized black body politic. “It was beginning,” he closes, signaling not an event of declaration but an inauguration of a pattern of abuse that would mark his two decades in office (Ibid) – abuse not simply of state powers but of something less divisible.

It is the sentence that falls out in the historical re-representation that I contend fills out the image of the white anxiety it provoked, and the textures of abuse that would follow. In rendering commensurate the optics of race and uniform across black/white, pimp/cop, he strips the terms of public order of its white appearance – which proves non-innocent.⁴ He draws the boundary of the body politic around a conception of integrity in which neither race nor police power is essential.⁵ Is this the declaration of war, in authorizing such a body? What does it tell us about the integrity and boundaries of the American body politic when it is taken as a declaration of war to authorize such a rival public order? With the pimp lingering in the image of the expelled, Coleman conjures racialized hierarchies of sexual access and protection, which have historically been a locus of white fears around integration (Hartman 1997). But he upends them, not only with his “sharp rhetoric” (Bomey 2017) but also with his “unapologetically pro-black” embodiment of political authority (Kurashige 2017).⁶

But I almost missed this question of authority by relying on the authoritative histories, mainstream and alternative, to characterize this man’s legacy for me. They tried to tell me

⁴ See Williams (2017) on the white appearance of the public order in the municipal context of New Orleans.

⁵ See Asad (2005) on the integrity of the body politic as a secular anxiety; throughout the dissertation, I examine renderings of the body politic for its core capacities and aesthetic flexibilities.

⁶ Coleman called this “the most flattering remark” made about him after he announced his retirement: “He is the only mayor I’ve known in my lifetime about whom the brothers stand out on the corner and slap hands and say, ‘My man’” (1994:331).

Coleman saw this intervention coming; he had spent his tenure fending it off any way he could: "I'd rather ride out the storm than toss the valuables overboard" (Ibid:290). Both histories describe him as "surprisingly conservative" in the fiscal discipline he maintained (whether to or against his credit). I never forgot what they had tried to tell me about Coleman's authoritative foresight, pinning it in my mind as an image of black political power under siege; but I had never delved deeper, figuring "surprisingly conservative" was all I needed to know his legacy was not what I was looking for amidst the revolutionary progressive visions emerging out of Detroit's crisis and in the wake of intervention. But such a binary political imagination is not fitting for the study of the social, what Coleman calls that "misty, multidimensional proposition" essential to connecting the region (Ibid:292). I had never considered the stakes of distinguishing a fiscal conservative like Coleman, who simply wants to know how things will be paid for before they are purchased (1994), and a fiscal conservative like the governor intervening in Detroit's business, who believes only public safety should be publicly purchased.

The 'surprise,' I conjecture, comes from Coleman's radical activist past, when he became a local celebrity for talking back to the House Un-American Activities Committee at the height of the Red Scare and correcting its southern chairman's pronunciation of the word "Negro." His career can then be captured as a transition from radical to conservative, a trajectory commonly called, selling out. But Coleman does not describe such a trajectory in his politics but a deep continuity:

"It wasn't the persecution that tore at us so much as a misrepresentation. We didn't give a hoot about subversion, or inversion, or perversion, or any damn version they could dream up. All we cared about was black folks getting what should be coming to us. Why was that so hard for those motherfuckers to understand?" (Ibid:135).

Coleman's family had migrated to Detroit from Alabama in 1923, as white folks there had incrementally dispossessed his family of land, and he inherited stories of ancestors murdered by

mobs for defending their claims. In Detroit, the vibrant black community in which he had grown up would be bulldozed without planning or apology to make way for the highways in the 1950s. He would serve in the US military and in the auto factories, in both fronts, fighting against segregation and the devaluation of black labor at every turn. His autobiography (Young and Wheeler 1994) compiles outstanding debts of American prosperity owed to its black citizens, radical in its challenge to foundational dispossession if not structures of capital.

These outstanding debts are histories present in the infrastructures of mobility and captivity that distend any project of repair. They can be read in wealth without market value, the substance of American forms of life that persists under the surface of actuarial accounting in which such debts can be restructured and written off with the stroke of a pen. I had dismissed Coleman's legacy because it had not fundamentally changed the rules of the game in which cities play; but I might have wondered at how he had forestalled this day for so long. In this case, there is too much at stake in a consensus to abandon his legacy of pro-black politics as foundational to integrated unity. His autobiography, written 20 years before this intervention, illuminates what its authoritative histories cannot – the affective stakes of reputation in assessing the worth of a promise, and thus, the value of debt, and thereby animating forms of contractual exchange for which the American property system (i.e., its social contract) is designed. Indeed, whatever the structural over-determinations of capital's flights, reputation is increasingly the terrain on which its value-trajectories are made.

To illustrate, consider how else the federal government could have spent the millions of dollars it sunk failing to indict Coleman – only ever succeeding in entrapping his associates (1994). And yet consider how successful sensationalized reporting on “political corruption in Detroit” has been in retrenching the one-way regional civil war. Says Coleman,

“I’m all for freedom of the press as a sacred American privilege, but I will not abet its wanton misappropriation by playing along as a source for the type of feckless reporting that Detroit has so wearily endured; nor will I pardon the incrimination and compromise of due process that has been perpetrated ad nauseam on my city” (Ibid:279).

Opening the field of due process to include the “unofficial prosecutor” of the media, he calls attention to how critical the differential status of members of the social contract are to their procedural equality. But “status” in the “social” is a “misty, multidimensional opposition” – heavy with history, pregnant with futures; not-quite-seen, evaporated materialities between us. It blurs the procedural lines between criminal/civil, prosecutor/press, public/private, suggesting only obliquely the binding that holds the body politic together as a very particular kind of whole.

Detroit Resurrected and *Fifty-Year Rebellion* offer histories of crisis that “speak for themselves,” partitioning the first-person perspective in the acknowledgments and proceeding to frame the significance of the case from a meta-historical perspective (White 1980).⁷ They thereby share in reanimating the redemptive tradition of American crisis, even in their fundamental disagreements about the value of freedom that hangs in the balance (Asad 2005; Roitman 2014). It is a diagnostic of fiscal irresponsibility versus a diagnostic of capitalist accumulation; a prescription of entrepreneurial initiative catalyzed by talented experts versus a prescription of community production catalyzed by women of color (Bomey 2017; Kurashige 2017). The case is not about race; the case is definitely about race. The urgency of these accounts condenses what is essential in the mist into crystallized takeaways, burning away the rest; in the progressive futures they propose, mainstream and alternative, the dimensions have been laid out into a clear pathway forward. Coleman’s unequivocally first-person account illustrates what

⁷ See Masco on existential crisis as a dominant political modality, collective imaginary, and public feeling, “reinforcing a generational gestalt of political gridlock and decline” (2017:S75).

cannot be captured: the lived substance of the city's reputation at which this intervention takes aim. Whether you believe this intervention was a triumph or travesty of justice, we are all surviving the substance out of which it took shape (Honig 2014).

Coleman knew one day the white establishment would have to "stop screwing Detroit" as if the city limits protected it from the traumas it seeded. But it would only be once it was too late for so many, when it was made inevitable by world-class consultants demonstrating and federal judges ruling: really, it is in your best interest to stop screwing Detroit. It was only after they had screwed Detroit for so long, they would need bankruptcy to make an honest city out of her in the eyes of markets for credit and credibility. But Coleman also suggests this too shall pass:

"We like to think that we are at the vortex of history, that all of the currents have joined at our heels, waiting for us to part the waters; but it's not like that. There is no cosmic salvation, no miracle cure, no magic moment – only good and bad and politics. And time. The wheels of the gods drive slowly" (1994:5-6).

I went to Detroit, like so many others, to live at this vortex, seeking salvation in the redemptive arc of history and chasing currents that promised to part the waters. I was trying to feel out the force of gravity at the vortex's center without being certain of its depth. I met activists who believed this intervention would be a world-historical inflection point, and how the people responded to this assault would portend, for better or worse, the survival of democracy. I met others who saw in it a violent eddy in a historical ocean as deep as agrarian settlement, and believed we had historical decisions to make, but their truth would not be realized in our generation (cf. Boggs and Kurashige 2012). I met others who lie in wait for a vortex that passes over a nerve at the bottom of world history's white supremacist pecking order, believing the explosion that follows will be when our actions truly count. I met others

lived with the weather,⁸ but their commitment to action wasn't oriented by its shifting gravity but to something eternal. I wandered and stumbled through "the good and bad and politics," taking different activist creeds as my map. This practice often proved hazardous, as I studied images of this terrain and its boundaries, I was vulnerable to the tripwires that would suddenly be pulled and change the whole geography. "And time" – how can I account for that on a map?

Salvation comes, salvation goes: its destructive force works not just upon bodies – distributed across so many statistical indices of premature death distributed across so many generations of American racism – but upon historical consciousness – not as the right story about justice but the experience of its execution. Bankruptcy offers a kind of magic moment, in its extraordinary authority to impair contracts – the protection of which founds our social contract (Locke [1690] 1980). This dissertation dwells in the currents of waters that never part, following dramas of rupture that drift on its surface as they ride the waves of mass markets in tax dollars, debt obligations, headlines, hashtags, clicks, food, water, shelter, sexual partners, and social status. It seeks to demonstrate how the strictly legal authority to rewrite the contractual record is deeply entangled with the foundational substance of the American body politic and its authorizing violence. Our tradition of rupture stays locked in its pattern of reconciling the contradictions of its secular authority by giving them a narrative: as the City's motto goes, *We hope for better things; it shall arise from the ashes*. For now, ashes; forever, dust to dust. And in the meantime, the hopeful first-person plural asserts the unity of popular sovereignty around an exclusive conception of integrity, while rendering persistent differences as either aesthetic to the body's core conception of survival or an existential threat to it.

⁸ "In *Beloved*, weather comes, breaks, changes quickly; it 'let[s] loss,' it is remarked upon and forgotten; it is. In [*In the Wake*], the weather is the totality of our environments; weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black" (Sharpe 2016:104).

If I had passed by Coleman Young's account, I would have missed the fact that restructuring has been ongoing project; indeed, Tiya Miles' pathbreaking research on Detroit's frontier history illustrates its particular calculus of necessity to be integral to the project the settlement – which she accomplishes by dwelling in the archives with the traces of the black and indigenous slaves who labored to secure white inheritance, speculating on the substance of the lives they might have led with their families divided up and exchanged as property (2017). It turns out we navigate Detroit streets named for slaveholders every day (Ibid). I had come to Detroit, like so many others, seeking to see the future and blind to the past I inhabit.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot tried to tell me this would happen (1995). He taught me to pay attention to the field of historical production and not to neglect the interstices where the silences appear between competing authoritative interpreters of history (1995): 28). I asked his questions in my ethnographic practice:

“What makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself? If history is really the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don't all winners tell the same story?” (Ibid:6).

But the urgency of Detroit's “racial politics” has made me hesitant to think what I've learned, so as not to appear on the wrong side of (accepted) history. I have sought to honor the historical subjects I have encountered in defining the terms of engagement; I have sought to track the structural positions being shuffled in socio-historical process. But the most difficult capacity to account for, trapped in the liberal tradition by the urgency of the vortex, is our capacity “as *actors* in constant interface with a context” (Ibid:23). Not actors constituted by rupture from context but made up in constant interfacing practices with it.

This ethical substance, caught between the brackets of subjective recognition and socio-historical distributions of life chances (Povinelli 2011), is called “the missing middle” by Aimee

Meredith Cox in her ethnography of “shapeshifting” young black women in Detroit. As one of these women describes it,

“The way we always have to think about how other people see us and compare it to how we see ourselves. I mean, it is really who we are and what we need to do on a daily basis to survive being Black and female in this world. But, I mean, not just surviving like getting a job and getting a degree, but surviving by holding onto our truth. The truth you don’t see on TV or in the papers like you should. They miss the middle because they are always focused on the outside and making assumptions about who we are. There’s a lot in the middle, but who’s trying to hear that?” (quoted in Cox 2015:10).

It is no accident that these young women and the City of Detroit must perform the same narrative conventions of redemption to access credit, no matter how much violence it does in cleansing them of context to package them neatly as self-making individuals (Ibid). Indeed, Cox makes the point that on TV and in the papers, Detroit’s financial failures were painted with “undertones of failure that was feminized in the same way the poverty has become over the past five decades” (Ibid:61). The narrative tradition of renewal in which bankruptcy law is expressed is missing the middle, casting the debtor out into the dark and stormy night of market forces; all the while, its legal outcomes depend on constant calculations of the social status of creditors determined by context – regulation, precedent, resources to litigate, resources to survive in the meantime.

This dissertation thereby seeks to illuminate the misty, multidimensional binding of the social contract, holding together embodied practice, narrative unity, and the disputes by which traditions are reproduced (MacIntyre 1983). Rather than exposing what is hidden in the middle, it examines its contours, the weight bearing in on it, and the affective work of missing it – what I will provisionally call whiteness. By whiteness, I mean to index cultivated embodiments of liberal grammars oriented by identification with the statistical norms of state sovereignty as well as its emblems of authority – “missing the middle” where this identification is predicated

on violent policing of rights to inheritance, mobility, and privacy.⁹

The missing middle cannot be sustained without much labor: restructuring serves to reconstitute (quite literally) the fiduciary infrastructures protecting whiteness, adopting its terms to restart the clock on progress after collapse. The high-profile of the Detroit case shows how central the feeling of progress is to this project, not only in managing populations but also to motivating speculative value. I examine ethnographically the pedagogical labors of restructuring that keep the game going along the following conceptual axes:¹⁰

- 1) the anticipatory logics mobilized by the declaration of emergency, and sublime affects they harness to state security (Masco 2014);
- 2) the characterization of the social contract as a body politic that directs conceptions of structural abstraction and scales expert engineering logics to the practical intelligibility of laypeople (Carr and Lempert 2016);
- 3) the redrawing of the public/private line cutting the contours of the properly political body, in the question called by sovereign intervention (Agrama 2012).

I reckon opposing the progress narrative only reanimates its the trap by mobilizing white affects around the very emergency to which they are attuned, missing the middle once again to skip ahead to the anxiety-resolving question of how to restore progress. I suggest instead getting out of this trap by divesting focus from its linear image – a "misty, multidimensional proposition" to render progress a *yes/and* rather than *either/or* proposition

⁹ See Ahmed (2012) on the materiality of whiteness as a habit and institutional will; Lipsitz (2006) on the possessive relationship between identity and structural privilege; and Asad (1993:2005) on the engineering of structural agency and secular appropriations of authoritative aesthetics.

¹⁰ See Von Schnitzler (2016) on the ideological commitment to pedagogy and local translation in the neoliberal restructuring tradition.

(Thomas 2016; Benjamin [1955] 2007). In each chapter, I attempt to identify white affects mobilized by this complex of emergency, pointing to progressive grammars that channel them to structural and thereby engineerable resolution, illuminating violence that persists ordained sacrifice, and asking what the whole image shows us about where this body is headed – according to its own accounting and beyond its own intentions. Such a method divests energies from a legal grammar of justice to conceive of responsibility; instead, I seek to pose the question within the substance of the middle, in which responsibility is concrete, particular to context and socio-historical location, and therefore not available to a consensus solution. It is worth saying what we might take for granted: one is not solely responsible to the social contract, the mediations of its judges, and the record it produces; but “one is responsible to life,” the constancy of its changes, and the death toward which it tends – a responsibility not of surfaces but depths (Baldwin 1963). No necessity calculus, messianic savior, strongman, judge, or activist platform can relieve this responsibility.

Arrival Narrative

[what I have been seeking]

This project is a tangle of hopes and fears, sensitively recalibrated along with the changing context of the socio-historical structure bearing down on my generation – in which we must act, we will ask, we do act. I have long been pondering Frantz Fanon: “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity” ([1963] 2004: 145) – while wondering what to do with the relative opacity. I found anthropology to be a kind of hope, offering tools of infinitely exhaustive critique with which to search for hope even if only to destroy it. The discipline offered a way of living in the shadows of my parents’ generation’s failed revolutionary hopes, growing up with the diminished futures of the 1980s as the global

conditions for an otherwise postcolonial future closed in on places including Detroit; and my generation's mission would seem to land smack in the fallout, a healing mission we were born to that we didn't ask for (cf. Scott 2014).

Is healing a revolutionary politics? Or is it giving up on something crucial about state power to believe so? Is state power what is crucial to revolutionary politics? If not or if so, what alternative ways do we have to live in relation to its dominance (Boggs and Boggs 1974)? These questions have haunted this project and my wanderings among activists, strangers, and friends, as I have struggled with the grammar in which they are posed: the unit of the historical subject who authors revolutionary calculations of political necessity. I was seeking a way of living that could relieve the responsibilities of all the costs and compromises survival in the fallout entails. Like many in my generation, I wanted to solve for political necessity as the most righteous, true, and just ends, so I could focus on optimizing the most effective means of action.

Anthropological critique was like running this calculus of dialectical world-history on the substance of the "everyday," taking for granted the correspondence of these temporalities. It was difficult not to, as these temporalities corresponded in the secular progressive faith in which I was raised and the white worlds to which I was disciplined. But I didn't believe I could crack the code, only run it toward an eschatological tipping point increasingly toward collapse – absorbed by existential crisis as a dominant mode of imagining politics, unable to feel out a positive futurity that did not reinforce the general gridlock (Masco 2017).

Detroit would bring it all together, for reasons I couldn't express – it is the very reputation the emergency manager serves to remediate that attracted me to Detroit, in the temporal complex of traditions of both Black Marxism and Black Jesus.¹¹ But this project really

¹¹ See Georgakas and Surkin (1998); Moten (2003); Dillard (2007); Ward (2011).

started with the Egyptian Revolution. It changed the equation, dumping me out of Marxist mechanics and into something quantum I couldn't grasp or figure. It gave me hope, but not the speculative structure of a utopian hope held out by the cynic; nor the aspirational structure of progressive hope held out by the activist – although the quantum field often collapsed into these linear images when I tried to observe it. I had to learn to be with it, as a way of living. I would have to find a way back to it constantly, as it is always collapsing; it is living in a different kind of aftermath – the collapse of the quantum – remediating by picking through linear affects, facing the violence immanent to the whole, disentangling the genealogies, examining my own inheritance.¹²

What was it in Tahrir Square that struck the hour of popular sovereignty on the clock of world history,¹³ but didn't seem to solve for the out-of-jointness of such a time (Scott 2014)? Hussein Ali Agrama called it "bare sovereignty" in its "asecular" indifference to the line between religion and politics that the state usually monopolizes the authority to be indifferent to (2011). We are supposed to be different according to the state's mediation, our unity the concrete manifestation of its abstraction. Maybe it wasn't "the state being overthrown" but a refusal to be thrown by the state? The protests offered sweet relief from the political necessity calculus as they "expressed every potential language of justice, secular or religious, but embraced none" (Ibid). Their sovereignty was not that "we the people" sovereignty (Ibid) that works these

¹² See Thomas (2016) for a quantum framing of anti-blackness; and Liu (2018) for "hard science fiction" that illustrates key principles of quantum mechanics phenomenologically.

¹³ "What time is it on the clock of the world?" is a question deployed by Grace Lee Boggs to provoke dialectical analysis (Boggs and Kurashige 2012). Boggs was an old colleague of Scott's (2004) interlocutor CLR James before she moved to Detroit, and the two radicals respectively reevaluated their failed revolutionary hopes toward different narrative ends: if James turned to the tragic, Boggs returns to the tradition of the American Revolution to resolve its foundational contradictions through a spiritualized, but secular, beloved community (Ibid).

differences into a transcendent metalanguage of justice, subsuming such differences into a general will, in which the image of the political is drawn and distinguished from the particularity of the religious (Bates 2012).

But really, I was just struck by the “everyday” of the images that circulated: the protesters were praying together. With different traditions and different disciplines. I had no tradition or discipline of prayer, but I was in awe of this heart of submission tucked into an uprising, its indifference to the state, unity cultivated not through identification with a shared aspirational future but an indivisible difference in the number of breaths we have left us each. I wanted to know: what might that look like in the US, where the line the state draws – the question it is always calling in marking and mediating our differences – is not how we pray but how we appear? What might it look like in the US, where this appearance factors so heavily into the differential distribution of breaths we have left to take, as forcefully mediated by the state (Gilmore 2002; Hartman 2007)? What sort of political subject could be indifferent to state categories without reinforcing indifference to the premature death of black people? What sort of political subject could stand prior to state difference without reproducing erasure of its foundational violence? Black studies is prolific on these questions without interest in reproducing a liberal first-person plural claimed by white normality,¹⁴ so perhaps the question about the subject doesn’t have an answer in the grammar in which it is posed. Maybe it’s not about potentialities of the subjects, but of particular modes of living (Agrama 2011), giving context and continuity to the possibility of any subject.

I went searching for potentialities during Occupy Wall Street, mobilized to seek the spirit of Tahrir in scenes of stranger love circulating from Zucotti Park. But in Chicago, “we the

¹⁴ E.g., Sharpe (2016), Wilderson (2003).

people” grammars of popular sovereignty dominated forcefully in the procedural rituals of figuring the general will, performing the immanent whiteness of such a consensus in the discipline of spirit fingers, the statistical abstraction of the 99%, and the formal equality of seasoned grassroots organizers and angry anarchists taking out their daddy issues on police they knew wouldn’t hurt them. I found shocking the lack of acknowledgment of the Egyptian Revolution in catalyzing movement energies. But I suppose it didn’t fit the narrative of self-determination emerging directly out of the experience of Wall Street oppression. For all its global anarchists claims, the ideological center of Occupy returned to the American Revolutionary tradition as its foundational narrative (Graeber 2013), in turn, reproducing the anxieties of founding fathers who sought to produce new forms of freedom through speech-acts while eating off of plantation slavery (Fleigelman 1993).

But it didn’t have to go that way in Occupy. My friend and mentor, Rakiba Brown, was dedicated to Occupy Detroit, central to facilitating a committee that helped the scraggly white hippies grasping at their first up-close experience of state injustice deal with themselves and get out of the way of manifest pluralities. She was famous and beloved for her gift of telling folks the hard truths about themselves they displayed but never examined: she told the truth with love, the love sharpening the truth, the truth deepening the love. She believed in Occupy’s spirit of expression and consensus but recognized *people were having to grow, to ask themselves what did horizontal leadership really mean*: “People do have to step up and take responsibility for getting the work of the movement done” — not the kind of work that often gets the credit (Gray Wolf 2014).

I met Rakiba after the encampment in Detroit’s Grand Circus Park have long been shut down, a winter passed. It was my first visit to the city in summer 2012, for a summit called by

Grace Lee Boggs on “visionary organizing” – a dialectical evolution to protest politics. As Grace put it in her message to Occupy,¹⁵ it was time to examine our culture, to look past abuses toward solutions. While I have come to ponder the clarity of the distinction between these two concepts, Grace Lee Boggs’ philosophical approach and attention to culture accorded with my anthropological way of living the aftermath, and I fell in deep among the converts re-conceiving our lives around this new kind of revolution (2012).

But I also met activists were not ready to give up on protest politics, conceding state power and rights to infrastructures built by the exploited and dispossessed. I sniffed out another immanently lifelong friend, Tristan Taylor, who didn’t mind in themselves the visionary organizing projects of cultivating souls by cultivating the soil and the like. But he was recruiting for a social movement to be led by black and brown youth at the bottom of the world-historical pecking order but would require white people to invest in the ongoing fight against segregation. So he did mind the way white folks were happy to buy visionary narratives as a hall-pass from struggle, a permission slip to adorn themselves with the aesthetics of black struggle while investing their energies in feeling better about themselves – collapsing political identity and brand.

Rakiba was indifferent to the disagreement over historical diagnosis, circulating freely

¹⁵ A video circulated of her message to occupy Wall Street that spoke gently and firmly (and too presciently) to its overwhelming whiteness, instructing: “This enemy of ours is not just Wall Street, it’s the whole culture. It’s the way of looking at us and valuing ourselves and each other. And how you are going to move beyond challenging Wall Street, how you are going to move to become part of the solution is not going to be easy. You’re going to have to do a lot of thinking. You have to look at how you yourselves have become part of this culture. Many of you would be happy if you could become part of Wall Street, become part of the corporations, if they would give you jobs. There is a long road ahead because you’ll have the opportunity to create something new that’s based on completely different values, you’re going to have to be thinking about values and not just about abuses” (Chang 2012).

without contradiction among any group dedicated to struggle. Her world was whole, and the summer I spent doing pilot research in 2013 as her roommate and spiritual apprentice, she walked me out of so many intractable language games chopping my world into analytical puzzle pieces (cf. Monk 2005). Rakiba taught me to conceive Detroit's wealth that had been so strategically devalued by the state and white investors, but not in a symbolic sense, for the sake of making an oppositional claim. She taught me it was concrete, all around me, an undivided temporal swell of sturdy assets, natural resources, trade routes, talented youth, wise elders, the new, the old. Her historical consciousness was praxis, and her practices of valuation drew out gifts in abundance.

Rakiba joined the ancestors the week before I returned to begin fieldwork in earnest in 2014, at the age of 61. Premature: I was not the only one left with a gaping hole in the world I was to go on living in. My ethnographic research suffered without the anchor of her mentorship, as I got lost in abstractions within my own methodology. Rakiba understood anthropology better than I: *it's what you do*, she once told me to tell my students, *it's your world for you to study*. I can only continue to return to her memory and tend to it for the light it continues to give. And when I worry I have failed her, I remember what she taught me about my own project: what I did (do), what I said (say), is not for my committee to verify, or my informants to approve. I will survive these forms of judgment. I will live on in their aftermath (Honig 2014; Scott 2014). She has left me holding open the question, how will I live with it? How will I die with it?

I raged at myself for neglecting a tape recorder during the summer of pilot research with Rakiba. I am still learning to live with my failure to archive more of the wisdom she shared, even just for the texture and tempo of her voice. Then one day, searching for traces of her

presence, I find the answers to all my entangled questions about politics on her Facebook profile.

Religious Views	There is only One Being and a nonexistent subjective multiplicity. <i>ya dig?</i>
Political Views	Other political views are like a certain orifice in that everyone has one.

One Being; to each her own orifice. The most abstract and the most concrete. How is that for asecular? How indifferent could you get to difference than its nonexistence? The dialectics of the orifice are as simply sublime as inhale, exhale; exhale, inhale. The question is the rhythm, possibilities of balance. What does the orifice have to say about conditions of surrender? What does it teach about love and vulnerability? What kind of care does it require? At the orifice, nobody is self-sufficient; everybody is vulnerable; no calculation or projection or algorithm, no script, no categories could ever come close to that view of becoming. The orifice: our body's own Angel of History, looking backward at the wreckage of our material histories as it is pulled inexorably forward (Benjamin [1955] 2007). *Ya dig?*

CHAPTER 1

The Terrified Body Politic starring in “Race to the Courthouse”:

Emergency Restructuring & the Faith of Bankruptcy

In March 2013, the governor of Michigan announced “Detroit [could not] wait” for “politics as usual” to remedy its ailing finances: declaring financial emergency, he appointed a restructuring professional trained in bankruptcy law as Detroit’s emergency manager. By statute, the emergency manager was endowed with extraordinary powers to redesign municipal governance from the balance-books up – including breaking collective bargaining agreements, suspending salaries to elected officials, rewriting legislated ordinances, and representing the municipality in Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy. With a limited tenure of 18 months, the emergency manager held a clear mandate in restructuring municipal operations: to restore Detroit’s standing in investment markets by producing a budget that promised sustained, regular payment on its debt obligations. The governor argued such renewed credit would allow the City to finance upgrades of its long obsolete and infamously failing administrative and technical infrastructures, making the city attractive in regional competitions for millennial talent, tech investment, and tax-dollars.

Indeed, the State of Michigan had been steadily falling behind in accelerating tech economies nationally pivoting from suburban expansion back into the speculative opportunities and lifestyle aesthetics of urban centers devalued by white flight and stripped of industrial vitality. In 2011, the governor had restructured revenue-sharing with its municipalities to shore up its own budget, precipitating further fiscal distress and the 2012 downgrading of Detroit’s debt (cf. Turbeville 2011). After a 2012 consent decree with city officials failed to produce a budgetary plan satisfactory to the State’s review team, the appointment of the emergency

manager served to bypass the “operational dysfunction” of the city’s elected government. The governor claimed the intervention offered technical neutrality and expert objectivity to solve problems left entrenched by partisan politics and catch up in the global economy.

Only two days later, a number of progressive legal organizations filed suit in district court challenging the constitutionality of Public Act 436, the legislation authorizing the emergency manager’s broad powers. They accused the State of racial bias in its implementation in only majority-black municipalities, while allowing majority-white municipalities with failing budgets to restructure themselves. With over half of Michigan’s African-American population slated for emergency management (cf. Lee et. al. 2016), they claimed this act violated constitutional rights enshrined in the wake of slavery to guarantee equal protection before the law, including civil rights to electoral representation. In a hearing, one attorney argued, “The stigma of PA 436 is that African Americans are incapable of self-government. I submit the denial of the right to vote through the exercise and implementation of PA 436 is to impose the badge and incidents of slavery” — unlawful under the thirteenth amendment (Bukowski 2014). This constitutional challenge was delivered amidst street protests and critical publicity against emergency management, as opponents claimed the law instrumentalized antiblack sentiment of Michigan’s white rural and suburban majority in a political attack against pro-black Democratic and pro-union constituencies and a private bid to advance the business interests of insider investors. The governor and the emergency manager were labeled Nazi and overseer on protest placards and in social media, characterizing their technocratic means as a reanimation of white supremacy’s deadly traditions in racial calculation, black expropriation, and genocidal

sciences.¹

Detroit's emergency manager would prove successful in leading the City through the largest and most complex municipal bankruptcy in US history in a record 18 months, not only restructuring legacy assets and obligations to unleash a new cycle of capital investment in the city but also restructuring labor and operations. Constitutional challenges to the emergency manager law remain in appeal, as rulings by conservative judges have thus far sided with the State on two central legal issues. First, the courts have held there is no constitutional provision guaranteeing the municipal franchise – as municipalities are defined in legal code as creatures of the state with no authority to govern except that granted by the state. As the elected representative governing the state, the governor thereby holds legal right and responsibility to intervene upon municipal subdivisions of his authority, regardless of partisan divisions and historical political antagonisms running clearly along city borders. Second, the courts have held as reasonable the State's argument that PA 436 is "colorblind" in its application, determined solely by "the color green" (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2006; Jackson 2010) – contending intervention is intended to serve as a financial palliative that will ultimately help all citizens catch up in the global economy regardless of the contested histories in which some have been legally held back. Plaintiffs have also failed to meet the courts' requirements for proving racial discrimination with evidence of explicit intent. What image of legal authority emerges from this dominant legal consensus, in which lengthy, costly, and uncertain constitutional litigation is left in the dust of bankruptcy's capacity to incentivize negotiated settlement – cities without sovereignty, money without history, antiblackness without intent?

¹ See Hartman (2007), McKittrick (2014), and Sharpe (2016) on the imbrications of these traditions; and Lewis (2015), Mirza and Seale (2017), and Stanley (2017) on the racial politics of technocracy.

This chapter takes on the collision of competing conceptions of race at stake in emergency management as a statutory form of fiscal governance – the colorblind race for investment in a ruthless global marketplace and the antiblack race of an American body politic constituted by critical exclusions from the means of democratic representation. Rather than seeking to expose the truth of race in either of these conceptions, I seek to illustrate how historically entangled temporality of antiblack violence comes to be embedded in accelerating progressive time (Thomas 2016). In the ever-untimely, “The Avante-Garde of White Supremacy,” Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton argue that the terroristic antiblack violence practiced by the state has no hidden depths: “The truth is that the truth is on the surface, flat and repetitive, just as the law is made by the uniform” (2003:179). The court’s requirement for intent defers judgment on the flat and repetitive truth of structural antiblack violence, directing legal sensibilities to the undiscoverable characterological fathoms of state actors.

In other words, I posit for examination the assertive fantasy of a colorblind body politic that wears the badges of slavery – aestheticizing the presence of historical injustice in a nonessential politics of expressions that can only adorn the body’s core legal logic of due process for contract-holders. What is essential is confidence in the mediating impartiality of judgment in contract dispute, without which we are left with the terror of war immanent to this form of the social contract. By exploring the textures of paternal authority also immanent to this form (Locke [1690] 1980), I illustrate the white image of necessity guiding faith in this “nonpolitical” (and therefore “nonracial”) intervention: an intergenerational competition for survival in which security of inheritance is distributed upward and legal liability, downward, with the terror of chaos pressing in on the field of play.

Forecasting Feasibility at the After-Prom

[holding court]

In this section, I introduce the playing field of bankruptcy, illustrating its emergency power of rupture as a secular formation suspending the proper domain of politics so as to recalibrate its boundaries (Asad 2005; Agrama 2011), according to its ritualized procedures of verification and delimited ethic of necessity (MacIntyre 1988).

It was just another late-summer day of 2014, and I am, as usual, rushing to the federal courthouse downtown for the regularly-scheduled confirmation hearings on Detroit's municipal bankruptcy. I had intended to arrive as the punctual court resumed after its lunch break but had gotten absorbed by a volleyball in my backyard. I found myself once again racing down the Lodge Freeway in my 1995 Jungle Green Toyota Tercel, swiping mascara in the rearview and self-medicating discreetly. My attempts to abate muscular tension and boredom would surely be challenged later in the courtroom, struggling to sit still in its rigid pews and follow the exhaustive legal procedure. Nobody but security would notice my arrival, and security wouldn't notice it was late. I feed a meter hurriedly, then stand fidgeting in line for the metal detector before dashing down grand hallways and slipping discreetly into the destined doors. I park myself quietly in the back, among the small contingent of public witnesses and retiree activists who do not consider themselves represented by any of the legal teams that filled the pews before us. We were witnessing these retirees' livelihoods being debated, evaluated, and adjudicated in the proceedings; yet we were all outsiders to the interpersonal dynamics of the court proceedings, cultivated over months of public hearings and the twists and turns of closed-door negotiations. I count it as a win in my research game to catch a nod from one of these activists.

This afternoon, we are listening to the testimony of an expert appointed by the presiding judge to evaluate the feasibility of the emergency manager's proposed plan of adjusting debts. Feasibility is one of the court's key criteria for confirming this plan and the sacrifices to creditor claims it entails – the debtor a.k.a. the City of Detroit a.k.a. the emergency manager must demonstrate that these sacrifices, bitten out of otherwise binding contractual agreements, condition the possibility of a revitalization plan that can feasibly launch the debtor into sustained solvency. If the plan is not feasible – if the sacrifices made by the court cannot conceivably set the debtor free from bad debt – the court cannot enact them. Hence the expert: “a good financial scrub” from Cleveland with the interest-neutral know-how to double-check the math on all of the complex budgetary projections on which the feasibility argument hinges – she described her own authority in her will and capacity “not to be bamboozled,” testing the emergency manager's calculations for seductive “overly optimistic” assumptions (Yaccino 2014).

The blunt angles of her haircut and suit frame the assessment she delivers on the stand well, testifying that the great recession had not proved a factor in her calculations due to the “obsolescence” of Detroit's housing assets. The proceedings do not skip a beat, as I catch up to the conceptual universe of actuarial value in which the stability of the city's future can be probabilistically computed without factoring in tens of thousands of homeowners foreclosed upon for refinancing their mortgages on predatory terms in a speculative bubble and the impunity of the banks sitting on vacant properties stripped of habitability's material trappings. Obsolete housing assets, indeed – when indexed at their present value, scrubbed of the history of (ab)use and anchored instead by sale-prices of modularly comparable assets in a volatile market.

The appointment of this expert had been contested by a competing candidate from the local law school who argued in his application that feasibility “must be assessed in light of the city’s history of still unhealed racial conflict in the city’s position within a fractured and segregated regional economy” (Hammer 2014). I had seen him present at community meetings and public forums, “connecting the dots” between the fallout of bankruptcy and institutionalizations structural inequality. He is by no means a fiery speaker nor paranoid in his style of critique but earnest in taking questions and humble in presenting accepted findings in the field of public policy on the structural reproduction of racism (e.g., Powell 2005). His commitment to Detroit’s community and to talking about race, I imagine, makes him “partial” in bankruptcy’s aspiration to act as a neutral arbiter in the political disagreement about whether we can ever talk about race. Today, the so-called financial scrub does not talk about race.

None of the lawyers who cross-examine her – representing bond insurers claiming a pound of the city’s flesh – will question her about race. They instead drill her about how likely the City is to fall right back into financial crisis if market hype doesn’t catch and convert a tax-base declining for over half a century into growth. Which is a “colorblind” way of describing the local expert’s critique of the expert’s report, which he published as an open letter (Hammer 2014) to the court describing the willing blindness of its “balance-sheet framework” to the apparent structural realities of America’s most racially segregated region marked distinctively by inequalities along comprehensive indices of opportunity (Kirwan Institute 2008). He describes emergency manager’s plan of adjustment as creating a second-class “minimal city,” fulfilling as prophecy the famous conclusion of another report, commissioned a half a century ago by President Johnson to investigate the conditions of crisis producing violent rebellions in cities like Detroit: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate

and unequal” (quoted in Hammer 2014). But he has not been invited to testify on his expert opinion that bankruptcy cannot feasibly resolve Detroit’s crisis.

What the court’s expert does talk about, before heading back to Cleveland, is how financing made available by bankruptcy will allow Detroit to update its embarrassingly obsolete IT systems and how the “skinny budget” allows no margin for error. But she testifies to the “will and skill” of emerging city leadership to make it work. “Will and skill” are apparently technical criteria of her assessment of human resources, as she defines them respectively in her report as “intestinal fortitude” and “talent and training” (Kopacz 2014). She has glowing reviews for the newly-elected mayor, who only recently rode in from the suburbs, bucking eligibility residence requirements by managing a well-funded write-in campaign (he gets the job done). She states on the record of confidence in him “as a leader and an operational executive,” a will and skill he cultivated as a former prosecutor who would go on to restructure Detroit Medical Center. She describes the “vortex of underachievement” that preceded his administration (Kopacz 2014) – apparently, the employees simply lacked the will and skill to leverage results out of brutal rounds of layoffs and budget cuts. She notes all of the talent the mayor is bringing into the city, professionals paid premium for their will and skill in making skinny budgets work – the “intestinal fortitude” to make the cuts and the “talent and training” to work the numbers.

In the local expert’s open letter, he balks at this conclusion, noting how her analysis is riddled with “blind spots” to complex contributing factors “that are clearly known and knowable to any caring observer,” conveniently covered over by her blind faith in rational choice (Hammer 2014). If rational choice replaces the caring observer with a calculating one, he points out it is still a narratively-rich belief system in the arc of its logic: “The day is saved by

placing the burden of feasibility squarely on the shoulders of the mythically invoked hero” (Ibid). Unfortunately for the caring observer, the narrative arc of bankruptcy procedure shares in this mythic tradition of rational choice secured by messianic sacrifice of heroic authorities. The judge and the rows of suits before him participate in embodying this mythos, the labors of care and calculation distributed procedurally. The local expert claims the feasibility report offers the court “a false sense of certainty about what it knows” (Hammer 2014). But the certainty in the courtroom feels real enough among these talented professionals who are only here to witness the report’s authority tested and verified by court procedure on the body of the witness. They have eyeballs to see structural segregation; they have the expertise to know the structural revival of Detroit’s tax-base is a long-shot framed by countless uncertainties – these professionals deal in value assessments and odds-making. So what are they so certain about? What is it the court knows is feasible?

Tucked into a section of her report called “Context,” the court’s expert offers a robust statement of belief framing the assumptions going into her calculation, worthy of the world-stage on which she is testifying today (Kopacz 2014). It reads:

Detroit “As Is”

Detroit is at a tipping point. While some may consider the chapter 9 filing as the low point in this great City’s history, I believe that it was the beginning of creating what can become a virtuous cycle of revitalization, improving economics and quality of life betterments for those who choose to live and work within the City. It is hard to imagine that people with such diverse political and socio-economic perspectives would have come together as they have in this process without the bankruptcy filing. Traditional political maneuverings are working to Detroit’s advantage and residents have the prospect of once again living in a community that is more safe and supportive. Black, white, Republican, Democrat, poor, wealthy, educated, illiterate and everyone in between have an opportunity to contribute to the virtuous cycle of revitalization, or not.

Her local critic calls this section “odd and vacuous,” “a substitute for analysis,” describing the concluding sentence as “nearly incomprehensible” (Hammer 2014). Perhaps it is clearly comprehensible in the historical vacuum of the actuarial universe – in which the subjects who matter are those “who choose to live and work” in Detroit (over competing municipalities) and in which political divisions are subsumed under the virtues of market vitality. Backing the “mythic heroes” making the necessary sacrifices to keep the city in the race, the court’s expert offers a vision of a diverse but virtuous resident population that does not care about socio-economic inequalities but about safety and support in contributing to market vitality. We can take Detroit “as is,” not emplotted in any complex racial geographies but at the beginning of a new plot. This conceptual universe allows for “two societies, separate and unequal,” in which nobody is exempt from contributing; and in which it is not the color of your skin but your will and skill that justifies your place. After all, the baseline minimal city designed by the emergency manager’s plan offers plenty of opportunities for the especially virtuous to upgrade their amenities.

I struggle to follow the technicalities of the expert’s analysis, but her consultant brand of confidence is familiar – at my Silicon Valley Preparatory University, I spent a few sessions hanging out with frat boys preparing for interviews with national consulting firms. The trick of gaining entry to the trade, they taught me, isn’t knowing the answer to a question (e.g., is this budgetary plan feasible?) but knowing how to perform a style of reasoning with confident assessments of market trends to produce a plausible answer (e.g., sure). Uncertainty over the future is the fuel of market cycles; the virtue lies in riding with the winners, hedging against falling behind with the losers (LiPuma 2017). Without the incentive to win and the terror of losing, the aggressively progressive momentum of market cycles is sucked into a “vortex of

underachievement." The expert's image circles around a black hole that punctures her "colorblind" devaluation of a civil service uniquely integrated in the region with the inaugural force of racialized sacrifice predicating progress (Thomas 2016). It bristles what the studiously impartial local journalists like to call "racial sensitivities" to what it leaves unspoken, brewing beneath the legal services of progress (Jackson 2010). The bristle passes through my sympathetic nervous system in the courtroom only to freeze before the expert's calculating image of confidence. I am terrified of falling behind. I am terrified of what I am worth, "as is." I am terrified my ethnographic data won't be credible, that the futures I am seeking won't sound plausible. I am terrified that I have already slipped into the vortex of underachievement, without bearings of competitors with comparable assets. I am terrified not only of losing but of the losers, qua losers at least; I am terrified of losing not simply safety and support but even the prospect.

As court is finally adjourned for the day, I expertly manage my quaking being into a frozen image of white normality, an invisibility cloak from which to spectate my studied participation in the scripted uncertainties of social scenes. But today I am noticed by a retiree working with his pension board, who stands next to me in the solemnity of the judge's exit. I am easily the youngest person in the room and, evidently from my dress, not a hired gun. He asks what I am doing here. When I inform him I am an anthropologist come to study the politics of the case, he snorts: *too late*. The *real politics*, he informs me, had been at the eligibility hearing months before these proceedings, which served only to hear and confirm the City's plan to exit bankruptcy. In my notes, I write, "too late, missed the prom."

The retiree gestures across the aisles at the suits glad-handing one another as they disperse, indicating the law firm defending the City's plan in court against the claims of

creditors such as himself. The firm had been hired to represent the City by the emergency manager, who had only left the same firm only 18 months earlier when he had been hired to represent the City by the governor. The retiree tells me to keep in mind that *none of these people are from Michigan. They are the biggest law firm in the world, they can roll right over us.* The governor and legislature had demonstrated they were *serious, they were going to proceed*, with or without his cooperation; once he accepted that, there was *nothing to do but get to work*. He was not paid for his time. I nod appreciating the gravity of that decision, eyeing the activist retirees in "Hands off my pensions! Make the banks pay!" t-shirts who attend court representing themselves and continuing to object after their official representatives had gotten to work negotiating with the emergency manager. They did not recognize his statutory authority to represent their city as legitimate and would fight dismissals of their legal challenges of the bankruptcy all the way up to the Supreme Court.

Whether negotiating or objecting, these retirees were all facing pension cuts in the form of reduced monthly payments, elimination of cost-of-living adjustments, and even the legal "clawback" of savings earned and vested with the City. And these pension cuts were nothing compared to the elimination of their health care benefits. The elimination of these benefits through bankruptcy saved the City \$5.x billion. Along with the pension cuts, the retirees would bear \$6.y billion of the \$7.z billion of Detroit's unsecured debt obligations dissolved through bankruptcy relief. I imagine the emergencies the man before me has faced over decades in the city, serving the City with relief laid off and equipment falling apart, protecting citizens amidst the despair of abandonment. I am checking my scripts – isn't this guy the hero? He jokes, *They should take the Thinker statue out from in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts and put up a Jesus one... with the judge's face!* I really laugh, breaking the ice around my intestines. I remark on the

apparent camaraderie that has developed in the wake of "the real politics" of eligibility: these fancy lawyers had plenty of clever lines to which the judge consented, bringing everybody in on the joke. The retiree doesn't bite: "it's not always funny."

No, it was not. Detroiters objected on the record until the bitter end, as activists charged "genocide" and retirees calculated how much longer they might live, adding newly unaffordable co-pays to reduced pension payments over their already skinny monthly budgets. Former City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson testified to an estimated \$1.5 billion budget shortfall she argued the State helped create, saving its own budget at Detroit's expense through this intervention – claiming a clear conflict of interest cloaked only by racism. I found myself surprised at how openly these counter-narratives aired in court; the presiding judge earned a reputation as caring, for making space to listen to citizens not written into the codes or factored into the procedures. Of course, these objections did not disqualify the mountains of actuarial evidence detailing the case's fiscal parameters. They didn't even slow its pace, as there was plenty to be negotiated behind closed doors between public sessions and plenty of corporate lawyers to represent the City across these sites. They didn't even really induce tension by naming as racial the court's calculus of life and death (Hartman 2007). *It's good to be reminded of the human costs*, the only woman from the New York firm stated frostily on the City of Detroit's behalf at one such hearing. "The human costs" are a recurring figure of excess in restructuring speak, capturing the threshold of suffering under negotiation in the public face of the case.

Perhaps it had been tense during the "real politics" of eligibility – before the unions had folded, when they called out thousands of their members and supporters to shut down the streets around the courthouse and add leverage to their negotiating position; before the civil rights challenges had been indefinitely deferred. The judge made it clear that he cared about the

sacrifices he would make; but also that he was determined to make them as soon as the emergency manager had whittled them down to the just proportions of the court's criteria. He made it clear he cared about Detroiters suffering the emergency of failing municipal services, his urgency to confirm justified by sheer desperation for refinancing. Perhaps "real politics" had ended along with a sense of suspense.

Pedagogies of Faith

[before the judge]

In this section, I explore the pedagogical authority of the judge as mediator of contract disputes. Examining the legal standard of faith anchoring bankruptcy's ritual sacrifice, I illustrate how fiscal survival as a credible subject of contract law precedes the possibility of civic freedoms in its cosmology of the social contract, ritually figurating a form of security conditioned by terror of its collapse.

I get an interview with the judge the next summer, long after the case's close, or long enough at least, that he has time to talk to me. I got his information from a documentarian friend of mine who specializes in getting these guys to say something blunt about their willingness to do the violence of austerity, using her privilege to secure the setting and get them talking before laying down her cross-examination. It was certainly more than you could get out of them at public hearings, when they would duck behind another question or a procedural reminder of civility without skipping a beat. She hadn't gotten anything scandalous out of the judge who presided over Detroit's Chapter 9 filing. Her camera captures the striking clarity of his blue eyes; she usually catches these guys when they get mad, but in her best clip of the judge, he looks almost serene in his stoicism – "Bankruptcy is beautiful," he says sincerely. The documentary narrates the bankruptcy as the legal clean-up of a conspiracy of the white and powerful to rape and plunder the great wealth resilient Detroiters have held together over

decades of attack (Levy 2014). In this context, the judge's sincerity sounds a little sinister.

I drive the Tercel out to Ann Arbor, to the University of Michigan School of Law – his alma mater, and incidentally, also that of the governor and emergency manager. I do not intend to catch him saying something that exposes the truth of the antiblack violence of austerity; if that truth is apparent on the surface of the intervention, I am more interested in how the uniform is made and worn (Sexton and Martinot 2003). I want to learn what makes bankruptcy beautiful to the judge. Besides, I am so well disciplined to prevent men from getting mad that I cannot cleanly distinguish my social warmth from terror. In person, the judge is far from terrifying; he has a Mr. Rogers air, so a little sinister for the Reagan-era context that authorizes this caring form of white masculinity. He is not defensive or suspicious but thoughtful and straightforward in instructing and reflecting on his role in the historic case. I can tell my curiosity satisfies him, as I have evidently observed him closely. In court, I was fascinated by his precise yet thorough method of applying bankruptcy's tests, criteria, and precedents, even kindly coaching participants on how to commensurate their claims to the code and exhausting unfinished lines of questioning at the ends of their cross-examinations.

The judge says he was disappointed the media never took his hints to file a subpoena to live-broadcast the trial: "Some may say I am naïve, but I have this idea that a key element to a successful democracy is an educated electorate." He claims if residents had the opportunity "to witness the proceedings firsthand," they would have been educated not only about how bankruptcy works, but more importantly, the vision promoted by the City – "and why it was necessary for everyone, including the residents and the pensioners, to sacrifice to varying degrees for the success of the city." When I ask him to describe that vision for which citizens must be instructed to sacrifice, he shoots off a list of basic services – "beyond that, the City

defined success in terms of its ability to attract businesses and residents back into the city limits, and of course, it would only be able to do that if it maintained adequate city services." His concern is securing this baseline against interruption, upon which the virtuous cycles of revitalization can ebb and flow. If heating systems and water meters train consumers to keep the cost-benefit analyses running against their bottom-lines in embodied practices of inhabiting infrastructures (Fennell 2015; Von Schnitzler 2016), in the judge's vision, bankruptcy can instruct us to do so as participants in a democracy.

He signs my confidentiality waiver with confidence: he is invested in the archive of this case – in his final ruling, he names history the judge of whether the sacrifices he enacted were just or a very violent mistake. I am impressed by how carefully he speaks, as I am terrified of my own rushing ideas and provisional claims being taken out of context. But it is the judge's job to be taken out of context. His is the voice of the body politic by its foundational design (Hobbes [1651]2017). I ask whether the gag orders on private mediations conflict with his pedagogical aims. "Absolutely, that is a constant struggle," he claims,

"a clear conflict between democracy and confidentiality. And generally speaking, I'm opposed to confidentiality in the court process. I can only justify it as absolutely necessary as part of the negotiation process. There is no way mediation would be successful, at all, if it had been open to the public to sit and watch it while it happened."

He pauses, careful, "Parties just will not make the same kinds of statement in public they are willing to make in private." I wonder how he would've stated that in private.

The judge explains his calculus of necessity, which punctuates his reasoning at every point: his court produces either a settled result or a litigated result; the City simply could not afford the latter. Besides, the private forms of reasoning negotiated in mediations do not bear on his judgment of whether a settlement is reasonable, which is instead a calculation:

"How strong is the [creditor's] claim; how strong is the [debtor's] defense; how much is it going

to cost to litigate; how long is it going to take to litigate; and then based on experience, there is a reasonable range.”

Indeed, his final ruling proportionally matches the payout each creditor receives on their previously promised dollar against his own estimated probability of their success in litigation – odds that will never be tested, but that instruct on what creditors save by foregoing the cost of further litigation and the uncertainty of recovering anything. *The City cannot afford it* – the emergency manager’s corporate lawyers constantly remind the court that lengthy litigation will drain the City’s capacity to reinvest and retain tax-payers. If the City can not escape this fiscal “death spiral,” there will be no debtor to pay out at the end of litigation. In court, the judge insists lawyers avoid this sinister “euphemism.” They are, after all, consuming the City’s legal budget mightily. I have taken note that this judge considers “death spiral” a euphemism for what he believes will happen if the municipality and its life-giving/protecting/nurturing services were slowly cut back until there was nothing left. Of course, only the governor can legally kill a municipality by dissolving its authorization, but who knows how long it would be allowed to spiral and what damage the spiral would leave in its wake.

I had heard activists ask, *why so fast?* – insinuating a motivated cover-up, to limit attention on the transfers of wealth channeled through the intervention. But time is money: it costs in bad debt each day without refinancing interest payments disproportionate to principal investments; it costs each day of defending the maxed-out value of Detroit’s impoverished tax-based against Wall Street lawyers with bottomless coffers to fight not only for their interest against the City but also for legal precedent underwriting vast and complex investment portfolios. Bankruptcy is a zero-sum competition among creditors to settle on the debtor’s pot of liquidity limited by the feasibility of her fiscal survival – time can be a weapon when the pot is being depreciated, and creditors do not have equal access to the means of litigating.

Accelerating the race to settlement not only leaves in the dust of history the contested terms of intervention; it also incentivizes creditors to divest strategically from the legal fight.

“Bankruptcy doesn’t ask why,” the judge claims in the activist’s documentary, as she insists on the question (Levy 2014). For the judge, such is the court’s grace, to offer debtors relief in exchange for a feasible promise of a more solvent future, regardless of what failures of fiscal virtue landed them in trouble. But it is a surface refusal of history – a blank canvas on which to paint a clean new credit profile. The intergenerational history of systemic inequality framing the debtor as a heroic individual is integral in the last instance to the court’s calculus: in the relative market positions of potential litigants, who can afford not only to fight but to threaten a fight.

The judge is not interested in connecting the race to settle with “the racial element” he describes in the objections to the case. Instead, this question is one of democracy – an externality to the municipal balance-sheets excepting the “colorblind” competence of the managers it elects. He tells me the political aspect of the case that most concerned him was “people’s anger about their democracy being taken away from them.” He directs me to the “real politics” of eligibility, in a day he opened up for people to come to court to talk to him:

“I remember being struck hardest by a woman who told me about a conversation she was having, I think with her grandson, about [the emergency manager], his appointment, and the bankruptcy case, in which she likened taking their democratic voting rights away to slavery. There was a very strong feeling that white Lansing was taking over black Detroit, and it was racially motivated.”

Indeed, I had read his eligibility opinion in which he constructs a composite narrative of all the objectors and their descriptions of how the case came about. He told me, “I felt it was important to give voice, public voice, to their concerns, which is why I re-created it in the opinion. You should read it, it’s very powerful, very powerful.” Excerpts read:

According to this composite narrative of the lead-up to the City of Detroit's bankruptcy filing on July 18, 2013, the bankruptcy was the intended consequence of a years-long, strategic plan.

The goal of this plan was the impairment of pension rights through a bankruptcy filing by the City.

Always conscious of the hard-fought and continuing struggle to obtain equal voting rights in this country and an equal opportunity to partake of the country's abundance, some who hold to this narrative also suspect a racial element to the plan.

Obviously, it had not been powerful enough to disqualify Detroit as eligible for a municipal bankruptcy undertaken by emergency manager – *bankruptcy does not ask why*. The judge can give voice to those asking why without it impacting the court criteria of judgment. He opens up a space for angry feelings about racial motivations that conjure deep histories of inequality and lets it play out on the surface of the case, tying it to the democratic practices for which it is a substitute through the exercise of voice given gravity by the court's witnessing. As one of his colleagues put it in *Detroit Resurrected*, the authoritative history: "I think he saw it as a social catharsis. People just have to be able to scream. I think he listened to their arguments. He let them literally have their day in court" (Bomey 2017:79). But the constitutional content of their claims has nowhere in the bankruptcy code to seep in, except in the judge's historical sensibilities inflecting his discretionary powers.

Branded with the composite narratives, the legal record captures the oppositional history that is acknowledged and left neither verified nor contested; his act of ruling serves to leave this history – whatever its content – in the past, making way for the consensual body politic of settlement, cleansed of the badges of slavery it may have borne before its rebirth. If the "death spiral" describes a necro-political *letting die* of marginalized black residents (Mbembe 2003), the judge's power isn't simply to *make live* (Foucault 2008) but to *resurrect* the body politic as a party to contract, and therefore, credit-holder. The court's tradition of resurrection not only

disciplines citizens to identify credit as the substance of living and dying; it also posits the body of a federal judge and the scene of his courtroom as an authorized mediator of that threshold, in a kind of public-private partnership with God. Our sins are written into our contracts; and this man holds the messianic power to take a legal eraser to that history of promises – *a Jesus statue with his face on it*.

But the objectors at the eligibility hearing had not only been giving voice to democratic concerns; they had been making a legal argument as well: among the requirements for eligibility for Chapter 9 relief is the debtor has filed in “good faith.” And it is on the point of faith where the “real politics” of the case heat up. The legally enumerated criteria for good faith basically hinge on ensuring debtors do not abuse the court’s remedy to cheat their creditors when they are not in fact on the brink of fiscal death. After all, the court is there to rationalize suffering toward practices of solvency, not to relieve it and reward practices of insolvency. The unions cried abuse, claiming they had been “blindsided” by the filing while they were still scraping together an alternative remedy and believed they were still negotiating with the emergency manager in earnest. They had discovered evidence that the entire bankruptcy had been premeditated long ago by the governor and his consulting team and took this premeditation and secrecy around it as direct evidence of bad faith in the negotiating process by which all avenues but bankruptcy are to be exhausted, and filing is never to be a strategic means of out-maneuvering contractual counter-parties. But “good faith” in bankruptcy does not turn out to presume transparency or rule out strategy – not when the necessities of fiscal survival are on the line.

The critical discovery broke thanks to union member and "corruption crusader" Robert Davis, who had filed suit against the governor’s office for violating the Open Meetings Act in

the bidding process for appointing Detroit's emergency manager.² The suit would ultimately fail to penalize the governor with a misdemeanor and a \$500 fee authorized by the statute, but the discovery process would expose a trove of emails going back to January 2013, revealing the emergency manager's firm had not even competed with other bidders for the winning contract to represent the City in court. In fact, the governor's office had collaborated with the firm and its consultants to lay the groundwork for bankruptcy since the introduction of the new emergency management legislation. The evidence reads:

Making this a national issue is not a bad idea. It provides political cover for the state politicians. Indeed, this gives them an even greater incentive to do this right because, if it succeeds, there will be more than enough patronage to allow either Bing or Snyder to look for higher callings—whether Cabinet, Senate, or corporate. Further, this would give you cover and options on the back end.

Ex. 402 at 2.

- Exhibit 846, an email dated March 2, 2012, from Jeffrey Ellman to Corinne Ball, both of Jones Day, with two other Jones Day attorneys copied. The subject line is, "Consent Agreement," and the body of the email states:

We spoke to a person from Andy's office and a lawyer to get their thoughts on some of the issues. I thought MB was also going to try to follow up with Andy directly about the process for getting this to the Governor, but I am not sure if that happened.

....

The cleanest way to do all of this probably is new legislation that establishes the board and its powers, AND includes an appropriation for a state institution. If an appropriation is attached to (included in) the statute to fund a state institution (which is broadly defined), then the statute is not subject to repeal by the referendum process.

Tom is revisiting the document and should have a new version shortly, with the idea of getting this to at least M[iller]B[uckfire]/Huron [Consulting] by lunchtime.

Objectors argued the City had not filed in good faith, as the City had not really filed. The

² All decisions must be made at a meeting open to the public – the OMA defines "decision" to mean "a determination, action, vote, or disposition upon a motion, proposal, recommendation, resolution, order, ordinance, bill, or measure on which a vote by members of a public body is required and by which a public body effectuates or formulates public policy."²⁴ The OMA provides that "[a]ll decisions of a public body shall be made at a meeting open to the public," and that, with limited exceptions, "[a]ll deliberations of a public body constituting a quorum of its members shall take place at a meeting open to the public" (https://www.michigan.gov/documents/ag/OMA_handbook_287134_7.pdf).

composite scenario includes some of this evidence, exposing the “political covers” cloaking the intervention to incentivize state actors to approach the intervention so as to increase their “patronage” across public and private sectors. The consultants talk about “[doing] this right” and in “the cleanest way” in their maneuvers to close off opportunities for ongoing legislative and legal challenge – which sounds sinister if you conceive of the bankruptcy as a historical repetition of antiblack dispossession and disenfranchisement in a high-stakes game in which bearing property and political representation secure survival. But I do not believe the conspiratorial reasoning reflected in the evidence sounded sinister to the judge, who is deeply invested in “doing [bankruptcy] right” and in the “cleanest” (and therefore quickest) legal fashion. The soundest legal outcome produces the best leverage for the debtor in the eyes of capital markets — taking the municipality at face-value as the judge does, this means the best opportunity for beleaguered Detroiters to receive neglected services.

In the authoritative history *Detroit Resurrected*, some of this behind-the-wings backstory is re-narrativized by the governor and his consultants to the author insofar as they demonstrate their foresight and discretion, their will and skill, to solve the problem of Detroit’s finances once and for all. But Davis’ discovery is given no mention, who would himself lose credibility after being jailed for a petty \$200,000 he passed around as a school board member of Highland Park (another fiscally-starved municipality, formed around a long-abandoned auto plant within the boundaries of Detroit). Instead, objectors’ claims to the bad faith of closed-door strategy is subsumed under the unions’ claims to bad faith in negotiations, paring down the “real politics” of eligibility to creditor claims and excluding the legal logics of objecting citizens historicizing their rights to local representation. This unions’ bad faith claim hinged on a comment the emergency manager made at an open meeting addressed to pensioners in which he called their

claims “sacrosanct” only a few weeks before taking those sacrosanct claims to federal court for impairment. The unions claimed he had lied deliberately, in bad faith, to give them a “false sense of security” (Bomey 2017:84) – undermining their defensive position. The judge would rule that pension contracts made sacrosanct by the Michigan Constitution were not sacrosanct in a federal court; his ruling begins with an epigraph from the US Constitution:

“The Congress shall have Power To . . . establish . . . uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States.”

The Michigan Constitution might protect the pension contract, but in this instance, the fed leans on this “supremacy clause”: as he later explains, “We in bankruptcy impair contracts all day, every day...That is what we do” (quoted in Bomey 2017:89).

Such is the core logic of the eligibility ruling. But the anxiety about bad faith in negotiations receives an aesthetic nod in the record. It takes us to the courtroom scene in which the judge questions the emergency manager on the sacrosanct comment, demonstrating his dissimulation from his actual stance; Bomey states the remark ends up being “a gift for the city’s opponents” in giving them a chance to call the emergency manager a liar in court (2017:85), regardless of the strategic value it costed them at the time. The emergency manager’s legal team acknowledged that timing was at stake in the incident: “This may not be the moment where he used the best words,” says one of them apologetically in court (quoted in Bomey 2017:85). The judge ruled against the emergency manager on this point, as “a consolation prize for the labor creditors” to clean up “the warts on the negotiating process” (Ibid:88). But the ruling is inconsequential, as he also draws on legal precedent to argue it would be “impracticable” to have negotiated in good faith with all of Detroit’s 170,000 creditors. Thus, he is able both to move the bankruptcy forward and to send a message to the restructuring team: as his colleague put it for the authoritative history, “I’m fucking watching you” (Ibid:88) – do it

right, keep it clean. In *Detroit Resurrected*, the emergency manager argues in retrospect the judge simply didn't know where he was coming from, was only asking if he was "gaming people" with the sacrosanct comment; his team still asserts they legally should have won this point of faith (Ibid:88). The story offers a whole sense of the ruling's authority, cleaved nicely between the political and the ethical (cf. Agrama 2011) – establishing the judge's vigilance and evenhandedness as a referee while restoring the faithful integrity of the intervention's architects in their fathomless intentions and consistency of character as winners.

Because *Detroit Resurrected* omits all the content of bad faith claims aimed at the secrecy around filing, it appears the unions capture faith in their "consolation prize" and that the question of faith simply isn't integral to the court's requirements. But in offering the full composite narrative of objections, the judge in fact asserts the good faith of the filing in a register agnostic to liberal tenets of faith in transparency and accountability – at least in legislative procedures of representing the body politic, even as he works to re-inscribe these principles in the legal procedures of his court (MacIntyre 1988). The temporality of crisis neatly organizes this contradiction in a narrative arc that delivers us from the necessity of survival to restructure freedom (Roitman 2014). In his ruling, the judge writes:

The issue that this evidence presents is how to evaluate it in the context of the good faith requirement. For example, during the orchestrated lead-up to the filing, was the City of Detroit's bankruptcy filing a "foregone conclusion" as the objecting parties assert? Of course it was, and for a long time.

Even if it was a foregone conclusion, however, experience with both individuals and businesses in financial distress establishes that they often wait longer to file bankruptcy than is in their interests. Detroit was no exception. Its financial crisis has been worsening for decades and it could have, and probably should have, filed for bankruptcy relief long before it did, perhaps even years before. At what point in Detroit's financial slide did it lose the ability, without bankruptcy help, to restructure its debt in a way that would firmly ground its economic and

social revitalization? Was it after the disastrous COPs and swaps deal in 2005? Or even sometime before?

The record here does not permit an answer to that question. Whatever the answer, however, the Court must conclude that Detroit's bankruptcy filing was certainly a "foregone conclusion" during all of 2013.

For purposes of determining the City's good faith, however, it hardly matters. As noted, many in financial difficulty, Detroit included, wait too long to file bankruptcy.

Then the issue becomes what impact does it have on the good faith analysis that Detroit probably waited too long. Perhaps it would have been more consistent with our democratic ideals and with the economic and social needs of the City if its officials and State officials had openly and forthrightly recognized the need for filing bankruptcy when that need first arose. It is, after all, not bad faith to file bankruptcy when it is needed.

Indeed, the logic of practicability governing the possibilities of faith all tend toward his assessment of necessity, which he had apparently decided long before even the corporate consultants got to work behind closed doors. The good faith of necessity hinges in both the legal and historical records on a much more immediate image of black survival than the intergenerational complexities of inheritance and commonwealth – the immediacy of police protection. While unions and activists heated about the "real politics" of the State's design on

the collective wealth of public pensions and assets, the emergency manager's "star witness" during the hearings turned out to be the chief of police he had just brought in from Cincinnati to lead the restructuring department (Bomey 2017:86) – "Everything is broken," he testified, detailing terrors of expired bulletproof vests, unanswered 911 calls, and criminal hotspots festering in abandoned buildings on unlit streets (Ibid). The judge's ruling begins with this assessment of failed basic services and obsolete infrastructures – "the city needs help." His declaration of the City's "service delivery insolvency" shifts legal question from its traditional terrain of cash insolvency to the municipal services municipal cash serves to fund, undercutting actuarial alternatives to the cash flow problem and making service delivery restructuring central to his expectations for a confirmable plan. It is the terror of a lack of even a minimal city that justifies inscribing the minimal city framework into the legal makeup of the body politic.

After this ruling, creditors have two options: negotiate to settle, racing against other unsecured creditors for as many cents on their previously held dollars as they can leverage in his proposed plan to exit bankruptcy; or pour legal resources into fighting it out through litigation, all of which has to go through this bankruptcy judge who has made it clear his intent is to confirm the plan. This judge has the authority to "cramdown" impaired payouts on creditors who hold out from settling – leverage the emergency manager now holds at the negotiating table. He is lauded in the press for taking liberties to give voice to objectors; whereas "cramdown" is used as a technical term for the necessary violence he holds the lips of creditors.

At the law school in Ann Arbor, I am a sharp student of this pedagogue, primed over months of witnessing his gentle manner of holding court. I am indeed a proper subject of his discipline, as a smalltime investor in the revitalization of Detroit and a civic participant in

recording the case's history. And properly so: I run on urgency, competition, a skinny budget. I remember reading the judge's composite narrative in Chicago amidst a mad race to defend my research proposal and get to the field. It was uncanny in its convenience, getting me up to speed on the case. In my melodramatic imagination, I had imagined studying the politics of the case would involve exposing the true face of state power. But here it all was, already on the surface (Martinot and Sexton 2003), already rapidly receding in history's horizon. Too easy to be cynical from Chicago – in Ann Arbor, the threat of a death spiral of this major American metropolis to faith in this region's economy is more immediate. Tea party tactics at the state and federal levels had, after all, made negotiating an alternative form of state intervention impracticable. Detroit's fate had been written in the record: it would either be saved by the skill and will of this team of strongmen, or left to the chaos of slow dissolution. I use my credit card to fuel my tank for the trip back to Detroit – too easy to be cynical as long as it was accepted.

The Athletics Of Balancing Books

[one on one with a pro]

In this section, I attempt to meet Detroit's emergency manager where he is at in the world, as organizers like to say, from where I am at in the world. I seek to listen generously, not so as to argue for his perspective in the terrain of historical consensus-building, but to learn from the historical context it illuminates. I relate to the ethical substance that we share in our respective labors of emergency restructuring in our respective industries of expertise, attempting to locate this legally extraordinary actor somewhere between the two-dimensional race to competitive credit for which he is celebrated and the four-dimensional histories of racialized sacrifice he reanimates according to those at the case's margins.

I remember well the fateful day of the faithful filing in the sweltering summer of 2013. I was doing pilot research as an intern for a progressive community organization opposed to the

emergency manager law. I had been pulling overgrown weeds out of a playground of a vacant schoolhouse being reclaimed as a community-based charter school, only to show up to work the next day to find that neighbors had been recruited to complete the painstaking manual job with tractors made for it. It was indeed very hot. I marveled at my own inefficiency, but the daily cleanup flowed without calculation. We did not talk about the arcane legal drama unfolding downtown; our work was based on the premise that all politics directly engaging the state were futile capitulations to a dying white supremacist, global capitalist world order. Catching the headlines on NPR, I went about the day as usual, remembering randomly to ponder, *is this what municipal bankruptcy feels like?*

Detroit Resurrected offers a much more riveting tale, in a prologue time-stamped down to the minute of the legal filing. The tale starts in the overheating vehicle of labor attorneys racing to the Capitol, to head off the inauguration of the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. The car sputters, failing to recognize “the urgency of the moment”: “Even for a city whose descent was half a century in the making, minutes still mattered” (Bomey 2017:vix). The narrative introduces us to the emergency manager, “the all-powerful de facto CEO of the city’s government” raised by a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who was done “preaching the same sermon over and over” in negotiations: “Detroit’s financial position is not sustainable, the government is broken, and the city’s neglected residents deserve better” (Ibid). We find him awaiting the final approval he has requested from the governor to file for bankruptcy, his team readying for the media blitz to follow. The emergency manager describes the message he was getting from his team of legal and fiduciary experts: “You’re trying to do this kumbaya thing and get everybody to work together, but it ain’t working, they ain’t listening, and you’re starting to lose momentum and the initiative” (Ibid). The unions catch the

proverbial wind that the emergency manager has made a move ahead of the hearing they have scheduled the coming Monday to get an injunction in state court to prevent a filing.

The scene is set for the “mad race to the courthouse,” which comes down to the relative speeds of the labor lawyer’s 2005 Saturn Vue and the digital system of Public Access Court Electronic Records (PACER) that was the vehicle of the emergency manager’s filing in federal court (Ibid). As labor counsel composes his briefing on a laptop on Interstate-96, the emergency manager is hurriedly uploading the thousands of documents that compose even the most rushed and bare-bones of a filing. Raising the suspense, the emergency manager crashes the PACER system on his first try. Reviewing the request, the governor wanted to sleep on it at first, until his team got wind of the imminent injunction team labor was looking to file. The governor later says of his momentous decision to bite the bullet, “I just wanted to make sure I again reviewed the letter appropriately. Once I looked at those things, it was time to go. They’ll put me down as the governor that authorized the bankruptcy, but I said the way I viewed it was, if I would’ve waited another day, another day, Detroit would’ve gone downhill just that much farther” (Ibid). The governor has both the skill to think slowly about the technicalities and the will to move quickly with the competitor in view.

Team labor arrives at the courthouse ready for their 4 PM hearing and wearing jeans, not having anticipated appearing in state court that day. But their hearing is delayed by 15 minutes. While still in the Saturn, labor counsel had debated notifying the state attorney general of their emergency hearing, as a courtesy. They understood the State was working directly in the interests of the emergency manager but decided ultimately that the ethical necessity was to make the call. But that did not mean they needed to give him a long lead time. So when they arrived at the courthouse, the State had a representative sent belatedly on his way, prompting

the judge to delay. At 4:06 PM, the emergency manager successfully files the City for Chapter 9 bankruptcy relief, by breaking down that bulky file and uploading it in chunks. In state court, the hearing is convened at 4:15 PM, only to be cut short as the judge's aide informed her of the filing and the futility of their legal exercise. The judge had intended to grant their injunction (Ibid). But it was too late: team labor played by the profession's honor code; the emergency manager played by the legal rules to win.

If you are tied to organized labor in this three-legged race, you can stop here, and let out a guttural scream. You have lost; you have let the bad guy get away again. The game is effectively over at this point, now that the terrain bankruptcy has been secured by the State. Under bankruptcy code, once the debtor has successfully filed, an automatic stay goes into effect, pressing pause on all new claims against him as he gets his house in order. From here on out, all negotiations would be protected by the court's gag order; all challenges would be heard first by the bankruptcy judge. Constitutional challenges to the emergency manager law itself would be blocked or allowed to proceed only on the condition that they did not retroactively affect Detroit's case. A series of injunctions filed by the unions to protect their collective bargaining agreements by emergency manager's authority were now suspended. It would later become a condition of settlement that the unions drop these cases.

In "the bankruptcy world" (as the judge calls it), the experts call this stay on legal action against the debtor a "breathing spell": it is the emergency manager who is allowed to breathe here, to compose his restructuring plan without having to answer to the competing demands of the City's creditors. In the court's eyes, the emergency manager's role is as transparent as statute, as the State's authorized representative of the debtor, the City of Detroit, a municipal entity dependent on the state for its legal authority. How subject-positions change, as

pensioners who dedicated their working lives to the city find themselves playing the part of bloodthirsty creditors, while the corporate consultants will now be referred to on the record, in the press, and in this dissertation as “the City of Detroit.” Whatever experiential expertise on the city’s built infrastructure and local operations, these are the world’s experts in contractual infrastructures and fiduciary operations. The disagreement about which of these forms of expertise to value first cannot be settled in Detroit.

I spent some time playing for team labor, so I opposed the emergency manager politically but had an increasingly hard time being mad at him for playing a game whose rules he did not write. Besides, I was getting increasingly exhausted by getting left in the dust claiming the moral high-ground, running late to reality expecting an abstract everybody to share my honor code (cf. Povinelli 2011). I had grown increasingly fascinated with the emergency manager since the announcement of his appointment in March 2013, when he made the headlines by calling his newfound role in public service, “the Olympics of restructuring” (Neavling 2013).³ At the time, all I really understood of restructuring was that it was an emergency means to more austere ends, so this world-historical claim sounded threatening. I watched from Chicago as his tenure was greeted by protesters in the streets outside of his temporary residence at the Book Cadillac Hotel. He fueled their fires early in his tenure, when the *Wall Street Journal* (dubbing him “Detroit’s benevolent dictator”) quoted him calling the city “dumb, lazy, happy, and rich”⁴ on the long-depleted glut of auto industrial

³ He had warned “the people of good faith” with whom he was tasked to negotiate: “Don’t make me go to bankruptcy court” (Neavling 2013).

⁴ The full quote: “For a long time the city was dumb, lazy, happy and rich. Detroit has been the center of more change in the 20th century than I dare say virtually any other city, but that wealth allowed us to have a covenant [that held] if you had an eighth grade education, you’ll get 30 years of a good job and a pension and great health care, but you don’t have to worry about what’s going to come” (Finley 2013)

boom. He walked it back, claiming the comment wasn't aimed at dedicated workers but failed leaders. He certainly didn't invent the "dumb, lazy, happy" trope in the field of corporate restructuring.⁵ The damage was done, but he would learn from the mistake. He was, after all, a professional. As he cleaned up his media game and lined up consensual settlements to unveil in court,⁶ my fascination deepened: he was quite personable, building his credibility as defender of the City's financial position; he was also thorough in his efficiency, cultivating confidence in his exhaustive method of last resort. With endless tables and graphs behind him in the sanitary courtroom, "sacrifice" became an abstract, technical term for creditor claims impaired by bankruptcy – which for the emergency manager, it must be, as the bankruptcy code prohibits discrimination between creditors, whether they be bond insurers or retirees.

I learned so much about the bankruptcy game by watching him play inside and outside the courtroom – skillfully summoning metrics and actuarial data with just the right quantum of force to make his legal or political point. I could relate to the athleticism of this Olympian restructurer, who walks with a limp easily taken as a swagger "he attributes to a lifetime of pickup basketball" (2017:32). He has that improvisational virtuoso of an athlete in the budgetary territory game being fought out within the circumscribed field of bankruptcy and its highly orchestrated procedures, negotiating and defending his position before the vigilant judicial referees. And like a true professional athlete, the energy of the crowd seemed to resonate through his performance: in the tempo of court, restfulness of streets, and takeaways of

⁵ See Bear (2016) on fallout of IMF / World Bank structural adjustments in India.

⁶ In an interview on the local NPR station, emergency manager would say: *We've had cooperation public, private, out-state, local, Detroit, Lansing...If it makes sense, if it's just logical, why wouldn't you want to do that? Anybody else is welcome to join the love train, and come on board. We're happy to have 'em. But we've got so much positive momentum going, I think we should continue to focus on that* (June 2014). For weeks following, NPR ran the "love train" soundbite along with a clip from the eponymous funk ballad.

headlines. Anthropologist and emergency manager, both tasked to feel out the structural unfolding of history. I had been awaiting the unrest many activists believed his intervention would provoke; instead, I was documenting his skill in heading it off.

After my interview in Ann Arbor playing the good student, the judge put me in touch with some of these big players in the case, who all responded rapidly, apparently well disciplined to his authority. I arrange a phone call with the emergency manager's assistant: it is 18 odd months after the trial's close. He was back at the national bankruptcy firm he left to take the emergency manager job and then hired to represent the City in court. I couldn't help but like him: he's interestingly methodical, firing off numbered lists in response to my questions; he's easy to talk to, making me laugh and saying, *hey boy*, when my roommate's large dog interrupts. It was like playing one-on-one basketball with my brother: it is intense play for me, learning the game by following his argumentative faints and drives, as he good-naturedly lets me take shots, which could easily swat down if he wanted to. But he was generous in coaching me through the logic of restructuring.

In our conversation, he is gracious in acknowledging all the players that came behind the consensus he crafted; he credits his whole team for positioning him to successfully boost the City's bond ratings. Coming from the Wall Street arena where it is said, *foolish people and foolish faces often end up in public places*, the emergency manager got a top-notch public relations expert.

The emergency manager says of the "robust media process" they developed:

"You don't have a choice: if you don't feed the beast, the beast is going to make their own. They're going to write the story anyway...Frankly, our side is persuasive; we know things they don't, and the positions that we're taking are valid positions we should take. We are doing a disservice to our effort and the citizens of the city if we don't let our position be known."

Indeed, the story they are going to write, in many ways, will be for the bond markets, determining the price at which they will bet on Detroit (LiPuma2017), not for the citizens

awaiting affordable reinvestment. He is persuasive, and the beast of mainstream media would faithfully report the story it was fed. His PR man told him, *like it or not, you're a politician now*: his statute spares him the election cycle, not the media cycle.

The emergency manager expresses his frustration at hearing his opponents in court and naysayers in the media mischaracterize the situation and his position; but he learned to let these political games wash over him, a practice he calls “the Zen of emergency management,” a phrase I had heard him use in the media in the celebratory wake of the case. He illustrates with a football metaphor – the referee never sees when the first attack against you; all he sees is your response. “Just accept it and move on,” or you'll wind up compromised by the penalty. Zen provides a rich ethical tradition through which to imagine the athletics of restructuring: as the practice evolves from denying the ego to the transcendence of suffering.

Indeed, he says he'd been through the crucible of high-stakes crisis restructuring before, and even if he was not immune to the threats of panic and bullies alike, he found freedom with the advice provided him by the governor:

“If you have a really good team...working very hard and providing you with the best possible information and advice, ultimately you've got to make the call. And you've got to live, ride, and die with the call that you make – that you are confident with the best information that you have to make the decision you can make in that time. That becomes a remarkably freeing experience because you ask yourself, *what's the alternative, do nothing? Make bad decisions have poor information?* No, this is the best we can do... Make the call, and never look back.”

I was a good athlete but never great before a crowd for this reason: always looking back through the eyes of the crowd and revisiting my mistakes, I would carry a shade of hesitation, just enough to miss the next high-stakes play. You've got to leave the judgment to the judges.

I learn to think through the logic of restructuring, adopting the emergency manager's second-person style of reasoning through a situation to find the imperative – the “you got to.” I find it's actually familiar, intimately, to the academic labors of managing the ongoing

emergencies of too much work into little time. I really am my own manager, relying on my own team, collecting my own information, disciplining my own time. The dissertation has dragged on as I have hesitated to make the call on an argument with which I will have to live, ride, and die, waiting for my data and the theory to make that decision for me. I am so glad that no other lives, municipal or human, are at stake in my crucible.

As a restructuring professional, he knows how to keep his head in a crisis. When I had been among those anticipating of precipitated collapse in the sensational declaration of bankruptcy, he didn't listen to the usual apocalyptic predictions that always flow in a crisis: "Lenders are remarkably rational. Capital markets are remarkably logical. The city is in a better condition to pay its debt; it becomes more valuable." Once the anxiety settled, of course they would refinance Detroit. The emergency manager says he believes in this logic of self-interest over the emotions conjured by crisis: "If I'm wrong, if emotion prevails, there's nothing I can do about that. I can't control that." He illustrates for me a cosmology of the capital markets funding our roads, homes, pipes, schools, etc.: it can be mapped and modeled mathematically through the value-maximization logic; but the models never quite fit reality in which emotion always interrupts and redirects. The game is to trap the profit-margin to be reaped in the interval of uncertainty between logic and emotion – to know when to get in, and when to get out, as confidence in investment futures rises and falls (LiPuma 2017). Only, the restructuring game happens at another level: when confidence has fallen too far to rise; when lost confidence devolves into panic. If panic prevails, the rational distortions of value logics that follow can threaten the whole game (Luyendijk 2015).

The emergency manager's role is, in this sense, structurally antecedent to democracy, calibrating the financial logic upon which its operations depend. As many of restructuring

veteran will say, people don't only vote at the ballot-box: they vote with their feet and their purses as well, bringing the investment vitality that is the lifeblood of the body politic (Hobbes [1651]2017). He tells me,

"My issue on the role of democracy is sometimes the systems, procedures, behavior, and policy have gone so awry that you have to press the reset button. It's a hard reset. You have to press the power button and the home button at the same time. Restart the whole thing, so it can fix itself; and once you do that, you've got to get out of the way."

Indeed, the body politic as machine is a foundational image (Ibid); and a hard reset is an intimate one, as democracy gets buggier. Democracy "fixing itself" offers a deeply procedural faith in the institution to produce a predictably logical, self-interested political body (cf. MacIntyre 1988). Besides, he adds, "We had democracy. We had two elections, and they went off without a hitch." Indeed, the new mayor and the governor's reelection happened in his term. The hitches claimed by activists around the mayor's write-in race, in which they discovered piles of identical ballots, did not get picked up by the press or investigated by the County Clerk; and all the dark money pouring into the governor's race isn't really news these days (cf. Mayer 2017). But he's right, technically, which is how democracy in America works: technically.

The emergency manager is mindful, therefore, of how democracy must proceed from his exceptional precedent. He tells me,

"You do have a powerful statute, but my own personal belief was, if I were using it as a way to force orders as I saw things on the city, I was failing because that would mean that you're not getting in, and you're building up a lot of resistance. That resistance will manifest itself in opposition to the plan that you're trying to develop going forward. Once you leave, resistance forces will try to pick it apart. I was only going to be there for a year and a half, two years; but the city's going to be there for the rest of our natural lives. So we had to design a process by which the people who were still going to be there were actually going to embrace the plan and try to push it through."

He knows how the game works even if he holds the sovereign exception to the rules. He is guaranteed to win but plays fair in settling the score. Otherwise, he'd be juking the stats, risking

the very fiscal stability and political integrity he aims to achieve.

He says he's lucky he got everybody coming together, "and that the citizens of the city said, let's see how this works out. We will stand by until we can get through this" – producing no civil disturbances that would make headlines and scare the market. He acknowledges that potentiality obliquely, in the context of growing protests over deadly anti-black police violence and the judicial indifference to it:

"I don't mean to get into nostalgia here, but America is a great country. We still have a way to go certainly on race relations, crime and punishment: there are certainly big questions that are expressing themselves in the media, apparently every day, which gives me some concern...But when we pull together to achieve an objective, we're pretty good at it."

Nudging the question of race relations as a political issue mobilizing publics, he offers restructuring as a cooperative alternative to the antagonisms produced by "crime and punishment," subsuming them in the American second-person plural.

Not with any nostalgia, he does recall being called an "overseer" by a former city councilwoman in court. He thought the space opened up for such objections was entirely appropriate and was happy she got to exercise her due process rights in opposing his plan and her constitutional rights to free expression, even if he was less happy about her choice of "metaphor." Far from trampling over such legal rights, his reasoning illustrates how the constitutional rights we associate with citizenship follow from the due-process rights that anchor us to the contract system. His modus operandi in emergency restructuring flows from avoiding unjust taking that violates due process; only in terms of civil contracts, this exercise depends on observing "creditor status" in the market, as not all civil contracts are created equally. Some are secured by collateral; with others, "all you have is a pledge" – and that can be restructured. The right to free expression is fine and dandy; but its force in court depends on your status to back it up. Due process guarantees justice in the process of taking, by mediating

between differential creditor status.

Race remains in the freedom of expression, but the emergency manager seems confident racial discrimination is the back-story of the case rather than its outcome. He had read the definitive historical diagnostic on Detroit, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, learning how pervasive legalized racial discrimination was to segregating and draining wealth from the city, and incidentally, how easily white homeowners irrationally undercut their own self-interest in their investments and succumbed to panic over mingling their investments with black neighbors (Sugrue 1995). “That’s how we got here,” he states, but he believes anybody could have fixed Detroit’s finances in the decades since those practices were shut down in court. Why then have Detroit properties remainder so starkly undervalued? Here is where he comes in.

The emergency manager’s blackness is strangely central to *Detroit Resurrected’s* account of his appointment, given that the tale serves to dismiss race as a legitimate qualification for leadership. By this account, the State’s team was forced to play the race card by the parade of nationally-recognized “so-called black activists” (as the State’s consultant quipped) that came through Detroit to protest the “plantation-ocracy” established by emergency management (quoted in Bomey 2017:41). But the emergency manager had deftly undercut their influence by going straight to the city’s influential black pastors and allowing them to assess the minister’s son’s sincerity (Ibid). But it was apparent the State had anticipated the optics of the situation, which its lead consultant would later spin as an act of self-defense against reverse racism:

“We strongly believed that the emergency manager should be an African American,” [the lead consultant] said. “Clearly, given the political tensions and history of race relations in the city, if the emergency manager was a white person, and even if they were the most qualified candidate, people would characterize the choice as, ‘Whitey’s taking over the city again’” (Bomey 2017:34).

It strikes me as an awkward situation for the emergency manager, with all his talent and

professionalism, so dutifully cleaning up messes created by this legally-colorblind market game to which his due-process rights are equally protected in adjudication: the core logic of self-interest might be legally colorblind, and yet, the color of his skin is still drafted into the playing of the game.

But the emergency manager doesn't seem shaken by the experience. He tells me, "People forget I spent ten years in federal government, six of them running a Whitewater investigation. I've seen some pretty high drama and some pretty high stakes at work for a while. There is very little – you know, if the devil pops out of a manhole cover with a Captain America suit on I wouldn't be surprised anymore." I, really, laugh: "I like that. I like that image." He rejoins, "No surprises. Anybody is capable of anything given the right set of circumstances. No surprises." I am tired of being surprised by my heroes turning out to be the devil, of believing in the suit. I will take that advice, sir: that sort of moral leveling sounds more human to me than the cosmology of saved/savior written into the legal destiny of the bankruptcy saga.

That's the nice thing about sports: it's a win or lose, but the boundaries of the game are clear. You don't have to craft a story to determine the outcome. You just play – the crowd, the referee, the opposition, the field, the court – its artful complexity gets absorbed, with all eyes on the ball. I dance now to cultivate an embodied intelligent not so instrumentally aligned behind this 1-0 statistical, instrumental logic. I want to show the emergency manager that logic and emotion don't have to be locked in a Manichaeian battle. If we made room for more logics than that of the capital markets and credit competition, maybe we could temper the power of panic so forcefully delimiting choice, giving emotion so many more ways back home. I do not seek to resolve my political disagreements with the emergency manager, which is why I have no problem "dancing with the devil," as one of my activist friends warned me. I want to be able to

communicate with this professional at remaking the structures that legally hold together collective forms of American life. We have a shared interest: neither of us want panic to interrupt vital supply chains sustaining our loved ones because investment markets suddenly loses their stomach, gambling in this winner-take-all game in which you might not survive being the last one left holding the book (Luyendijk 2015). Neither of us want these hateful and ashamed white boys, already on the loose, to play for right of the strongest in the chaos. The emergency manager didn't write the rules to this game. And as he says, the beast of mainstream media publics demands to be fed. But what if terrified publics quit requiring blood sacrifice as a show to make us feel safe?

It is the emergency manager who makes a connection for me between the war on terror and this case, as this lifelong "yellow dog Democrat" described his profile and courageous leadership:

"Barack Obama, when he decided to go after Osama bin Laden, was advised by virtually his entire national security team that he should just bomb the house in Islamabad that Osama was allegedly in. This is a place that's their West Point in Islamabad; when you look at the national geopolitical context, domestic relations, and all that kind of stuff, and Barack Obama, a profile of courage, said, no. We need to know as a nation and its people that this adversary of ours is truly captured and killed. [We need] to verify that, and, more importantly for the future, we need to extinguish the myth that's going to occur that, one, he is not dead and becomes a martyr if we don't retrieve the body. And against his [Obama's] establishment, he said, let's go, let's do it, at great risk. That's the courageous moment. Forget what you believe in life or death, that is a courageous moment in leadership: when somebody said, against the advice and against the magnitude of risk, that we are going to do the right thing. Well likewise, Rick Snyder: it's a courageous thing for him to say, 60 years of declining Detroit, this whole black-white divide, the whole Lansing versus Southeast Michigan, the whole suburbs versus Detroit, Republican versus Democratic. The state got 2% of the vote in the City. [But he decided the intervention was] the right thing to do...You can do what you want, but you need to have some leadership to make difficult decisions at a very early stage to set the table right, and you have to have someone who owns it, to drive the reforms through to the end so that they stick."

For the choice of metaphor for the emergency manager's role that stuck with me, I credit my friend Tristan Taylor. Not overseer, as Tristan likens the post-bankruptcy regime more to

sharecropping than slavery – post-emancipation modes of continued surveillance,⁷ policing, and theft, only with a new fiduciary infrastructure (Hartman 1997) – no, not overseer. Tristan calls him the governor's “triggerman”: precise, highly skilled, the violence that must be done, and no more. Let it be known: he's not the devil.

Accelerating Reinvention

[the king's court]

I conclude by anticipating aftermaths of bankruptcy through the paternal authority of Michigan's governor, as he is reelected only a week after Detroit's local democracy is officially and fully reinstated.

By mid-2015, the gubernatorial administration that quarterbacked the emergency manager policy would be facing intense public scrutiny and around of criminal prosecutions for the handiwork of the emergency manager appointed to the City of Flint – poisoning the city's water supply with lead in a purportedly cost-saving and incidentally profit-chasing move to switch the city onto its own river water with inadequate treatment facilities (cf. Guyette 2017). The radical authority of the emergency manager would serve to insulate the governor from responsibility for this decision, although the headlines continue to dog him. Flint residents were already beginning to protest and collect evidence of their contaminated water supply at the time Detroit's case was confirmed.

However, they were many months out from breaking the story, as the governor campaigned successfully for reelection on the success of Detroit's emergency manager in closing

⁷ He authorized a vast and comprehensive upgrade of police surveillance over Detroit's neighborhoods – albeit through an apparatus that also answered resident demands for adequate street lighting: the lamps installed by the public-private Detroit lighting authority include not only cameras but ballistic sensors (cf. Browne 2015).

the case. In one of the most expensive gubernatorial races in the country,⁸ the CEO-governor handily beat his off-the-shelf establishment Democrat opponent. This challenger, with a reputation for being “non-combative,” did not campaign very much in Detroit, banking on the support of those black voters disenfranchised by the emergency manager law. While this challenger was formally endorsed by the unions and Detroit’s Democratic mayor, the headlines showed these parties standing behind the governor in consensually settling Detroit’s case and planning the city’s comeback.

I’m downtown in my Toyota Tercel the evening the Challenger concedes, sitting in the dark and listening to the CEO-governor’s speech on the local public radio station. The station had delivered comprehensive coverage on the bankruptcy throughout the proceedings, proclaiming its journalistic standard of being “rational” and “accurate” in transmitting the court performances to the public. By the next summer, the station would feature sponsorship announcements from the firm to which the emergency manager had returned. Accurate, indeed.

The CEO-governor opens by thanking his opponent for the courtesy of a concession phone call, stating, “We had a good race here in Michigan.” He thanks his family, lined up on stage around him, for allowing him to run, joking with the crowd, “There are higher powers in life, folks, you know that,” as his wife beams beside him like the prom queen.⁹ He thanks his grassroots supporters, culminating by thanking the team that matters to him the most, “the team

⁸ With hedge fund managers and Koch money at the top of the governor’s contributors and even more dark money pouring into the governor’s “New Energy to Reinvent and Diversify,” or NERD fund – the fiduciary complement to the actuarially-trained governor’s Twitter handle: @onetoughnerd (Maynard 2014).

⁹ In *Detroit Resurrected*, it is his wife who convinces him to try out for public service (as it is the emergency manager’s wife who convinces him to take the job) (Bomey 2017). Incidentally, it is also well known that the governor had grown increasingly frustrated by his failures as a venture capitalist to bring investment to the state, and in his tenure, has worked to channel the investments of the state retirement fund to venture projects in Michigan (Maynard 2014).

of Michigan and all the citizens of our state." Then the CEO-governor launches into a story about the state's fall from grace:

"We got complacent. We had a lost decade, and we did that to ourselves...Instead of recognizing the world was changing, we spent time fighting with one another, we spent too much time blaming each other, and we went to the bottom."

He describes the bottom in a series of humiliations that "affect the soul" – companies closing down, moving out, taking jobs, and families out of the state; for-sale signs in the neighborhood, and underwater mortgages; graduates leaving the state for Chicago. "Our spirit was being broken," but the governor assures his audience, the bottom was not good enough. "It was time for us to recognize a new path. It was time to reinvent Michigan!" He describes the progress his administration has made in terms of climbing the ranks among states in growth rates for private job creation and home value increase.

How did his team achieve this success? By running proudly on "the positive":

"We didn't spend time talking about what was wrong with everyone else. We spent our times talking about what the problems were, and what the solutions are, and how we can bring people in to get those solutions in place to make a better life for Michiganders."

Now, it is Michigan that "can raise the standard of how politics should operate in this country."

After all the years of decline and the saying, "Detroit versus Michigan," he tells the crowd, "We can stand here and say, it is Detroit, Michigan!" He goes on to instruct, "So when you see anyone in this country, do not wait for the five or ten minutes of the negative. Just look them dead in the eye, and say, *isn't that great, what's going on in Detroit, and how we are all getting along?*" The applause are wild; the CEO-governor calms the crowd of supporters and volunteers, who he knows can't wait to party.

But first, he wants to describe what reinventing means to him. He asks the crowd to visualize:

“If you go out in the farm country of Michigan, you will see that Centennial farmhouse with a sign that says that family has lived there for 100 years or more. You will not find a prouder family in all of Michigan, and they should be proud for what they've accomplished. That is what we are doing here, folks. When your foundation has collapsed for generations, you have to go to the ground. You have to dig in on the toughest problems, make the toughest decisions. You can't build a foundation that's going to last long if you leave those problems there.” He closes, imploring the crowd, apparently itching to start drinking, “it should impress you in the heart to recognize that we're doing this to make a better Michigan not just today, but we are doing this for our kids. You see all the people here? We're doing it for their kids. We're doing it for their kids! We're doing it for generations to come! We're going to build Michigan back, even better!”

I shudder: I have seen some of those Centennial farmhouses, and I can't help but imagine how they were living a hundred years ago – when many of the families now living in the city were still living under the terror of the post-Reconstruction South (cf. Dubois 2014), and when Detroit's black residents were confined to renting from slumlords in segregated neighborhoods (Sugrue 1995). Many of the homes they managed to make would be cleared from the earth by the 1950s. I imagine living in such a Centennial farmhouse back then, with only church and family to occupy me, and nobody to protect me from an abusive husband with a good reputation. Whose kids is the CEO-governor doing this for, again? I balk my eyes as he anticipates the coming success of the bankruptcy and announces that he will not become complacent. “It is time to accelerate!” Sounds sinister.

Epilogue

The constitutional challenges to the emergency manager law have stalled to this day. In their first hearing, all their claims were dismissed except the most difficult to prove: racial discrimination based on the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution, requiring evidence of explicit intent. After appeals on the dismissed claims, they went proceeded with the discrimination claim however by this time all no emergency managers remained in place over any community or school district. As a result, the case was dismissed as moot. They have not

given up efforts and anticipate regrouping in the event any emergency manager is appointed in the future.

In my conversation with one of the lead attorneys in this challenge, he walked me through not only the legal difficulties they would face, but the judicial terrain of fiscally conservative judges installed over the Reagan era and all the procedural hurdles that would likely draw out their efforts. He believed in their claim enough that he believed they would eventually prevail but only after it was too late, hoping the legal challenge would lend legitimacy to the social movements necessary to pushing back on this assault, and that these movements would not wait on legal victory. All in all, our conversation ends bleakly. I joke that I feel crazy sometimes in the crowd of optimists. He laughs, now that he has to ask himself, *am I that person? The cynic gets left behind as things go forward.*

CHAPTER 2

The Hysterical Body Politic starring in "Water Is Life":

Human Rights & the War Over Liquidity

In July 2014, the United Nations made headlines by issuing a condemnation of the aggressive disconnection of water service to Detroit's large low-income population, stating the policy constituted a potential violation of the human right to water. The UN statement answered appeals of local activists seeking redress to what they contended was an unaccountable state apparatus targeting poor citizens of Michigan's majority-black metropolis, and austerity measures benefiting the interests of big banks and corporate contractors. The UN's warning catapulted global media attention to Detroit's shutoff policy, catalyzing speculation and critique of both austerity and American racial politics as the global spotlight of scrutiny around human rights abuses was turned toward the US, which has traditionally asserted itself as an international enforcer. When special rapporteurs sent by the UN visited Detroit that fall, they issued recommendations that confirmed local activists' linking of the shutoff policy to housing access and spread of blight destabilizing Detroit's neighborhoods; they declared unacceptable the retrogression of basic services built to meet public need.

The UN statement served to intervene upon another project of emergency intervention in Detroit – the restructuring of city governance by an emergency manager, a restructuring professional appointed in 2013 by the governor to balance the City's books. The emergency manager had filed for emergency relief for a debt load city could not afford through the federal authority of Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy. From the legal perspective of the court and fiduciary perspective of the emergency manager, Detroit's water system is a highly valuable asset in terms of the revenues guaranteed by its regional customer base; as well as a costly and

failing infrastructure in dire need of capital investment and reorganization of bureaucratic and operational labor. In bankruptcy, Detroit's creditors would have an interest in this asset in negotiating consensual settlement of their claims on the City; and to fulfill his mandate, the emergency manager was tasked to produce a structure of governance that would appear fiscally sustainable and thereby attractive to capital markets. State actors argued their efforts to rationalize customer collections through the temporary pain of service disconnection proved a progression in efficiency and fairness that would be reflected in water rates.

The humanitarian intervention into state policy within the state intervention into municipal underwriting produced a clash of competing conceptions of water in the constitution of the body politic. As activists built broad-based public support around the claims, "water is life," buttressed by the authority of the UN proclamation, "water is a human right," state actors countered that liquidity is necessary to the survival of the municipality as such, appealing to consumer common-sense that, "water isn't free" to treat and deliver.¹ This chapter offers an ethnographic exploration of the complex histories and futures at stake in this battle over water, as the urgent affects attending declarations of crisis destabilize secular boundaries between legal, moral, ethical, financial, political, and religious styles of reasoning; and as redemptive traditions of crisis orient practices toward affective relief and the renewal of the integral body politic and its authorizing forms.² How does the universalizing figure of bare humanity serve to mediate an emerging consensus between conceptions of water as life, and water as liquidity, across legal and historical records of the case? What forms of life does this emerging consensus

¹ For other ethnographic case studies on competing rationalities of water, see Espeland (1998) and Ballesterio (2012).

² See Roitman (2014) and Asad (2005) for their formulations of the redemptive grammars of crisis and the deep ontological and epistemological stakes of "making whole."

exclude in the process of translation and commensuration?

I present an entangled ethnographic scene to illustrate how public affect and foundational narratives become factors in the complex legal and actuarial accounting of governing racialized and marginalized populations through emergency – “the human side of restructuring,” as the State’s legal experts put it. The UN would never initiate formal prosecutorial procedures against the City as the shutoff policy continued; the human rights claim would have its day in bankruptcy court, in which it would be dismissed through the reestablishment of due process procedures for consumers holding a service contract with the department. As Detroiters transitioned as legal subjects from citizens to human beings to consumers, the water department would be successfully restructured by the emergency manager through a consensual settlement achieved in bankruptcy, according to the very market logic local activists had been fighting for decades and sought to put on trial in the crisis.

I suggest an irresolvable tension at the heart of the water/liquidity disagreement, disturbing the clear narrative arc of “Detroit’s water crisis” and casting of political antagonists – between the progressive waves of interventionist logics and the enduring undercurrents of sacrificial violence (Povinelli 2011; Honig 2014; Thomas 2016). While grassroots activists insisted on a historically-systemic framing of the issue to challenge the emergency manager’s actuarially-systemic expertise, the gaze of mass publicity that descended on the city in response to the UN’s humanitarian framing focused on decontextualized scenes of abject black humanity. Animating sentimental traditions of white publicity (Hartman 1997; Berlant 1997), humanitarian images flatten historical obligations between the sympathetic spectator and suffering subject

and distance their entangled relationalities.³ The authoritative history of the case would call this “public hysteria,” an amalgam of urgencies that shifted from local concerns with structural violence to aesthetic concerns with the sanctity of the body politic’s integrity – an aestheticization embedded in secular grammars of the natural rights-bearing individual (Asad 2005). In other words, “water is life” loses its conceptual multi-dimensionality when taken up as an emblem of market confidence in the democratic rule of law securing the liquidity of mass markets.

The UN and the federal court are both founded in this liberal tradition; the collision of their respective interventions staged a fundamentally secular question of how to draw the line between political rights and private freedoms (Agrama 2011). The UN called this question in the court of public opinion, rallying progressive beliefs around the human right to water – a right that proves aspirational in the exclusionary history of the water infrastructure’s foundation and reproduction. The bankruptcy judge closed the question ruling in federal court, affirming the progressive sanctity of life as a political belief to be pursued through his court’s restoration of civil rights along with the legal necessity of adjudicating disputes among citizens in their capacities as contract holders. At a crossroads of a reputation crisis for state authority, the hysterical body politic – as produced by the humanitarian sensationalism that amplified local protests and dominated mainstream accounting – would settle for a general consensus to restore confidence in the state systems underwriting white privileged access to water and liquidity.

To stay present with the entanglement of progressive temporalities re-founding public

³ See Saidiya Hartman (1997) for her historicization of sentimental white publics that supported legal emancipation while abhorring racial miscegenation.

order through intervention and the repetitive return of antiblack violence upon which such foundations are built (Thomas 2016), I track beneath the surfaces of water/liquidity what historian Tiya Miles calls the “old, aquatic creatures” of historical racial and class divisions that “flow beneath present inequalities, silent as underground freshwater streams”; she suggests, “we sometimes sense this,” that we might “dip our fingers into the water and touched the outlines of an alternate, historical dimension” (2017). Her research into Detroit’s settlement demonstrates that in the early 1800s, when the public water system was founded, many enfranchised citizens thus served still held black and indigenous slaves in defiance of the federal ordinance legally prohibiting the practice in the territory (Ibid). I argue that such selective and strategic drawing of the line between public and private remains at stake in the work of restructuring legal underwriting and re-founding state authority over life and death of the body politic.⁴

In the ethnographic scene of collision that follows and retrospective revaluations of crisis possibilities,⁵ I track the entangled labors of legal and affective settlement to explore the textures and temporalities of authority, immanently contested and progressively tending toward re-stabilization in crisis. It is a scene in which the participants anticipate the crisis to be ongoing, even as paradoxically, it is this scene that demonstrates the successful closure of crisis through

⁴ I follow Hussein Agrama (2011) in conceiving this work as a feature of secular power – power exercised through the very capacity to raise the question of the line between politics and religion, or public and private interest in this case, in ways by which state power paradoxically extends ever more intimately into the makings of everyday life while evermore violently asserting its prerogative to protect private liberties. This argument dovetails with Hartman’s (1997) investigation of the legally evolving racialized distinctions between white criminality protected through the sanctity of private property rights and white public fears of black criminality justifying violent subjection.

⁵ I borrow these respective ethnographic reading practices from David Scott (2004) on the tragic costs of dialectical temporalities and (2014) on the re-narration and re-signification of revolutionary aspirations in the wake of their disappointment.

the procedural delegation of punitive powers to elected officials under the state of legal exception.

The Collision of Claims

[scene: a day at the fair]

I had planned to get to the water department's much-anticipated "water affordability fair" in the morning, as a habit of urgency I had cultivated over the last few weeks of protests, demonstrations, and meetings. Twice, I had found myself up before dawn, at the gates of the private contractor hired to shut off service to Detroit residents on whatever roster they claimed to hold of delinquent accounts, picketing in good sport and witnessing the eventual confrontations between police and civilly disobedient activists obstructing the trucks dispatched. The first time, arrests had been early – tense, brief, and a little rough around the edges, with a small crowd. For the second, police made us wait in the hot sun with no bathrooms until midday for the arrests, as protesters went limp in police arms and were ceremoniously removed on the special bus they brought out for the occasion. The lieutenant was wearing his Tigers jersey as he made clear to local reporters on the scene, the police respected their right to free speech, but their job was public order.

Local reporters and remaining activists headed downtown for a thousand-strong rally to *Turn on the Water! Tax Wall Street!* – sponsored by National Nurses United whose members were in town for a convention. Grassroots leaders of struggle marched in flank with celebrity Mark Ruffalo and nurses in Robin Hood hats. That had been a long day. Activists had promised to continue to escalate until they won a moratorium from whoever was really in charge – the water department, the emergency manager, the mayor, the bankruptcy judge. It wasn't very clear,

apparently even to them.⁶

This “water affordability fair” was the result of their efforts to figure it out: the bankruptcy judge had called the department’s deputy director into court for some explaining after an activist blasted the shutoff issue in court hearings he had opened to allow individual objectors their day in court while their authorized representatives negotiated behind closed doors. “The buck stops with you,” she said to the judge, calling the policy, “a national and international disgrace” (*no applause, whistling, or clapping in the courtroom!*); the judge told the deputy director the policy had caused not only hardship and anger but also “a lot of bad publicity for the city doesn’t need right now” (White 2014). The judge, of course, has no jurisdiction over policies governing municipal operations – one way the tenth amendment protecting state rights against federal powers distinguishes municipal from corporate or individual bankruptcy.⁷ His hands are tied; and yet, his word is final on all the deals emergency managers trying to settle. He is a man to keep happy; he is the man setting the pace to settlement.

So, the board shifted: the emergency manager passed over department operations to Detroit’s newly-elected mayor, who had just blown in from the suburbs to win an election for a functionally-powerless office. The mayor called a (short) moratorium while he got his house in order, and only a few days later in court, the deputy director was back to announce a reassessment of the aggressive policy. He explained to the court: the City’s goals are for *everyone to have access but also be current on arrears – a historical lack of rigor in the collection process had led to*

⁶ While the emergency manager’s mandate was defined by his total executory authority, the authoritative history, *Detroit Resurrected*, claims he “was exasperated at the maverick water department’s indiscriminate handling of the shutoffs” (2017:190).

⁷ Historically, this amendment has served to protect southern states’ “rights” to antiblack racial governance.

\$50 million of bad debt in retail services; the resulting rate increases are a burden on the shoulders of those who pay. The department's diagnosis of the problem with shutoffs was simply, *the media and customers are not aware of how to keep service active.* The fair would debut the mayor's new engagement campaign: as shutoffs resumed, customers would be made well aware of how to keep their service active through regular payment. Would these efforts be adequate to address masses of low-income customers with arrears ballooned to the hundreds and thousands over the era of un-rigorous billing and failing infrastructures leaking bad debt? The judge sighed, *this issue has touched a nerve.* In court, activist lawyers promised a class-action; on the streets, activists declared the war water was still on. The fair would be the next front in the theater of restructuring operations,⁸ and I didn't want to miss any of the action, imagining masses of people affected by the policy descending on the scene.

But what exactly was a "water affordability fair"? A fair seemed a fitting opposite of a protest, as far as civic events go. "Fair" also seemed to be the brand for the policy – it's only fair all customers pay their due; but the City would offer fair warning when they fail. Indeed, the policy had been aggressive in shutting off first and asking questions later by contractors paid per shutoff. The department had historically billed properties rather than customers and had no records of what properties were inhabited and by who. Customers were shutoff with no warning, and often no record of the arrears for which they were responsible, which often swelled unchecked when a water main was gushing unchecked somewhere in the neighborhood. Some customers were not even in arrears and just happened to live on a block contractors had disconnected with systematic if unaccountable efficiency. *The Atlantic* reported

⁸ See Masco (2014) on the Cold War histories institutionalizing the affective management of citizens in crisis and fields of expertise in capturing risk.

one resident describing water trucks circling her neighborhood “like they were the police hunting down a criminal” (Hackman 2014). So much of the reporting had zoomed in on the hardship of water shutoffs, dwelling in sympathetic scenes of abjection with luxurious detail and sensational images; but here was the anger, not of advocates but residents affected by the policy. The water department had been happy to throw in activist faces that these folks were not the ones marching and protesting. But would this anger build?

Historical Entanglements with Racial Segregation

[absent from the scene]

My friend Tristan, a Detroiter infamous in activist circles for his refusal to sacrifice his political position for the sake of agreement, had entered the water struggle only when he sensed this anger. He critiqued the struggle for failing to channel and organize its expression, settling in practice on a consensus of,

“sending out an SOS to all kindhearted individuals to supply the downtrodden of Detroit with drinking water – missionary-like work under the guise of ‘community self-efficiency,’ reminiscent of Booker T. Washington’s conciliatory policies toward Jim Crow.”

He wrote these words as an argument for a “winning perspective,” rejecting the moral high-ground of a defeatist position. Tristan had cut his teeth organizing other young Detroiters to fight for their segregated, defunded schools. He had endured utility shutoffs in the past; he bucked the melodrama, joking quite seriously that a shutoff on its own was *just another Tuesday*. It was the aggression against the masses he believed could provoke a fight with enough leverage to demand structural redress. He needed his fellow Detroiters “to believe it is their right to reach for the stars and not settle for cornbread and malaise.”

I knew Tristan wouldn’t be at the fair. His “winning perspective” wouldn’t travel far – if the fight wasn’t about drinking water but the capacity to maintain basic human sanitation as he

claimed, that was what the City was saying, and the City had all the cards to play for anybody willing to negotiate a minimum requirement and move on with their lives. In the years to come, we would laugh at memories of white people running around with water bottles *like the sky was falling down*. Tristan has since disavowed his analysis as caught up in the panic of the moment. Of the demands he put forward at the time, he has stuck with, *Stop the New Jim Crow!* But he has long abandoned, *Water Is a Human Right!* Indeed, these slogans seem out-of-joint side-by-side on a flyer he made calling Detroiters to come down to the fair to demand an affordable payment plan, to demand the cancellation of debts for those simply cannot pay – the repetition and renewal of a historical assault on black people in this country, next to the rupture in universal progress (Thomas 2016). Water might be life, but we are stardust.

I might have planned on showing up to the fair in the morning, feeling the urgency lingering from heightening protests; but I showed up in the afternoon, feeling it fizzle along with Tristan's participation. There might not be a storm, but there would at least be a scene – there wasn't even a crowd. The department had lined up chairs along both sides of the double-wide sidewalk for overflow, but by this time, they were empty. The scene went on in the adjacent abandoned lot where I found friendly faces abounding, hailing water customers on their ways in and out of the building. There were different groups doing the hailing, letting setting distinct tones in their presences and offering distinct grammars in their materials. I recognized the humanitarian-focused activists suited up in reflective orange vests evocative of both disaster and construction zones; they were grilling hotdogs, offering balloons to kids and advice to their parents on how to access assistance and negotiate a payment plan. They had even hired a DJ, a gimmick to really make a fair out of the fair. Right past them on the lot, I recognized the policy-focused activists donning T-shirts emblazoned with various protest

slogans – the most common, the locally silkscreened, *STOP THE WATER SHUT OFFS! WATER is a HUMAN RIGHT!* They had fresh fruit, information about assistance, information about policy alternatives, information about the system history, information about recycling rainwater, information about getting more involved. Both groups had sign-up sheets and lots of water.

Regional Investments in the Body Politic

[orange vests on the scene]

The group in the orange vests had been founded only after the UN statement had been issued but had very successfully leveraged Twitter, national media, and donor publics around the crisis – and their leading role organizing the response. Initially, they had followed grassroots leaders and strongly advocated the policy alternative favored by progressive circles; but as the storm of media hits grew, they took the lead in staging the scene for potential donors and volunteers to come to the rescue, blowing the shrillest pitch in the SOS call Tristan critiqued. The orange vests' flyer advertising the fair to Detroiters made no mention of the UN or emergency manager, featuring instead a stock photo of the bright-eyed child sipping a glass of water with large text announcing, *WE CAN HELP!*

The group had recruited and trained volunteers as advocates to accompany water customers in negotiations. The advocates were young and white, from out-of-town or new to it, including a pair who drove a U-Haul full of water bottles cross-country to join us. The department refused to allow their deployment, but they appeared cheerfully helpful in their idleness outside. The man behind the brand glad-handed and snapped photos, his thumbs ablaze at his phone. This suburbanite newcomer would, in time, be discredited in activist circles, outed as a predatory crisis vulture with a history of swooping in and building a top-grade social media infrastructure to direct resources that he controlled. I had partied with his

progressive type of millennial tech-talent in college and was not surprised by the exposé. He was most certainly a skilled player of the currency of confidence, in his studied range of emotional performance and his strategic flexibility combining with available affects and amplifying their urgency (Ngai 2005). Such hype games dominate most markets post-crash, and Naomi Klein told us, markets follow disaster (2005). Amidst the disaster of water disconnections, he was evidently primed to work the progressive markets. I even believe he believed in his progressive long-game – only, what was the ticket for, and what was its cost (Baldwin 1985)?

The confident man wanted his story told. The night before the fair, I had been to the Advocate Training, sharing politely in the nervous anticipation, adding to the sense of historical gravity in my documentary role. When I had requested to record the proceedings for my project, I had watched the confident man pause briefly to calculate potential risks/rewards before producing a warm welcome, our smiles a white hall of mirrors. I remember his sanctimony as he instructed volunteers:

When you are wearing your orange vest, you are like the UN. You're a mediator in a conflict of broken trust between the department and its customers – who no longer have a lot of faith in it for obvious reasons, right? This mediation, just like in a war, has to be done delicately.

Right, the UN: delicate – outsiders with no formal authority or local expertise. But it is only later, well after the bankruptcy has played itself out, that I discern his angle:

It has to be documented thoroughly, so we can get justice not just for customers. It's also important to get justice for the system because the alternative, if you can't show Detroiters want to pay their bills and they just can't afford them, the alternative is to have a private system, which nobody wants.

The volunteers got the costumes for their roles, but here he provides the narrative ends of their heroic mediation – justice, for the system the entire region depends upon. I had been so focused on privatization as a boogie-man, I had missed this wrinkle in the emerging consensus:

not even Detroit's bitterest suburban detractors wanted a private system – and boy, were they bitter. The suburbs had spent decades fighting the city for their right to control rates in courts and the legislature, by any means necessary preventing the city from prospering off of the water infrastructure that it owned, maintained, and operated (D'Anieri 2007). As a result, the suburbs were served as wholesale customers by a nonprofit enterprise system, raising rates to turn a profit on their own retail customers who naturally blamed the city (in Southeastern Michigan's state of nature, at least). They would lose the rights of bullying if the system was privatized. So how are these mediators of war at the fair bringing justice to the system by putting on a show – this show, starring Detroiters, restored to faith, who want to pay their bills?

The mass shut-off campaign had not been the first act in which the water system appeared in bankruptcy court. Indeed, the system was an asset Detroit's creditors would fight for a piece of in the settlements of their clients. Sure, it was overdue for expensive maintenance; but it serves 40% of Michigan's population, a "cash cow" milking constant revenues. The emergency manager's team approached county executives with a bid to regionalize the system, insulating it from the City's fiscal situation; but the counties flatly refused, rehearsing their generations-old suspicion that Detroiters just don't want to pay their bills and weren't capable of fiscal responsibility (Bomey 2017:183).⁹ *Detroit Resurrected*, the authoritative history of the case, describes the regional political situation as "dysfunctional family members unwilling to acknowledge that their destinies are intertwined" (Ibid). But Coleman Young, the city's first black mayor who held the seat for 20 years, spent his career screaming at the suburbs that their

⁹ "Why would they do anything but attempt to return to the old ways of providing benefits to the friends and family of the past?" Bomey quotes the deputy executive of Oakland County (Ibid) – expressing the racialized suspicion of affirmative action as an improper incursion of private kin relations in the provision of a public good in which white inheritance is naturalized as general (cf. Young and Wheeler 1994; Hartman 1997).

destinies were intertwined; he was just also going to fight for the city's right to self-rule and for its black citizens to get their due of national prosperity after centuries of legalized theft and discrimination (Young and Wheeler 1994). Young assumed the city's rapid expansion of its water infrastructure to serve the multiplying municipal landscape, brokering what regional agreements he could while effectively fortifying the path out the city (D'Anieri 2007). And still, they fought him tooth-and-nail until city customers bore all the burdens of liability and none of the benefits of an asset. Who was it that doesn't want to pay their bills?

The bankruptcy judge was having none of it and ordered the counties into negotiations with the emergency manager. The judge tells me later the asset was solvent, so he wasn't worried about it; but he saw a fabulous opportunity to democratize system through regional cooperation. If only cooperation was forthcoming – one of the county executives had only recently caught too much press for the juicy profile he gave *The New Yorker*, sparking protests and making headlines for his response to “how Detroit might fix its financial problems”: he was quoted saying,

“I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, ‘What we're gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn’” (Williams 2014).

Detroit Resurrected glosses over the content of that particular “insensitive racial remark,” offering for the history books instead the insensitive but less-specifically-racial remark, “I'm called a Detroit basher. The truth hurts, you know? Tough shit” (Bomey 2017:184). I suppose the general American public is ready to accept a stubborn, abusive patriarch in the dysfunctional family, as it progresses in sensitivity. But it disrupts the terms of reconciliation that emerge to acknowledge the ringing repetition of foundational violence (Thomas 2016) – whether the imagery triggers anger or an awkward pause, he did say, *it's come to pass*. How do we reckon

with that, accounting for the settlement emerging in bankruptcy? What kind of dysfunctional family treats expressions of sovereignty not identical that of the white patriarch like that (cf. Hartman 1997)? Apparently, the kind who hides histories of abuse in polite euphemisms that gaslight the abused.¹⁰

But history was still being made at the water affordability fair staged by the mayor, as negotiations were as yet ongoing behind closed doors. We have no idea what political calculations were made or what factors were leveraged in the back-and-forth, as Detroiters were suffering to pay and activists stoked progressive consensus around the shared humanity of all water consumers. But we do know the legal knots that would finally join the family's intertwined fates: the settlement established a water authority to be governed by a board on which all stake-holding politicians get an appointee; planned and operated by private contractors but not privatized; owned by the City, leased on a 40-year basis to the regional authority for a \$50 million annual payment the counties made sure would be dedicated to infrastructure improvements and kept out of the general fund (Ibid:191).¹¹ By the time the lease is up for renewal, what will the family look like? What will they remember of the debts that produced their connection to the water?¹²

¹⁰ "If, indeed, '[without] confidence...commerce...would, like a watch, rundown and stop' [citing Melville], a public admission of not really 'having' the feeling, of being unable to isolate relocated, either in oneself or in fiduciary transactions that would seem to affirm its existence above all (since trust is what enables them to take place), raises the specter of the potential threats the system itself" (Ngai 2005:70).

¹¹ The City had been drawing about \$250 million of revenue annually for owning the system.

¹² "As such this [historical consciousness of raw theft] *avenges* the prior—the deep inequities of interpretation that structure the sense of settlement, of matters that are done. Revenge does not mean individuated harm inflicted on a perpetrator in a transaction that renders justice. In my usage here, I mean avenging a prior of injustice and pointing to its ongoing life in the present. This refusal to let go, to roll over, to play this game, points to its presumptive falsity of contractual thinking. With this, the notion of two parties knowingly abstracting themselves out of their own context to contract into an agreement" (Simpson 2014).

Civic Advocacy for an Alternative Policy Solution

[emblazoned T-shirts on the scene]

Next to the confident man and his recruits in orange vests – at the fair playing negotiators to remind the negotiators behind closed doors to get over their obsolete style of white patriarchy – the folks in emblazoned T-shirts were forging a very different consensus effort out of the declaration of humanitarian crisis. They represented a coalition with a decade of experience fighting rising rates, punitive shutoffs, and the legal and legislative structures that produced them: the water department had been under emergency federal receivership since 1977 for failing to protect Environmental Protection Agency standards as industries dumped downstream. This emergency receivership stretched out for decades, granting total mayoral control over system governance insofar as the mayor's restructuring strategies were approved by a series of conservative federal judges. Activists argued this strange authoritarian partnership had slowly and steadily worked to outsource not only the labors of infrastructure maintenance but those of financial decision-making to private contractors, draining tax-payer value out of the system. Detroit's low-income customer base had long been bearing the excessive long-term costs of these emergency cost-saving maneuvers; shutoffs were not new and neither was organized protest against the policy.

The moral center of the coalition was rooted by welfare rights activists who carried the torch from the civil rights struggle in the South through the decades of assaults on workers and poor folks (Kurashige 2017), throwing the weight of experience and gravity of tradition behind the coalition's policy appeals. Documenting their story, there was another millennial suburbanite in the fray, but this one behind the camera, studiously respecting grassroots voices and turning around materials at a furious pace to spread awareness of their cause of confidence

lost in the state.¹³

These activists were at the fair not as mediators in the war but fighters for low-income customers unduly suffering insult on top of injury. Their flyers didn't address customers abstractly as individuals but emplotted the assault they were facing in a complex history of privatizing practices coming to a head in bankruptcy. Of course the anticipated apocalypse of privatization didn't quite land with the case's close, but the complex history of privatizing practices would have to be addressed. The system was in dire need of critical infrastructure upgrades. Decades under federal receivership ensuring the system's efficiency had produced some critical failures. Retired engineers and technicians described the handover of systemic governance to accountants with no expertise on the system's actual capacities. The system is among the nation's largest and as such, as one retiree told me, it was often the pilot site for cutting-edge new equipment, getting the City good deals but resulting in an idiosyncratic infrastructure that didn't match the blueprint for the cookie-cutter equipment that followed. Contractors and consultants would come in with no hands-on experience, only the blueprints they had memorized getting their degrees, and make costly mistakes. I heard more than one retiree complain of the compounding costs of this lack of continuity produced by intensifying cycles of contract work, replacing laid-off civil servants. But such costs are not easily distinguished amidst the long-haul of infrastructure maintenance; I do not imagine they make a clear factor in the accounting practices by which the balancing of books dictates the bottom-line for labor costs. And the big investors interested in financing new capital improvement projects are interested in the highest possible return-value for every second a municipal water bond sits

¹³ I am deeply indebted to Kate Levy's documentary work (2014) and friendship. See "I DO MIND DYING" (<http://www.detroitmindsdying.org/>) for her film, links to interview footage, and up-to-date news on the water struggle.

in their portfolio.

The activists were still protesting the last round of financing capital improvement projects, only ten years ago. In 2005, the young and soon-to-be scandalous mayor of the time had run a game tried-and-true in the region of spending the money on favored contractors who didn't actually get the job done. The terms of the deal tied the bonds sold for all that cash to a derivative "swap" agreement, promising a low fixed-rate the City could easily pay back in financially booming times. In the financially busting times that soon followed, not only was that fixed-rate suddenly high, but a catch in the swap contract kicked in: a "termination event" costing the department \$1 billion in penalty fees. The termination event kicked in when the State first declared emergency, resulting in the downgrading of Detroit's credit (yes, emergency begets crisis); although the system was by design fiscally-insulated from the City's finances, their intertwined reputations were enough for the swap contract-holders to start collecting.

While the mayor who did the deal took the heat in the press, the activists called the question: the federal receiver had pushed the deal; the suburbs had backed that mayor. The circulate flyers pointing to the numbers: 45% of the department's budget serving debts inflated by predatory loans made by the banks that conditioned market collapse; 45% of Detroit's population struggling to pay their water bills. \$537 million already paid on an expensive gamble with shoddy returns; \$540 on average owed by households. The activists could only speculate as to the emergency manager's strategy as he negotiated behind closed-doors and by statute owed them no explanation; but they recruited publics to anticipate he was likely *clearing the books of bad customer debt to make the department more attractive to private investors*. This warning is delivered on a flyer that calls the shutoffs *a policy of robbing Peter to pay Paul* – Paul, in this case, will only charge a fair dollar to cities who demonstrate that they are ready to rob poor

Peter if need be to pay him back on time. The T-shirts emblazoned, *WATER is a HUMAN RIGHT!*, evoked a last line of authority as local, state, and federal emergency governance failed to account for the damages of continuous restructuring. Powerful critics mocked the slogan, telling activists they had a right to take a bucket down to the river – right apparently implies free, and delivery costs. But these advocates knew all too well the liquidity flows getting leveraged against the poor. They weren't aiming for international prosecution but an expert-sanctioned policy solution they appealed to any public to embrace in every forum they could.¹⁴

The policy solution in question had even been adopted by Detroit City Council in 2005 but never implemented under receivership: an affordability plan that calibrated rates to income in a proportion recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency. Now when the UN actually showed up in Detroit a month later, their representatives backed the activists' affordability plan, after several days touring the city with grassroots leaders, hearing the testimony of Detroit residents, and hustling on the dance-floor with community members (Gottesdiener 2014). They were "special rapporteurs" without authority to threaten international legal action; they were there to rapport, it seemed. These white women were hardly older than me, making it hilarious to imagine them lecturing the bulldog of a mayor as they did at a meeting preceding their final press conference. They recommended "a total prohibition of disconnections of people who cannot afford to pay, and people who are in a particularly vulnerable position," receiving applause for announcing the bankruptcy "doesn't exempt [the City] from human rights obligations" – a procedural sounding assertion without penalty. By that time, I had seen the mayor peddling his own life-or-death stories of kids

¹⁴ See Asad (2005) on the conceptual difficulties of translating the universal subject of human rights to the particular rights and obligations of national subjects.

surviving flooded sinkholes, underlining the necessity of financing repairs in an image of threat more immediate and sensational than the statistical eventualities of structural vulnerability.

By the time of the rapporteur visit, as *Detroit Resurrected* notes, the “public hysteria over the issue” had already been effectively “dampened” by the mayor’s moratorium leading to this fair (Bomey 2017:190). The rapporteurs delivered a moral victory to the activists, but the mayor, unchastened, got back to the big boy business of finalizing the regional settlement. The restructuring team was going after the excessive debt owned on the predatory loans, but not with the aggressive stance demanded by activists. That debt was collateralized by water revenues and thereby deemed secure from liquidation in bankruptcy. They were aiming for refinancing, not a refund. And clearing the books wasn’t their only strategy in making the department more attractive to private investors owning its debt.

Detroit Resurrected fills us in on the long game post-facto: regionalization would entail taking the word “Detroit” off of the name of the bond, which consultants believed would result in kinder interest rates (Ibid:183). Whatever the activists’ expert demonstrated about the systemic sustainability of affordability, the consultants shrugged – investment markets scare at the word “affordability” (and whatever margin of return it would cost in the sale of the bond). Indeed, the emergency manager succeeded in restructuring the toxic water debt simply by issuing new bonds on terms of favorable enough for Wall Street investors to opt in at a rate of 93%, settling without lengthy dispute and clearing the path for the water authority (Ibid:191). The UN only factors into this authoritative history insofar as it provoked public hysteria amidst an ongoing reputation game in which bankruptcy is referee, paying customers are chips, and critical infrastructures are stakes. The activists who called the UN and their restructuring alternative receive no mention.

Hysteria is a historically feminized term for affect, out of control; in fact, the root means uterus. The emblazoned T-shirts crew is, in fact, mostly women; but there are different ways of inhabiting the cyclical temporalities of life and death in which that empty organ entangles the chronological/messianic progress of the Christian era¹⁵ – it matters how we live our pain, not just how we kill it (Asad 2005). The fiercely caring matriarchal authority of grassroots leaders threatened the aura of the disciplinarian patriarchs running the numbers, claiming authority to legislate and judge even while shut out of the democratic procedures for channeling political disagreement toward consent of the governed.¹⁶ Armed with experience and expertise behind a competing claim to systemic change, they are rival representatives of the body politic's truth, rival re-signifiers of the general consensus. Such a rival authority constitutes a political crisis in Hobbes' sense ([1651]2017), for the body politic attuned to the discipline and protection of the security state, anxious to smooth over tensions in the dysfunctional family and maintain an image of unity – awaiting the feeling of redemption that satisfies this image.

The activists in emblazoned T-shirts promised a redemptive intervention on behalf of those suffering water services connection – a promise the state picks up, imitating it aesthetically to a broader public than activists have infrastructure to reach, while gutting it of its political substance. The state thereby appeals to a sentimental body politic only interested in the humanitarian spectacle of the crisis scene, unto which they can project their own urgency and

¹⁵ “And since Plato does offer us a representation of the receptacle [the womb], one that he claims ought to remain a singularly authoritative representation (and makes this offer in the very same passage in which he claims its radical unrepresentability), ought we not to conclude that Plato, in authorizing a single representation of the feminine, means to prohibit the very proliferation of nomative possibilities that the undesignatable might produce?” (Butler 1993:44).

¹⁶ While the traditional Freudian diagnosis indexed repressed sexual trauma within the family, see Parker (2001) on the feminist politics of hysteria challenging patriarchal order, rewritten through racial histories of trauma that go beyond the familial.

distance themselves from implicating entanglements (Ngai 2005: 85). The rival project of policy activism requires work, if the informed citizen is not to be outmaneuvered by confident experts assuring the public they are responsible masters of the abstractions underwriting infrastructures; the general public accepts that assurance along with the confidence their own taps will continue to flow uninterrupted uninterrupted.

Besides, America's sentimental body politic has a history of holding together equality and inferiority, maintaining a safe distance from the threshold of survival while fashioning selves by identifying with the sovereign protection thereover (Hartman 1997).¹⁷ Riding this old wave is habit; and there is no redemptive script for questioning the terms by which the threshold of bare humanity is made, nor aesthetic capture of those excluded even from this violent reduction.¹⁸ To reintegrate the body politic rifted by the UN, all the sentimental body politic of the American mainstream proved to require was for an elected official to take over the shutoff task, reducing democratic representation to the accountability of calibrating the pace of fiscal discipline to the moods of the general public – the fiscal discipline itself left uncontested. The grassroots activists' human rights claims had been charged by their civil rights claims against emergency management, deferred on the court docket until after the bankruptcy; rather

¹⁷ "If the black body is the vehicle of the other's power, pleasure, and profit, then it is no less true that it is the white or near-white body that makes the captive's suffering visible and discernible. Indeed, the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to a racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as a source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentiments integral to the wanton use of the captive body...[this] is further complicated by the repressive underside of an optics of morality that insists upon the other as a mirror of the self met in order to recognize suffering must substitute the self for the other" (1997:20).

¹⁸ "Who is to be counted as human, what the capabilities are of the human subject, will be decided through the global market in which property rights and cost-benefit analysis are central. Human rights become floating signifiers that can be attached to or detached from various objects and classes constituted by the market principle and designated by the most powerful nation-states" (Asad 2005:158)

than reckon with their authoritative claim on the progressive American tradition of redemption (Asad 2005), the restructuring team resolved the crisis of faith in its intervention by redeeming civil rights in the body of Detroit's new white patriarch.

At the fair, the women in emblazoned T-shirts are far from hysterical, but rather earnest in a friendly way and tense in a ready-for-action way. They hail customers not as victims but actors, in publics both local and general. There are cards detailing the ways, *It is NOT YOUR FAULT BUT it is YOUR FIGHT!*, right next to cards making a bipartisan appeal to the governor and emergency manager – *Please stop the water shutoffs and work to make water accessible and affordable for all* – for a general public to undersign. Rivaling the state project, they too seek to cultivate citizens as responsible stewards of the infrastructure. The collage of interpolations is held together by urgency, precipitating action now on this unfolding complex of restructuring histories. The UN is referenced; water is emblemized with a heart – but none of the materials hail subjects in their biological humanity. Such are the paradoxes of a search for an authority to rival that of the state but nonetheless oriented to practices of constituting citizenship. The orange vests will disband not long after the fair, along with the infrastructures built and resources captured; the grassroots matriarchs are still fighting, as they were fighting before the emergency manager and will be fighting as long as their brothers and sisters in struggle remain under siege – long after the hysterical body politic, crisis markets, and documentarians have moved on.

Municipal Disciplinary Engagements

[plastic bags littering the scene]

The City will not be outdone in claims to caring for vulnerable populations, as identified structurally and mediatized sentimentally. Customers leaving the department (presumably

signed up for a payment plan) are issued clear plastic bags affixed with the department's logo and filled with a collection of printed materials, including:

- instructions for paying online and a blank self-addressed envelope in case this fails;
- a list describing customer assistance programs, including eligibility and documentation requirements, as well as dates when depleted funds are expected to be replenished;
- a colorful timeline of deliverables prepared by the community engagement consultant to accompany a description of the 20 year master plan update completed by a multi-disciplinary team of water specialists retained by the department;
- a history of the system detailing mathematically its technical vastness;
- an apology, for unposted stormwater drainage charges;
- a warning, in the font and card stock of due process, that *PAST DUE ACCOUNTS MAY RESULT IN DISRUPTED SERVICE*, as part of the department's continuing efforts to keep rates low, detailing the notification procedures customers are now to expect.

The fine print of this warning includes a tip: *Repeat instances of illegal usage will result in the department disconnecting service at the water main. Additional charges will apply.* Here is the gravity weighing that bag with legalese, translated: you reconnect yourself without paying up, and we will pour concrete over the valve, and it will cost somebody a few grand to fix that if that property will ever again be habitable. The transparent container holds together a vision of the informed citizen imagined by the restructuring department – know how to pay, know we know how to spend your money, know we know when you try to slip by us, and don't be mad when we make mistakes because we're doing our best.

Also in the plastic bag is the new face of the water department – the recently-appointed director, a native of notoriously-white Upper Peninsula who left her post at generally-white

Ann Arbor for the job. She started as a chemist and graduated up four levels of management – from the laboratory to business development – before directing entire municipal infrastructures. Her glossy bio is accompanied by a bookmark with her smiling face watermarked behind an apparently inspirational quote:

Change is also being noticed and commented on by our customers. They support our effort. They will also continue to point out where we falter – that’s okay too. We need to hear about what matters to our customers and then demonstrate our desire and ability to exceed their expectations...

This image of the department’s authority addresses customers indirectly and possessively, pedagogical in casting the proper dynamic of customer service as the paradigm of the department’s social contract.¹⁹ She does have a schoolteacher look – pedagogical, in studiously ignoring the deviantly delinquent cast out of the customer service base. Her quotation ends with an awkward rehearsal of the Obama-era political aesthetic: *AND WE CAN!* – not, we, the American people, but we, the water industry professionals running the department.

The transparent bag’s contents offered the terms of settlement the City worked to strike with its customers in the distribution of responsibility as the department’s arbitrary and failing bureaucracy upgrades to regular, comprehensive, monitored service transactions. While these terms held no procedural legal water, they had their day in bankruptcy court nonetheless – as part of his extra-jurisdictional intervention into the water crisis, the judge ordered the City into mediations with activist lawyers. They had figured out a way to elbow into the bankruptcy process with the help of a progressive bankruptcy lawyer *re-radicalized by Occupy*, who pointed out water service is a form of executory contract, which the department violated by canceling

¹⁹ On the case of water infrastructure in South Africa: “[In economic studies aimed at translating free-market principles to local contexts] the black urban population emerges as sufficient, but *potential* economic subjects whose values need to be transformed to enable them to participate fully in the market” (Von Schnitzler 2016:57).

service in a manner that did not accord with their own procedures and terms of contract. They demanded a Temporary Restraining Order from the abuse of shutoffs, while making a case that without the affordability plan, the terms of service were impossible for low-income residents to meet. Closed-door mediations between the City, activist lawyers, and the injured Detroiters they represented were ongoing at the time of the fair, which it would later seem the City had used as an adversarial focus group on customer service. Only later in the next month with the court hold an evidentiary hearing, putting the policy question on trial in the eyes of the public.

The activist legal team approached it like a hearing on what had evidently been exhausting negotiations (which, legally, it was), opening with a simple statement on their position, reduced to demand for a six-month moratorium, including winter months in which the ground is too frozen to disconnect anyway. But the corporate lawyers hired by the emergency manager to represent the City understood it was showtime, opening with a comprehensive legal theory of the TRO filing, the inadequacy of its due process and equal protection complaints, and the harm to paying customers posed by any moratorium that might slow their delinquent neighbors. As the activists' witnesses took the stand and described the exorbitant proportions of their water bill and conditions of vulnerability created by service interruption, the aggressive corporate lawyers had only a short and brutal line of questioning for them – *how much do you pay on your cell phone bill? how much for cable?* Activists had fielded that one before from the local media, calling shame on the implicit racialization of fiscal irresponsibility. Indeed, it was cringe-worthy in the courtroom, as the crisp-suited New Yorker delivered it with such spite he seemed to spittle. But the disagreement illustrates how the histories of anti-blackness evoked in equal protection complaints in the US depart from the threshold of biological survival embedded in the universality of the UN's secular authority.

Rather than calculating a minimal requirement to let live biological beings, affordability calculates a fair proportion of unequal incomes to be spent on such minimal requirements – and what proportion is left for other forms of investment.²⁰ Methinks this flush-based white guy doth protest too much to these black folks being connected to the information economy despite inheriting cross-generational exploitation and dispossession (a structural gloss for rape and plunder).²¹

The City's witnesses, including the department director and the mayor himself, showed themselves to be much more sympathetic to the hardships faced by their vulnerable customers. They testified to the financial necessities tying their hands to the shut-off valve, while entering into evidence artifacts of their new campaign it seemed to creatively combine due process and public relations: new door-hangers announcing impending shutoffs; a new disciplinary gimmick for the percentages of arrears required as a down payment to reconnect made a colorful logo – 10/30/50! For those truly sympathetic customers with the paperwork to qualify, the mayor promised he was out raising money for a bond to fund relief assistance. Activists went after the semantic replacement of affordability with assistance, demonstrating in their cross-examinations the City has no data on its vulnerable customer base and no way of

²⁰ "This 'survival' [sur-vivre, more than (mere) life] seeks to orient us toward overlife, toward the gifts of life, to the extra, the dividend, the unearned, and toward that which cannot be earned" (Honig 2014:10).

²¹ "In other words there is this debt at a distance to a global politics of blackness emerging out of slavery and colonialism, a black radical politics, a politics of debt without payment, without credit, without limit. This debt was built in a struggle with empire before empire, where power was not with institutions or governments alone, where any owner or colonizer had the violent power of a ubiquitous state. This debt attached to those who through dumb insolence or nocturnal plans ran away without leaving, left without getting out. This debt got shared with anyone whose soul was sought for labor power, whose spirit was borne with a price marking it. And it is still shared, never credited and never abiding credit, a debt you play, a debt you walk, and debt you love. And without credit this debt is infinitely complex. It does not resolve in profit, seize assets, or balance in payment" (Harney and Moten 2013:64).

demonstrating such an emergency assistance fund could sustainably ward off default. The payment plan, after all, is only to pay off arrears; it is an additional charge to their climbing monthly bills, as shutoff looms one late payment away. The judge was evidently disturbed by this point, supplementing cross-examination with his own questions as he is clearly calculating the inadequate proportions of available assistance against the low-income customer base over time. In the rigor of his sympathy with the plaintiffs and scrutiny of the City, the judge raised hopes of a ruling favorable to the activists. But when he issued his ruling, it turned out, “He played the long game,” as Rosalyn Walker, one of the activist-plaintiffs, put it to me later.

His ruling describes the shut-off policy as an *appropriate and justifiable* method of *motivating payment* by customers who *choose not to pay* – a fitting expression of the court’s moral imagination of debtors, abstracted from context, whose freedom is defined by fiscal behavior.²² It commends the City’s efforts for those *suffering temporary income reductions, providing them time to cure delinquencies and assistance to cure defaults* – indeed, the structure of assistance is entirely palliative, making accounts whole only when they are threatened by a temporary emergency. As for the ongoing emergency of structural poverty affecting 40% of Detroiters, the court can only *urge the City to examine the issue with the sense of urgency it deserves*. As he said when he first ordered mediations, such political matters are not within his jurisdiction – a civil rights issue, so to speak. The question lingered, as Rosalyn later asked, “Why’d you waste our time?” If is only legal action was to urge urgency, what had been hearing been for? “He acted like he cared.”

Whatever the UN would go on to say, the judge also established his findings about the plaintiffs’ claim on the necessity of water and the irreparable harm of disconnection: *they do not*

²² “Responsibility was thus an inestimable component of the bestowal of freedom, and it also produced individual culpability and national innocence, temporal durability and historical amnesia” (Hartman 1997:132).

establish or even suggest that there is a fundamental constitutional right to free or affordable water. The injunctive relief sought by activists in the TRO, he claimed, *would pose a threat to the successful completion of negotiations* to regionalize the system and refinance its debt. Case closed. The activists wanted democracy; they would have to deal with the mayor. Or at least, the mayor's appointee on the board of the new authority. The due process claims on the executory contract would be cleaned up; but being party to such a service contract is not guaranteed by the American social contract. The urgency of the deserving suffering nonetheless makes it into the accounting of the settlement resurrecting the body politic: "In a nod to the shutoff crisis, the deal also carved out an annual stream of \$4.5 million to help low-income Detroiters pay their bills and limited water-rate increases to protect ratepayers from sudden spikes" (Bomey 2017:192). There would be no sustainable affordability plan, only the institutionalization of emergency assistance at the documentable poverty threshold, funded by the private sector: no right to water in the books, but a body politic that cares on paper.

There would be a rate-increase of 7.5% less than a year after the case's close, to shore up a projected \$27 million budget shortfall created when Flint's emergency manager decided to disconnect from Detroit's regional system by poisoning that city's population with river water contaminated by untreated lead corrosion in the pipes. But that crisis was yet to emerge. And when city council initially sided with activists, voting down the rate increases, they immediately received a reprimand from the state treasurer, underscoring the precarity of the regional authority's upcoming bond sale and threatening prolonged post-bankruptcy state oversight. Another vote was held, after a budget hearing that was so long and laborious in rehearsing the details of fiscal necessity underpinning the rate increase that the City's CFO ordered pizza. The council voted to approve the rate-increase along a cleanly gendered split.

“You’re trying to put a Band-Aid on the Grand Canyon,” one of the women who opposed it later remarked to me explaining her vote, “That doesn’t work.”

But the Gulf War veteran who authored the new version believed he had created an adequate compromise, hiring the activists’ expert on affordability to do some more studies and bring credibility to the issue – “an implementable water affordability or assistance plan, I’m not going to be too picky on which one.” He smiles inscrutably when I offer the precedent of Philly’s affordability ordinance – “But how are they going pay for it?” Detroit has to know, exactly how it is going to pay for everything now, on a timetable backed the consultants’ projections. Case closed.

Legal Witnessing of History in the Making

[neon hats observing the scene]

As customers exit the water department with plastic bags, a couple of Detroit police officers idle in the street, mounted on strong steeds and wearing helmets. Nearby are a couple of young hippies in neon-green baseball caps, designed to set them apart in any such politicized crowd as trained “legal observers.” They carry notepads, in which they jot notes seriously whenever the police change position or interact with citizens. They are prepared to testify in court if the police commit any abuse of their power in such a civic scene – easier to witness than a missing door hanger. They don’t hold any formal authority nor are they in any way specially protected from the force of law they are designated to document. They were omnipresent at protests and marches – they had a lot more to jot down on the days civil disobedience took place – although they would never be called to testify. The neon hats served to remind the police they were being watched by people who knew the civil rights owed to the crowd; it didn’t hurt to remind the crowd civil rights were what were being exercised, or to remind other

documentarians of the legal lining constituting the historical archives. But the police appeared just as sensitive to the procedures legalizing their authority to do crowd control and images their encounters with citizens might produce.

Now, I was raised by the neon hats; I know their story too well, anchored by secular evocations of Dr. King orienting legal practices of furiously bending that obstinate arc of history toward justice. So I couldn't help but chuckle at the fair, when I asked whether there had been any confrontations with the police. Briefly, in the morning, one of my friends in a neon hat had a territory spat with one of the mounted officers. The competition over the legal authority to surveil can certainly get macho. But my chuckle was nervous, a habit of regurgitating cognitive dissonance. Behind the bored police horses on the street, the neon hats watching on the curb, the emblazoned T-shirts getting signatures on the sidewalk, the orange vests passing out balloons, as the reggae canon played over their speakers – behind them all, set deep in the vacant lot, stood an armored tank, parked, uncannily inconspicuous in the weight of its stillness and ominous in the potential of its casually unaimed cannon. I suppose it didn't feel like a war as long as the tank was parked.

The protests and the organizing would continue, indeed, continues now; but the storm of global publicity around Detroit's water crisis had passed. By the next year, the global news media would have forgotten of any other water crisis in Michigan besides the scandalous poisoning of Flint's water supply by its emergency manager – the autonomy to govern granted by the authorizing statute effectively insulating the governor from prosecutions that would follow. The UN condemnation over the retrogression of water services stood unaddressed and unenforced; bankruptcy heard the evidence, agreed the structural human need would go unmet and ruled the issue a political matter not guaranteed by rule of law. The fiscal health of the

system's liquidity would be regenerated by the attenuation of Detroit's political authority to institute forms of care responsive to public mobilization – in the settlement of regional bodies politic waging a war over resource rights against the municipal body politic that birthed them. If Detroit's water customers wanted to demand affordable payment plans or the cancellation of unjust debts, if they wanted more than assistance, if they wanted to send a message that didn't fit on a postcard, if they wanted more than just a change of face – whatever else they might be calculating along the minimum threshold to maintain water service, the display of deterrent force on the side of state discipline at the fair begged to be factored.

The Optics of Blunt Force

[the tank framing the scene]

Only a week after the water affordability fair, the neon hats migrate to Ferguson, Missouri, where the police had shot down an unarmed Mike Brown, leaving his body exposed in the streets for hours. The uprising that followed shut down operations in the city, and as international news coverage showed, the tanks were live. The actions of Ferguson's citizens provoked a national conversation on antiblack state violence as well as a Department of Justice investigation that identified the structural pressures accumulating on the municipality's black population (Department of Justice 2015): facing an acute budgetary crisis in a region steadily losing in jobs and housing markets, Ferguson had turned to generating revenue by using the criminal justice system to milk fees and penalties from its low-income population. In Detroit, we would hear the refrain from police officers and officials being pressed by citizens for increased accountability: *we are not Ferguson*. Coleman Young had integrated the police force following the unrest of 1967, a past headlining crisis incited by unchecked aggression of white police against black citizens. After his reign, the department would spend a decade under a federal consent

decree for due process violations and improper use of force, but the new mayor had appointed a new commander, and the emergency manager had lifted the receivership. According to Detroit police, there was no legitimacy crisis of law and order in Detroit, whatever legal methods the City used to fund its public safety budget.

Mourning Alternative Futures

*her wake [the shape of the scene]*²³

But the Detroit water crisis did begin with a violent act of abuse of state power against citizens, crystallizing structural tensions of punitive debt policies. The UN might have hailed the world to Detroit's cause, but Detroit activist Charity Hicks had hailed the UN. The call came following her senseless arrest by the cops she had called when the contractors who came to disconnect her whole block got physical when she demanded to see their orders and deigned to negotiate more time for her neighbors. This event opens Scott Kurashige's anti-authoritarian account of the water crisis in *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*; he quotes Detroit activist Tawana Petty, "Initially it was more of a policy struggle[.] This made it more of a human struggle where everybody realized just how aggressive it was" (2017:115). Indeed, activists turned to the UN not for a biological threshold of humanity to back their policy; but because emergency management had displaced other mechanisms of accountability for extralegal state aggression: Tawana Petty describes the human struggle relationally, not in its bareness.

I remember witnessing Charity draw the line on the unfolding tenure of Detroit's emergency manager, and how it felt to exit the abstractions of policy and sit with the weight of this assault. It was both humbling and empowering to be grounded by her authority; she could

²³ See Christina Sharpe (2016) for provocations on thinking "in the wake" of antiblack violence as not an interruption of progressive state time but a condition.

address us all at once in our differences – as protesters, policy advocates, documentarians, citizens, humans – the plurality immanent to the collective she conjured in the heart. Wage love, she commanded; she demonstrated in her presence. She would be tragically killed not long after in an un-prosecuted hit-and-run in New York city – before the civil disobedience, the marching celebrity, the fair, the settlement.

In her absence, I would become cynical; in mirrors of white femininity, I could feel the pull of the sentimental tradition's affective recruitment on my frayed nerves. Schooled to critique its racializing gaze (cf. Berlant 2008), I clamped down on those nerves with a self-punishing vengeance only to become trapped in the negative image²⁴ of sentimentality, still seeking a satisfactory resolution to crisis, only in calculations cleansed of affect, numbed to the tragic costs of dialectical synthesis.²⁵ *What does "wage love" even mean?* – I find scribbled on the back of a receipt from those days. Wandering through the glare of historical spotlights aimed at crisis, I yearned to discern the truth of their direction – a true victory for the municipal Leviathan, carved out of the mounting odds.²⁶ But "wage love" posits a qualitatively different conception of being human than that assumed of the body politic forged out of the state of war. It confounds friend/enemy boundaries and public/private distinctions that plot a clear historical course. It is not immanent to legal judgment or political victory, but it precludes neither.

²⁴ "Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote about how a 'picture' of something can sometimes hold us captive, limiting our understanding of it. Sometimes, in opposing that picture, all we end up introducing is its negative. The assumptions that frame the picture remain the same, and we remain beholden to it" (Agrama 2011:24)

²⁵ "Tragedy...raises significant questions about the extent to which we are – entire and whole and perfectly – the masters and mistresses of our own ends" (Scott 2004:159).

²⁶ "What is needed, or hoped for, is a return to what might be deemed real value – to true prices, to underlying fundamentals, to material production" (Roitman 2014:43).

Searching for the whole sense of “wage love” decayed by my instrumental imagination, I scour YouTube for Charity’s archival presence, to remember her and reflect on what I learned struggling with questions she asked, as the stakes were raised and terms narrowed. I find an old clip of her reflecting on the World Social Forum in 2010 in which she is already anticipating the water crisis and restructuring of the public asset, and in which she speaks to many of the traps in which I find myself (EMEACGreenScreen 2011):

I had been seeking a bogeyman. Charity asks, *how do we socialize people to destroy creation?*

I had been anticipating privatization in terms of ownership. Charity says it’s already here, *they have commoditized everything on the planet to be traded.*

I had been imagining Detroit as an exceptional frontier. Charity says, *Detroit ain’t by itself. It’s all over the planet.*

I had been cynical about humanism’s traditional exclusions.²⁷ Charity holds even the tyrants to the obligations of kin, *we got people that are multibillionaires and the rest of the human family living on a dollar a day.*

I had been tracking power in the face of a dollar. Charity says, *it’s all smoke and mirrors, it’s a big shell game, the real power is the people.*

I had been asking, what was the true political path – protesting the state or building alternatives? Charity says, both, *there is the pushback, but there is also the co-creation.*

I had been desperate to resolve historical contradictions. Charity asks, *how do we hold those contradictions?*

I had been asking, how do we account for everybody? Charity asks, *how do we get everybody online, plugged in?*

I have been overwhelmed and froze. Charity says, *from being overwhelmed, we’re building.*

Charity could touch your life in passing. Lingered after a meeting’s cleanup, I was graced to receive a not-quite-random act of wisdom from her: she described to me of the

²⁷ “The class of humans remains intact with the tyrant, the pagan, and the slave are excluded from it” (Asad 2005:145).

tradition of Chinese medicine, meridian orbits channeling energies across our bodies, flowing through our vital organs left and right, up and down – these energies, our power. It can take years of practice to break sticky blockages and sense that flow. I couldn't conceive it at the time. In my two-dimensional progressive imaginary and in a body cultivated under the abuse of aspirational calculations, I experienced *water is life* as an aesthetic symbol of communitarian potential; I heard *98% of your body is water!* as a fun fact. I had a better sense of my monthly budget than my aquatic biology. But what would it mean to conceive of such materialities predicating conception, to conceive of conception in ebbs and flows, in life-giving breaks? What would it mean to hold the 98% liquid together with the 2% muddy infrastructure, as a regenerating and dying whole? What if the spiritual authority of water cannot be captured in an emblem or slogan of struggle? What if it is the substance of struggle, to illuminate as long as our lights last?

Confronted with a crisis of state authority, the body politic that counts in this case (the unmarked body of that most general consensus) exercise structural agency according to the logic by which it was engineered (Asad 1994): magnifying unchecked passions and self-love only to defer to the calculating sovereign's promise that sacrifices now will prospectively guarantee the peace of its security (Hobbes [1651] 2017:150). But this private/public partitioning of our sense of self is only one tradition of making a life and negotiating consensus. Could such a blockage be washed away? Swimming with aquatic creatures of our entangled histories (Miles 2017), it seems such a surface distinction. In the resurrection of the municipal body politic, the worldly authority of the UN to shame nations pales in comparison of the worldly authority of federal courts to honor creditors. The UN promises universal rule of law, an institutional telos for conceiving human integrity, a secular umbrella for incommensurate traditions of justice. But

the federal court can make it rain. I seek to hold these competing images of authority together, to ask at the scene's edges: what forms of life are being drowned?

Epilogue

But the case hasn't been closed, not finally. Remember the activists we watched blockade the contractors' trucks and get carried away while we sang *we shall not be moved*? They wanted their day in court rather than pleading the misdemeanor away, so they could turn the tables on the City and put shutoffs on trial once more. They teamed up with the guild of neon hats to craft a legal theory of necessity in their defense – they were morally compelled to block those gates by the existential peril the contractors represented. The City dragged out the preliminaries for a couple years before frustrating their plans by dropping the charges – or rather, the New York lawyers that stuck around on the City's contract budget for the case. Only one of the activists has legal grounds to persist: the beloved Baxter Jones, a fierce advocate for the differently abled and anybody else getting bullied. The police had immediately dropped charges against Jones, after a team of police had installed him in the back of a van not equipped to secure his wheelchair. The arrest had been copiously documented, but there is no footage of the bumpy ride to the detention facility. Jones is suing for damages. It's an awkward legal fit for the political cause of water shutoffs, as the terms of the case do not dramatize humanitarian stakes of the draconian policy. Witnessing Baxter Jones persevere in the face of such compounding forms of neglect, I wonder if his case is not with the whole bankruptcy is about: the uncalculated and difficult to document injuries suffered by those for whom public infrastructures are not built.

CHAPTER 3

The Compliant Body Politic starring in “Blight Is Cancer”:

Tax Foreclosure & Other Invasive Approaches to Neighborhoods

In September 2013, the Obama administration joined Detroit’s state-appointed emergency manager in authorizing the corporate and nonprofit-led Blight Task Force, to consolidate private and public efforts to remediate Detroit’s abandoned residential and commercial property infrastructure. The Task Force received a \$300 million federal grant to address blight removal, public works, and public safety – budgetary priorities collapsed in the Task Force’s diagnosis of blight’s “cancerous” nature, harnessing urgency behind their intervention designed around the Task Force’s terms pathological criminality deterring healthy investment catalyzed by the appearance of property neglect. In its 2014 report, the Task Force proposed a framework to coordinate statute, legal procedure, policing practices, public investment, and private innovation, around a plan to “eradicate” blight¹ – including a projected budget of \$1.85 billion to remove over 40,077 blighted structures and securing an additional 38,429 structures featuring the Task Force’s indicators of future blight.

To fund this expensive intervention, the Task Force has at its disposal approved reallocations of numerous emergency pots of money, including Detroit’s share in the federal “hardest hit fund,” created in response to the subprime mortgage crisis, fire escrow funds, and Department of Housing and Urban Development grants. The municipal bankruptcy undertaken by the emergency manager also cleared the City’s books of other outstanding budgetary obligations to produce a budget absorbed by public safety costs, including \$368 million for

¹ For critical assessments of the “broken windows” paradigm in policing the strategy evokes, see Harcourt (2009) and Howell (2009).

blight elimination. While the threat of blight proved central to the court's ruling on the necessity of restructuring, the blight removal budget proved to be central to its execution of pension cuts, justifying extraordinary sacrifice to accelerate the reinvestment cycles initiated by this costly process. The Task Force's framework has been adopted by Detroit's mayor, elected during the emergency manager's tenure, who measures his administration's impact according to rates of demolition and remediation, and who has continued to successfully lobby for federal investment. Meanwhile, the promise of revitalizing post-intervention parcels has fallen to the newly authorized Detroit Land Bank Authority, which employs market professionals to steward the City's vast real estate holdings, strategically coordinating demolitions and sales. The Task Force's diagnostic authority accelerates this complex institutional terrain (and its complex division of expert labors) toward its prescriptive horizon of Detroit's neighborhoods purified once and for all of unsightly properties.

The reallocation of emergency federal dollars in 2010 and the formation of the Task Force in 2013 coincided with steep annual increases in home foreclosures executed by the county government on homeowners three years delinquent on property tax payments. The tax foreclosure crisis followed from a statewide restructuring of collections procedures in 1999, which aimed to prevent blight by cleansing deed transfer and accelerating reuse while increasing collections to fund services and incentivize further payment (Coenen et. al. 2011). However, this policy matured along with another emergency destabilizing Detroit's tax-base – the subprime mortgage market, which disproportionately affected the city's African-American homeowners targeted for predatory refinancing. Mortgage foreclosures transferred tens of thousands of occupied properties to big banks, leaving vacant properties to be stripped while strategically defaulting on tax debt of housing assets devalued by the crash. Low-income

homeowners very often survived foreclosure by falling behind on tax debt, which had historically been non-punitive in collections (cf. Coenen et. al. 2011). This tax debt, reflecting the State's maximum rate, was not only compounded by 18% interest rates on delinquent payments but also inflated by over-assessments of property value conducted at the height of the housing bubble in 2006 and left un-corrected until after the bankruptcy – with no retroactive adjustments.²

Right on the policy's three-year schedule, such homeowners started falling into foreclosure by the thousands at increasing rates in 2010, reaching a peak of 67,000 properties in 2015. Meanwhile, the county's tax auction, created by the 1999 legislation, went online, opening bids for a stake in Detroit's distressed property market to global speculative investment at \$500. In 2014, the Michigan legislature, in coordination with Detroit's mayor, passed emergency legislation to prevent abuses of the auction and reduce penalties borne by homeowners seeking to avoid the auction by redeeming their outstanding tax debt on a five-year payment plan. These efforts served to acknowledge the structural destabilization of neighborhoods threatened by the sheer quantity of homes forcibly vacated, while rationalizing the punitive collection method of tax foreclosure with incentives to participate in tax collection.

Activists argued the tax foreclosure policy created a "blight machine," feeding the blight removal industry inaugurated by the Task Force. They linked it to racial geographies of gentrification, creating low-cost investment opportunities for white capital to leverage at the expense of African-American homeowners suffering intergenerational cycles of devaluation and dispossession of black wealth (cf. Safransky 2014; Pride 2016; Kurashige 2017; Moskovitz 2018).

² See Atuahene and Hodge (2016) on this case of "stategraft," or legalized theft on the part of state actors.

While the boosters of Detroit's revitalization efforts claimed its extraordinary land vacancy would allow for "development without displacement" experienced in other cities, these activists countered the tax foreclosure policy provided a state-enforced means of displacement for redevelopment provided for in the Blight Task Force framework, reframing the emergency of blight's ugliness in the structural history of its production and recasting Task Force's heroic intervention as parasitic opportunism (cf. Stovall and Hill 2016).

This chapter examines tensions embedded in the concept of blight, caught between its aesthetic appearance and the histories of care, title, and value this appearance indexes in property markets. Detroit's revitalization ultimately hinges on its capacity to revive its tax-base. With no models at hand to forecast property tax revenues in a housing market as distressed as Detroit's (Goodman 2012; Ding 2014, cited in Hammer 2014), the promise of the Task Force's purification project provided essential evidence in municipal bankruptcy of the city's future solvency. While bankruptcy maintains a reputation for its actuarial complexity and technical nuance, the court in fact relied heavily on character witnesses of the revitalized Detroit and decontextualized spectacles of abandonment.

I show how the appearance of property neglect becomes essential to the fiscal health of the body politic, belying the relational entanglements absent from foundational images of consent to the social contract. These entanglements can be tracked in the contexts that overdetermine the value of wealth held by folks apparently excluded from that foundational image, and the abstraction of white normality it produces. Yet, property value is only good out of context – commensurate, comparable, alienable – in ways that weigh down on the life chances of historically neglected communities. With the terms of citizenship calibrated to taxation of this duplicitous index, homeowners at the bottom rung can only buy time in their

home without a structural path to building equity.

Let us begin by considering the substance of blight: real houses. Those still standing after the clearance of public housing projects that replaced the clearance of extreme inter-city segregation were likely built for white families, and sold for far less than they were worth when the first black family claimed one on the block. Real houses, devalued based on the color of the owner-occupant's skin during a historical period of market growth and publicly-subsidized wealth building for white people (Sugrue 1995). Real houses, subjects of unregulated market speculation in the unleashing of the subprime mortgage market that offered to finance these houses at rates homeowners would evidently not be able to afford in the long run (Stout 2016; Jefferson 2013). Real houses turned over to banks to turn over to banks to turn over to yet other banks; real houses, in the meantime, legally evicted of its former occupants, perhaps inhabited illegally and maintained at the expense of squatters or neighbors – in investments in which they can lay no legal claim. Real houses that some may want to inhabit, but nobody with capital really wants to buy. Real houses that somebody with capital really wants to buy, lying in wait for the right price.

The Gospel Truth of Heroic Medicine

[blight, right now]

In this section, I listen to a community expert on the history of Detroit's blight strategy to unsettle the compliance script generated by the diagnostic authority of the city's paternalistic doctor.

I meet the community elder for an interview at the house on the east side that she has recruited the skilled labor of citizens returning from state incarceration to rehabilitate. The house is beautiful, subtle in its craftsmanship and attention to detail. It is a humble block, peppered with green lots with grass well-kept and overgrown, families and no obvious signs of

new Detroiters besides my own Maryland license plate. The elder is generous and patient in breaking down the history of state gangsterism she and her neighbors have long suffered and the interests behind the power-players of the intervention-cum-take over. She takes aim at the Task Force, the extraordinary power it wields, and the authority it has taken on she consistently challenges.

She describes her intervention at a meeting hosted by community development experts, unrolling the Task Force plan:

“Everybody there was hanging on her every word like they were the gospel truth, right, because after all [this] is an organization representing the people (I am so tired of hearing that). I raise my hand and said, I don’t mean to be belittling or anything of the information you’ve given us, but I’ve been hearing about this blight for a long time, what is it? What is blight? Well, right now, we’re defining it as – and I said, right now? So, we are going to play this game of the oppressor again? Today, blight is this; tomorrow, it might mean something else. I said, let’s act like everybody in the room is highly intelligent. Blight is defined as? She turned around and said, I don’t know, I said, okay, thank you.”

I remember sitting in such a meeting at which the community elder called this question. We had in front of us just another survey, asking participants to check off their “top three blight issues,” producing data to inform programming led by rising experts in community-based blight remediation. The surveys were a habit, not offered for discussion but more like a short assignment. Their ready-at-hand categories offered back the gospel truth being presented for consensual participation and gradual absorption – the flat, repetitive discipline of boxes checked. Like a doctor’s office, at which there is never a box for, nerves.

The community elder took an example from the list of “issues”: “abandoned/inoperable vehicles.” She inquired,

If I have a car sitting up on cinderblocks in my yard, and I have had it up there for a couple of years – because I still want the car but I don’t have the resources at hand or need to fix it, or I am still working on it, can the City simply decide one day that this counts as blight?

She gave me pause in this example, prone between asset and liability at the precipice of

determination. I had become so familiar with structural critiques of this blight economy; and yet, I had also become so familiar with its pedagogical practices that I took her question for granted, skipping easily over what blight is to the political contest over what to do about it.

The community elder continues her story, describing how she queried the crowd to find out if anybody knew that blight tickets could cost from \$500-\$10,000. They did not. I had surely seen this figure, among other figures, and skimmed over it as a technical detail, my imagination assuming its proportionality by not pausing to ponder the bottom-line. She let us know,

“They start from one level and through the ability of the administrative hearing board of the Blight Task Force, they hold the authority to decide how quickly you go from \$500 and get the \$10,000. And there’s one other little caveat: if you’re not able to pay the ticket, the City has a right to take the property.”

In other words, there is never a definition of blight, right now: there is blight as it is enforced through the discretion of a board manned by corporate and nonprofit professionals with their own plans to grow in the wake of their own eradication efforts. The threat of the land grab is not abstract; she has several recent examples in mind.³ But this administrative fact has all the trappings of public authority, in the power of enforcement; it is the discussion that has been outsourced.

She narrates, “I said, Negro removal – that’s what we used to call it back in the day. And we see it again. Because we’re dispensable when it comes to making money and when white folks need it, we’re dispensable, so whatever we have to do, we’ll do. Is it right?” I answer with an exhale. She goes on, reflecting, “The things going on in the city are reminiscent of apartheid South Africa.”

³ While much of Detroit’s downtown development has been driven by large-scale, concentrated buy-up of depreciated abandoned buildings, Detroit’s east side has seen such a large-scale, concentrated buy-up of residential parcels (at depreciated wholesale prices negotiated with the City) for the purposes of the privately-owned “Hantz Tree Farm.”

Surely, the comparison to apartheid in South Africa would shock or scandalize the blight removal crowd by speaking a prevalent critique in a space in which it is expedient to leave it unspoken. In the political climate of Detroit's comeback, the institutional brokers of revitalization cultivate an ethos of setting aside such critiques in the name of working across the division it characterizes. Indeed, such comparisons to race-based regimes of settler-colonial occupation have been made in the past – and it is this past that boosters of the city's revitalization are trying to move passed. After all, there is nothing racially exclusive about the new Detroit; in fact, the new Detroit is recruiting widely and as inclusively as possible. What is excluded is blight – and what is blight? According to the elder (and many other Detroiters), blight has historically been substitutable with black people, allowed to live only in value-depreciated housing and neighborhoods – easy targets for displacement when the state calculus of restructuring demands sacrifice (Thomas 1997; Williams 2009). Again, she has concrete examples in mind.

Is it a historical prejudice of elders to suspect the black population will once again prove dispensable to renewal project that so actively recruits them? Anthropologist John L. Jackson argues,

“The more blatantly racist a society has been in the past, the steeper its climb out of explicit racial discrimination and the harder it is for contemporary citizens to shake fears of de facto racism [unspoken, of the heart]. The farther we advance from overt racist doctrines and laws, the more material traces those past sins leave behind, which means all the more surfaces to which contemporary racially charged paranoia might stick” (2010:95).

Blight, according to its authorized Task Force and many observers, covers the surfaces of the city, charged by the histories of its making and the uncertainty of its naming. Blight's decontextualized image is de facto vacated of people to racialize, to discriminate against; talking about properties vacates the discourse of any sociological attributions. Yet, it can be difficult to

ignore the dog whistle attributing the material traces of neglect to the most recent imaginable occupant projected into the image (Haney-Lopez 2014).

I can hear my friend, Daisy Jackson, a lifelong resident of the east side, with her arms crossed: *I don't like how they say it*, she lingers on the opening consonants, the “bblllllight” areas. I recognize the emphasis that sounds like *black* and is often accompanied by the same awkward pause. I interview Daisy over the course of a regular (busy) day around her house, which holds four generations of her family. When I ask her explicitly about racism, she says she never really experienced that “hard racism,” like getting verbally assaulted in the streets. “Thank God. I don't think I could've lived back in those days.” Daisy's father led her family's migration from North Carolina in 1952. She was raised in the historic Black Bottom area, in the wake of the destruction of its central business district.

Daisy explains her active role in the neighborhood: “I was raised with the block club. I wanted to keep the tradition going.” She describes those days, when she first saw Anita Baker at Elbow's, when kids could walk anywhere without fear, and a plate of barbecue costs \$1.99 – “a lot of history.” She remembers the block club parties that brought together all the generations. The kids all knew each other: “It was a whole lot of fun. They used to block the streets off for the swim-mobile. We used to have a library, and one come on the block – the bookmobile.” *Every week!* her friend chimes in. Daisy describes it as much more than a club: “We're a block family. We look out for each other.” She really does look out; on her porch, across her yard full of tricycles and toys, she keeps track of what's going on diligently. Every time I visit Daisy, I hear updates on what houses have been bought up, how the flippers and renters treat the neighbors – or whether they treat them as neighbors. It seems some of these new folks can't see the people looking out for them and are suspicious of the very people keeping them safe.

Daisy's house hasn't been broken into once in the 46 years she's lived on the block.

She talks concretely about the violences facing her loved ones on the streets. The threat is not the abstract specter of criminality that haunts the Blight Task Force report:

"These kids are crazy. They kill you if you've got something, and they kill you if you don't have anything. And to me that's just crazy to me. I don't understand why this new generation just want to take a life. They don't fear nothing."

She doesn't point to empty houses or even their abandonment: "There is no trust, people are scared," she says. "People don't know each other anymore." It resonates with how she upholds the block club tradition – she doesn't describe the value of cleanups for the sake of appearances but rather to teach the youth to contribute to carrying it on, as she says, "just to keep it going. I wanted the kids to know each other."

Daisy sees her neighborhood coming back and wishes she had the cash to get in the game. When she sees young white folks who have come to help out, she believes they blend right in. She believes,

"The more we get out and rally, and let people know, show people, that we are all trying to do the same thing, they will want to join in...to bring whole neighborhood back together, block by block."

I know many white folks eager for such post-racial terms of unity, but I wonder whether they will join in, whether it is the same thing – the body politic in which the individual is entitled to look out for himself and not to have anybody looking over his shoulder, versus the block family Daisy describes. When I asked Daisy about racism, she had flipped the question back on me, prompting me to clarify what I'm getting at by this word, so contested in regional politics. I describe my white colleagues, *talking about people like they're not also people*. She knows what I'm talking about; it might not happen in the streets in the ways it did back in those days of legalized discrimination. When the streets have been emptied by violence desensitized to life, is

blight eradication really the most pressing concern for the block family?

The gospel of the Task Force offers post-racial terms of unity in its diagnosis of the body politic, but in a biomedical imaginary that abstracts the body from context and relation. It divides problems that face the entire block family into healthy normality and deadly pathology. By not acknowledging how anti-blackness has been historically inscribed in the infrastructures it takes up, the Task Force has only pathology to signify internal difference (cf. Moten 2008), leaving sticky charges on the colorblind naming of “*bblllllight*” when the unmarked assumption is white. The Task Force’s “blight as cancer” diagnosis made headlines in 2014 when its chair – a titan of both downtown real estate and the corporate mortgage market – testified in bankruptcy. The titan illustrated the urgency of intervention through shocking time-lapse images of properties accelerated decline since only 2009. I remember gaping during his testimony, looking around the room for at least some discomfort with the conveniently-dated exclusion of any reference to the spectacular burst of the subprime mortgage bubble in 2008 in which his company participated. But the proceedings didn’t skip a beat: the titan’s point was forward-looking, illustrating how rapidly the “ugly” appearance of blight degraded and spread, hampering the possibility of other kinds of investment around it. He was playing doctor in the emergency room of bankruptcy; his confidence holds together his expert authority across a neatly divided terrain of private interest and public service. With its survival in the balance, the body politic turns with obedient habit to the task of compliance.

Besides, if you question his reputation, the titan will sue you, as he did the Department of Justice for opening investigations of his company’s participation in high-risk predatory mortgage lending. His responsibility for American housing crisis is as yet unheard and therefore unsettled in court, and therefore, we need not worry about his responsibility as a

corporate leader in the industry that nearly broke the globally-dominant value of American currency (Luyendijk 2015). He is not on trial; the City is. And bankruptcy's procedures are conducive to a diagnosis like "blight as cancer" that doesn't require an accounting of the historical and environmental factors – although we know such factors are integrally linked to the production of both blight and cancer (Jain 2013). The cancer diagnosis generates uncanny parallels, not in describing the illness but the modality of intervention: we know enough about cancer to intervene and treat, with variable efficacy and quite a lot of violence to the body (Ibid); but researchers and advocates have a difficult time proving legal liability for structural causation of cancer in court (Fortun 2009). And the titan, as a diagnostic expert recruited to the court's process, happens to derive his authority from the same structure that foments the so-called cancerous conditions of blight, whether or not he is vulnerable to litigation or criminal culpability.

So what is blight, according to the narrative of cancer? What is it that spreads so contagiously? According to the introductory message of the Task Force's plan:

"Blight serves as a venue that attracts criminals and crime. It is a magnet for arsonists. Blight is a dangerous place for firefighters and other emergency workers to perform their duties. Blight is also a symbol. It is a symbol of all that is wrong and all that has gone wrong for too many decades in the once thriving world-class city of Detroit. Proliferation of blight throughout Detroit has not only become a negative symbol for those who live near or around it but it is also become negatively synonymous with the City of Detroit itself; not just locally but in newspapers, television, online and in virtually every other medium worldwide. The phrase 'ruin-porn' did not emerge accidentally. It emerged because it is rooted in the truth that tens of thousands of well-built homes, commercial buildings and clean vacant lots have morphed into an unprecedented amount of ugly blight."

In this account, the deadly power of blight functions through its aesthetic power, suggesting bodies (soulless, destruction-seeking zombie-figures, both the victims and perpetrators of threats of destabilization) without necessarily populating the blighted flesh. It is a symbol, a stand-in, for all that is wrong "for too many decades" of black political leadership in the "once

thriving world-class city” built up by auto magnates and frontier speculators. But it is not only a symbol of death and dysfunction but also desire (Borden 2013; Apel 2015): in the sugarcoating of ruin-porn, which has indeed propelled Detroit into the global spotlight in this era of global crisis. But the speculative forms of investment magnetized by the spectacular visual impact of the disaster called deindustrialization does not provide a diet to sustain the body of the body politic, as it continues to experience a net-loss in terms of structural investments by its tax base and the state. Indeed, as Detroit’s global brand has come to be dominated by images of unpopulated, dystopian abandonment, blight is self-evident and overexposed, a shame on the body politic, sexualized for containing the unimaginable; the cancer metaphor excises the relational entanglements and specters of domination conjured by the pornographic, focusing on the pathology of its spread and fitting the unimaginable in a box.⁴

If blight offers such a sensually charged image, the technical and legal criteria of blight appear redundantly abstract. Without a narrative in hand to make these “traits” cohere, they turn out to be very broad, quite circular, and ultimately discretionary. They describe, without addressing, very different qualities of neglect and imply very different holders of responsibility – between owner-occupants, illegal trespassers, and legal holding entities. They reflect the long history of the city’s efforts to manage blight that must be made commensurable with this consolidated strategy. They reference mechanisms of policing and accounting that illustrate how critical the legal clearance of title (and corresponding histories of ownership) is to the physical clearance of property. They are boxes to check, left to the experts to interpret.

The Task Force also has authored a pre-meditative method of indicating future blight,

⁴ See Hartman (1997) on the anti-black sexualization of the unimaginable as it is rendered and managed as pathology.

preempting anxieties of its recurrence. These properties “may appear in fair condition today, [but] there is a high probability that they will become blighted in the near future and need to be removed” – including unoccupied and publicly owned.⁵ These indicators reference, without naming, some of the structural dynamics that work to produce blight – including the weakness of neighborhood policing, the strength of the scrapping economy, and the demonstrated incapacity of the state and disincentive of government-sponsored lenders to invest in maintenance. Without a quite local stakeholder vested in privately policing a property, it is fair game for those willing to risk their health, lives, and freedom, to strip any and every available material of value for exchange in the informal junk markets left standing in postindustrial Detroit. Time is money in this value-starved economy, and scrappers play a short game against the long-term security of Detroit’s neighborhoods as well as derivative traders. A couple of days of failed hyper-vigilance can be all it takes.

Each blight indicator provides the Task Force with an increasingly comprehensive collection of available data-sets through which to map blight. But the complexity of such a map is held together by a common trait: “caused by neglect.” According to the report, what blight really is right now turns out to be a collection of data-sets that politically cohere under the banner of neglect – an active, even criminal action, untethered from any explicit actor. The report focuses on residential blight and offers beautiful photos that locate blight in specific properties and parcels, suggesting an individual actor; and yet the data-sets suggests structural actors – private entities ready to litigate for their interests and public entities too broke to maintain. In the terms of the court’s cancer diagnosis, the debtor-as-patient anticipates recovery

⁵ See Hacking (1990) on the emergence of probability theory as an objective science; and Beck (1992) on the political institutionalization of risk.

through structural probabilities, while searching for the anchor of personal responsibility among so many small acts of neglect (Jain 2013).

The message from the chairs of the Task Force continues,

“There is no need to sugarcoat this calamity any longer. In fact, as is the case in so many areas of human challenge, the admission of reality in a complete, objective and unbiased manner is the first step on the road to recovery. Make no mistake about it, this Task Force has taken on the mission to recommend a clear and detailed plan to fully and completely eradicate blight from the City of Detroit.”

Indeed, the Task Force strategy is comprehensive in taking this first step – of documenting, mapping, surveying, and assessing the reality to be admitted and subject to eradication. It concludes, “Failure is not an option.” Indeed, the invasive method to the blight of cancer promises success in reconstituting Detroit’s neighborhoods in the very title of the plan – “Every Neighborhood Has a Future...And It Doesn’t Include Blight.” What remains ambiguous is the fates of Blight’s phantom subjects, as “every neighborhood” is purged and the necessary success achieved.

The City, represented by a mayor who only recently moved from the 99%-white neighboring municipality, is regenerating its own image as tough on crime and no-nonsense on blight – as his administration counts the number of houses knocked down on its web “dashboard,” it is continuously acquiring new houses by seizing properties with outstanding blight tickets and even those targeted more than once by the police for drug raids. Running on the promise to bring the fruits of revitalization to Detroit’s neighborhoods, the mayor has focused on “reawakening” the City’s nuisance abatement program by putting teeth into code enforcement (distributing and collecting on so-called “blight tickets”).⁶ The Task Force offers the more friendly face on the work of blight removal, illustrating the opportunities for jobs,

⁶ See Hinton (2016) for histories of the criminalization of poverty.

community engagement, and collaboration it makes available in its plan. The diagnostic authority lies with the caring professionals and expert technicians, leaving the dirty but necessary violence diagnosis requires to the body politic's representative – who embodies a paternal masculinity of tough love through fiscal discipline.

This plan is replete with colorful photos of Detroiters participating in the economy created under the strategy, offering an image of the healthy body politic beating this cancer – residents snapping pictures of blight on smartphones and tablets (“blexting”); millennials in front of computers; young men at demolition sites; diverse groups at meetings; children posing for social media. It includes mantras like, “treat every street as if you lived there” (an imaginative form of displacement). Its colorful pages are no longer available at the interactive website timetoendblight.org; I rely on my print copy made available at an office of an arm of community engagement. It includes visualizations of the proportions offered by the data, like, “opportunities for Detroiters” projecting jobs as a body count of restroom-sign males – 120, recycling; 25, deconstruction. In this last category, the plan reports: “a wet-wet demo will be used to mitigate lead exposure until other options are presented from the pilot projects,” acknowledging while containing a quiet health hazard posed to workers and residents in this eradication strategy.

The plan illustrates the Task Force's expertise in coordination through flowcharts modeling healthy flows of liquidity, title, and decision-making. Many are provided in both before and after forms, highlighting the procedural remediation of the red-tape and redundancy of the neglectful regimes that allowed blight's fiscal life-threatening spread. Condemning a property as blight might come down to an ultimately discretionary authority; however, once condemned (these flowcharts suggest), such properties flow through a seamlessly regularized

process. This regularization, the report claims, serves to rationalize emergency costs by keeping the workflow steady, predictable, and therefore efficient, uninterrupted by bureaucratic vagaries and backlog.

The central innovation highlighted in the Task Force's plan describes the Motor City Mapping Initiative, which offers techniques of both precision medicine (through algorithmic data analysis) and patient-centered care (through community engagement) for treating the cancer-ridden body politic. The initiative – and the industry of data collection and modeling upon which it sits – is crucial not only to the optimization of costs the plan imagines but also to the story of innovation as opportunity. This data helps the Task Force to establish “a consistent, clear methodology...to achieve the most impactful outcomes,” by answering questions like, “what neighborhoods do we engage at what point in time?” Much like the cancer treatment institutions described by Lochlann Jain, this initiative privileges technical expertise governing algorithms over the community expertise tailoring intervention, dividing the evidentiary labors of,

“the interpretation of one who has much at stake by virtue of literally embodying the disease, or the understanding of someone for whom a tightly specified set of research data offers no more than a professional tool. Institutions support the separation and even mutual inscrutability of these forms of knowledge” (2013: 53).

This hierarchy works to disguise very political questions of who gets what kinds of resources and when, through the technical work.

The algorithmic tool is designed according to a simple calculus – “where investment and blight removal can potentially benefit the most Detroiters in the least amount of time,” determined by indices of both dynamics of and threats to occupancy rates. This emphasis on timing allows the plan to optimize its investments by imagining Detroit neighborhoods not as secured territories of state governance but rather as markets leaking such stability. The trick of

the tool is to determine the “tipping point” for such a destabilized markets, or the point at which falling stability might still be turned around by intervention rather than be lost by steep decline. Nowhere in its plan does the Task Force list specific neighborhoods at the tipping point or work to order its priorities. Instead, the tool will produce priorities for intervention; interventions will produce effects; surveys will update the data; the tool will produce new priorities. At the crossroads of the tipping point for individual neighborhoods, there is no consideration of the structural reproduction of historical inequalities through algorithmic decision-making based on historical data (O’Neil 2016).

While the algorithm produces geographic priorities, the report argues community engagement allows “holistic” treatment to follow. It thereby “assures...more intangible factors receive full consideration,” capturing the excess of the precision algorithm. Within the boundaries of its geographic priorities, parcel-by-parcel recommendations can be tailored by community stakeholders already working to invest in the stability of their neighborhood and eager to leverage any resources made available. If blight is cancer, it is multiple and particular in its appearance and costly and uncertain in its treatment, making patient participation and compliance critical to efficacy even while the technical parameters of prognosis and prescription are statistically abstract and institutionally determined (Jain 2013). The algorithmic feedback loop is reproduced by hand, through surveys priming programming priming surveys priming programming.

While the Task Force strategy incorporates the participation of residents who seek to give their input into the last stage of implementation, they are excluded from its long-term strategic framing. In the community engagement circuit, they are invited to go check boxes, map health and pathology on their blocks, and learn low-cost prevention and remediation

practices – creative board-ups that beautify vacant properties awaiting eradication, rain gardens that lighten the load on the water system, and other innovative, efficient signals of care to ward off creeping neglect and cultivate reinvestment energies. Many of these meetings proved a qualitative extension of the mapping process, surveying neighbors for untapped assets and potential anchors of stability. Their voices are useful to maintaining cost-effectiveness and a steady flow of work, by identifying unmapped parcels that still may hold salvageable value and anticipating possible resistance that might interrupt and delay. They volunteer extra care, taking responsibility the City can't afford. Patient-centered care, in the long run, is actually more cost-effective. There are even small grant competitions to seed healthy cycles of investment, little experiments in regenerating parcels to improve circulation. The report encourages, "Be inventive, resourceful, responsive, and obsessive about finding a better way. Don't be afraid to try something that is untested" (the titan is known to be a bit obsessive).

On the strictly municipal side, the mayor has created the Department of Neighborhoods to coordinate efforts by district and field resident issues – *we want you to think of us as the face of city government*, one of them announced as a presenter at a philanthropically-sponsored "blight boot camp." They do not represent citizens in any kind of a decision-making capacity; rather, they act as local blight technicians, assisting individual cases that come with an issue either neglected or caused by the complex institutional division of labor streamlined by the Task Force. When a resident gets up at a public meeting to advocate for the demolition of a proven dangerous structure that has been on the list for years and expresses frustration at the accelerated concentration of demolitions taking place in sexier neighborhoods, these blight technicians quickly recruit somebody on their staff to get their contact information and follow-up about this case, sidestepping the structural concern by urging patience with ongoing

symptoms, cultivating anticipation of recovery, and reminding everybody of the numerical sublimity of the blight crisis.

Back on the east side, the community elder offers as a gift some concrete historicity to make sense of the landscape of intervention I have been tracking – relationships that move beneath the surfaces of the Task Force’s flowcharts and disrupt the apparent consensus on blight-as-cancer. She does not sugarcoat blight; she changes the frame by which the figure gains depth of meaning and coordinates of value. In contextualizing the body politic in the history of relations that produce it (Hammer 2014), the violence of intervention – the promise of eradication – loses its persuasive force cultivated in anticipatory hopes for a cure that secure unquestioning compliance with the expert diagnosticians, authorized unilaterally to distribute responsibility for this contested history. “We didn’t cause the blight,” she says. “We have become the excuse for other folks that don’t want to accept responsibility for what they did.” Other folks did much more than neglect Detroit’s neighborhoods; there are other ways to conceive of responsibility besides the fiduciary.⁷

⁷ “One is responsible to life: it is a small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. And this is also why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction. It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant – birth, struggle, and death are constant and so is love, but we may not always think so – and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths – change in the sense of renewal. A renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not – safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope – entire possibility – freedom disappears. And by destruction I mean precisely the abdication by Americans of any effort really to be free” (Baldwin 1962:92).

The Regional Footprint

[blight, in comparison]

In this section, I explore an alternative diagnostic authority, in the tradition of urban planning that has historically counterbalanced the individualist heroic approach. I show how the structural and individual frames complete each other and their shared progressive temporality and meta-authoritative epistemology.

I seek a second opinion on the blight-as-cancer diagnosis from a professional expert on the housing market from the very different field of urban planning, whose interventions come in the form of commentary and consulting. We talk in his office in the thriving downtown district recently rebranded as “Midtown.” He takes issue with the cancer metaphor itself, which he believes misguides the Task Force’s efforts. Cancer, he says, “at least in principle,” can be treated and cleared from the body – “and it’s gone.” In principle, at least, for a subset of individual cases. He argues this individualist framing is precisely where the State’s diagnosis of Detroit’s fiscal emergency fails – blaming the City’s political leaders rather than facing the structural problem. He is not worried about this structural scapegoating but takes the leaders of intervention as individuals. We dig into the reputation of the titan and his rapidly expanding downtown empire – 70 buildings in the last decade with “no whiff of scandal” of low-key bribery or alienating political pressure. The titan has been portrayed in the media as a savior for these investments and the massive policing apparatus by which he has secured them. But the planning expert faults these narratives not for the colonial traditions of white supremacy they reproduce (Stovall and Hill 2016), but because one individual, even with the “brute economic strength” of the titan, cannot turn off the structural engines of blight much less reverse their impact.

This expert's diagnosis does not take the city as its patient with the entire Southeast Michigan region, which he explains, has for 60 years produced, every year, thousands and thousands of more houses than there were households to fill them, and that inevitably means that there is going to be redundant houses somewhere in the region where there is literally no warm body to put in, and those are going to be the least competitive houses in the least competitive neighborhoods, where people least want to stay, and where are those going to be?" We both know the answer he provides: "Overwhelmingly in certain Detroit pockets," although many would not describe as "pockets" the areas untouched by this phenomenon.

"The statistics since the end of the recession show that the region is still producing 5,000 more houses per year than there are households. So up there in [the northern counties frontier], they're still building houses."

It occurs to me is not the nature of the disease the Blight Task Force gets so wrong, according to this expert's logic, but the nature of the body itself. Taking the regional body as the subject in crisis, it appears that the uncontrolled growth weakening and killing once-healthy housing stock is being driven by the speculative expansion of the regional footprint. In urban planning this phenomenon is described as the "doughnut hole" effect: sprawl continuously incentivizes sprawl, as homeowners realize upward mobility in cascading projects of (re)settlement. 5,000 residents chase increased equity and leverage their municipal taxes dollars, leaving behind 5,000 vacancies for 5,000 aspirational homeowners seeking increased equity to leverage their municipal tax dollars.

Such uncontrolled, accelerated settlements of regional frontiers expresses cancer logics in a sense; indeed, cancerous malignancy cannot be readily identified and confined to the appearance of problematic symptoms. As "cancer survivors" well know, even the apparent eradication of the disease does little to guarantee the cancer will remain in remission. And,

despite the increasing refinements and complexity of the statistics upon which prognosis and treatment are based, not much is understood about what holds together the manifold diseases we call cancer, much less their underlying cause. For a population, there is no real talk about eradication; Jain describes how such a possibility boils down to an individualist struggle of the will, the competition within the population to be on the right side of the bell curve of survival (2013). Her observations here again sound eerily apt for the body politic, being pulled apart from the inside out by the drive to escape depreciation of one's investments by the speculations of another: "Yet justifying one's own life in the numeric death of the collective makes a dangerous bedrock for hope" (Ibid:8). But the odds of survival are not distributed proportionally across the collective – premature death for racialized and marginalized populations engulfs epidemiologies of both cancer and homeownership.⁸

The planning expert's regional diagnosis entails regional planning as the cure: he has an alternative state intervention in mind, aimed not at discrete municipalities but transcending them to enforce cooperation among them. He says,

"I think what's very interesting politically is, what is the state going to do when, five years from now, the city looks at its books again, and it goes, we still can't make it. because then, the state can be like, *'Oh my God, we have a white, competent, non-corrupt mayor; we privatize everything; we can privatize all the services; we've unloaded all the debt.'* All the solutions from their perspective are to be tried, and they are going to be shown to be failed, and that's gonna be a political awakening. I can hardly wait because then the lie of the diagnosis will be obvious. Whether they will realize they need structural change, which means regional planning, God forbid, that's was going to be a hard pill to swallow."

I believe he will not actually be surprised in five years when all these solutions have been shown to fail, and the state is still blaming black people and refusing to swallow. However sarcastic, the divine invocations index the foundation of belief upon which planning

⁸ On racial disparities in cancer incidence and treatment, see Siegel et al (2011) and DeSantis et al (2018); and in housing markets, see Mayock and Malacrida (2018).

rationalities are expressed.

Indeed, his structural diagnosis rests not on its historical foundations of antiblack exclusion and racialized license to dispossess but on the assumptions of individual economic rationality by which populations are manipulated and infrastructures or engineered (Asad 1994). Race is just another sociological box to check in measuring outcomes and efficacy – not part of the diagnosis. The problem of whiteness is sublimated in the expert’s evaluation of the limits of regional politics in producing a solution, expressed in the colorblind framing of the urban planning paradigm in a conservative state (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2006). The expert nonetheless mimics conservative whiteness in voicing objections to his policy solutions: *“Oh my God! You’re trampling on the Holy Grail of Republican dogma! What you mean, I can’t sell my property to a developer so he can do it he wants with it?!”* Considering the racial inequalities embedded in this regional body, the imaginary of the dogmatic Republican indexes whiteness as a license to speculate at the expense of black capacity to hold license (cf. Harris 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2015), while appearing simply as an anachronistic tradition blocking progressive efforts to a rational course of treatment.

On the other side, the planning expert treats as irrational racial anxieties over gentrification, which he views as necessary for the city’s financial survival. He claims with no state or federal funding on offer, gentrification is “the reality of financing cities nowadays”: “We are forced to float our own financial boat on people with disposable income; you can’t run a city only with poor people; they can’t pay the bills.” Past this politically-produced reality of municipal economics, race emerges as affective excess. He says,

“There are lots of traditions of distrust, many of which I’m sure have a factual basis but after multiple generations, who knows what’s fact and what’s oral history fiction...but there’s plenty of facts to have a black community with objective justification for, ‘you, white guys...you basically abandon the city, and now you want it back from us; you want to take away from us

and we have toughed it out for all these years; it's just not fair that you take it back from us now that it's worth something,' and I can appreciate totally the emotion...it's certainly a sad byproduct of the forces that have emptied out the cities and explicitly discriminatory barriers in the city."

But such anachronistic regurgitations of history ultimately distort an ahistorical calculus of market rationality:

"You may hate the fact that Whitey is coming back, but you gotta look at the green that they bring in for your own self-interest; that's easy for me to say, but basically, get over it. Face facts: you can have ideological purity, and say, we want to keep them out, or you can improve your standard of living economically. Make a choice. you can't have it both ways, you just can't."

If this dismissal of seems unjust, it articulates a source of bipartisan consensus and precisely what the politics of renewal are all about – conjuring the political will for rupture and nailing it into a legal framework that facilitates healthy circulation before gridlock resumes. "Seeing green" offers an embodied disposition to explain the redistributions that follow in place of traditional racial embodiments. The progressive rationality prone between the choice to move forward or backward does not have the depth to consider rationality informed by historical memory (Thomas 2016), not convinced that Whitey is a reliable anchor for black self-interest.

The planning expert's progressive epistemology is conducive to the structural logics of his field, composed of the infrastructural pedagogy of rational urban designers anticipating the aggregated rationality of the populations they regulate and manipulate. Jain cues us to the anesthetic effect of statistical thinking on the technicians of cancer:

"Statistical aggregations provide a logic through which bodies become interchangeable numbers for which nothing need be felt, neither guilt, nor pleasure, nor horror. They enable prediction" (Ibid:90).

Such statistical aggregations are cleansed of historicity with the legal defeat of explicitly racial biases in lending and planning that have historically produced blighted infrastructures (Sugrue 1995), in a way that feeling, remembering bodies are not. Such embodied knowledge is

dismissed from the structural evidentiary parameters of intervention.

But tapping such knowledge, the racialized effects of statistics-based treatment persist in the infrastructure. I ask the planning expert to explain why lending is so critical to stabilizing housing markets: the City has increasingly replaced emergency grants with zero-percent loans as palliatives offered to homeowners seeking to fund rather than neglect expensive repairs. I knew residents who were not simply suspicious of the incentive for Whitey and her good credit to take advantage; but who had watched too many of their neighbors lose their properties to such promising debt liabilities. He explains the importance of “comparables” to the property appraisers sent out by lending banks to verify whether the fair price reached by buyer and seller reflects market value, hedging their liability for the mortgage. If the appraiser comes out, and there is nothing comparable – if all other home sales have been done by cash in the distress of foreclosure and auction, for example – the bank may not be willing to infuse that neighborhood with the full value of the agreed-upon price. Stabilizing value, in this context, means ensuring that there are comparables, reproducing the possibility of market activity by indexing market activity. Without such stable value, we end up with the irrational mismatches we see in Detroit’s housing market between material value for residents and asset valuation for investors.⁹

The mimicry of comparables as the value logic producing circulations of liquidity produces a de facto negative distortion of the present value of black wealth historically conditioned by Whitey’s unwillingness to hold assets comparable to that of their black neighbors. So much for individual property rights, when the value of any given property has been so historically determined by this unwillingness to share in an integrated credit reputation.

⁹ See McFarlane (2009) on the appraisal politics of gentrification in which the practice of making comparables can be leveraged to make markets and inflate prices out of white investment.

This unwillingness fueled the spread of the speculative footprint now eating away at the city's vital core. But comparables are critical in convincing investors, individual and institutional, to maintain rather than neglect properties, whatever the context for determining them – their value is flat. The majority of folks, the planning expert believes, do not share in sociological, political, psychological motives to invest but need to perceive the payoff. The majority of folks, regionally, he must mean, as so many Detroiters have invested so much to maintain their properties and often much more. The devaluation of investments not aimed at profit and increased equity but rather family and community survival belies the bind faced by low-income residents, quickly running out of credit in the new Detroit.

I find my Toyota in what seems to me a very poorly planned parking lot and ponder this alternative expert authority. Perhaps the blight-as-cancer diagnosis can be of use in making sense of the value logics that unite the venture capitalist and urban planner, even as they conceive of quite differently constituted bodies politic. Both are white. Both take for granted the cellular unit of study and intervention as the parcel, anchored by the deed (legal title of property as both asset and liability) and valued by the market – the facts that must be faced; the admission of reality that must be made. While cancer refers to hundreds of diseases that researchers fail to consistently characterize / classify / predict, it expresses a definite logic of an acceleration of normal cell division (Plutynski 2013). The proliferation of cancers functions because of its autoimmune logic; the body and all its epigenetic particularity is the substance of cancer in a real sense. It is part of what makes liability so difficult to prove, even though we know that the cellular processes of acceleration at stake are fueled by toxicities internal and external to the mass production of the American dream. Kath Weston describes the toxic intimacy through which our bodies join with the upholstery of our automobiles, disturbing

materially distinctions between individual and structure (2017). I am disturbingly comforted by the familiarity of my Japanese car the history books identified with Detroit's decline. As I once heard a retired auto worker quip, *what would Jesus drive?* What a comparison.

Foreclosed

[blight, not yet]

The logic of both the Task Force and the planning expert take for granted the social contract between those who pay property taxes and the municipalities to provide them with services. Indeed, it is the breakdown of this exchange that the emergency manager is mandated to rectify, in a logic that identifies tax compliance as a central index of the social covenant's strength. This relationship posits an abstract citizen with enough liquidity to follow structural incentives toward greater gain, marking tax payments as a political action in itself and therefore the withholding of tax dollars as a kind of revolt (cf. Martin 2008). However, Detroit is not home to such an unmarked category but rather a majority-black constituency that represents not only many first-generation homeowners but also the breakers of boundaries of racial segregation. As the Task Force acknowledges, this constituency has proved tax non-compliant with cause – they have been overassessed, underserved, and maximally charged. Tax reform demonstrated a political will among Michigan legislators to rectify this broken social covenant in abstract and on paper, without tax debt forgiveness reparative of illegal assessment values (cf. Atuhaene and Hodge 2016). The result has been one of the largest tax foreclosure crises in American history. In this section, I will explore an alternative narrative of conceiving blight – not as the inevitable outcome of unregulated urban development or a cancerous contagion on market investment – instead, as the home that it once offered and yet still could.

I interview the director after a stint volunteering for him during the tax foreclosure crisis of 2015 – 67,000 homes on the list, unknown how many occupied, in a city with a population of

less than 700,000. I had spent weeks serving part-time as a tax counselor, meeting with the drop-in clients who came in carrying different amounts and kinds of paperwork to deal with different amounts and kinds of property-tax problems – mostly, homeowners in tax foreclosure attempting to get their home off the list before the county treasurer took that list to open auction in the fall. Some were renters whose landlords had continued to press them for rent even while in the process of losing legal title, we would advise to stop paying and start saving for the auction. The foreclosure list had come out on March 31 – when it would be far from the county’s best interest to foreclose on their own capacity to collect delinquent property taxes and instead gamble this extensive housing stock on an auction process expensive to administer while quite cheap for participants in such a fire sale market.

The county treasurer’s office – which takes responsibility for property-tax delinquencies by buying this debt from the municipality (Coenen et. al. 2011) – opened negotiations and extended the window in which foreclosed properties could yet be “redeemed” through payment. That April, his office had occupied the downtown convention center, receiving thousands of Detroit residents to come to terms in specialized payment agreements that got them off the list by putting down a portion of their unpaid balance and agreeing to regular monthly payments to eliminate that balance over 5 years. The deadline to get off the list would last until June – a deadline we could feel coming at the housing coalition, as drop-in clients coming at a steady stream swelled the office. Many of these clients had not been to the convention center; indeed, many of them had only just learned that their homes were on the list. Many had been to the convention center, put on a specialized payment agreement with high monthly payments they could not afford; they had already defaulted, were already back on the list, and still fighting to reclaim their title to their homes. Most of them were low income, fixed

income, collecting disability or Social Security; a few of them works low-wage jobs, and were losing paid time coming to see us and undertaking the bureaucratic journeys we set them out on. We collected this information, as well as the names and ages of all the occupants of their household, asking them to disclose disabilities and medical conditions as well – yielding not only a list of regularized maladies and injuries, but also descriptions of medical costs as well as labors of care.

The housing coalition did not have direct assistance to offer these clients in paying down their taxes – or at least, not in any kind of regular way. They had received a few cash donations after the director was quoted in the *New York Times* story covering the crisis. He was able to use the cash to make up the difference in some close cases – a few hundred dollars here, a few hundred dollars there. Our job was to counsel clients on what their options were, and what they would need to do to secure them. Given the housing coalition’s long-running relationship with the treasurer, we were also authorized to negotiate specialized payment agreements on their behalf – the director, taking a spreadsheet to the treasurer to negotiate in large batches. So while we couldn’t offer them assistance, we could easily calculate the terms of their specialized payment agreements from their tax records and collect down-payments from them to offer the treasurer. Clients would walk us through “their story” – some would offer narratives, others simply oblige us with the details we solicited – In either case, the director needed enough information to convince the treasurer that the negotiated payments could be made, and/or there would be a social (and possible political) cost of foreclosing on an identified vulnerable household.

To help these vulnerable households, the nonprofit helps the county by finding them and finding out what they can afford. The director says of the county government,

“I don’t think they want to take homes from senior citizens and people dying in the hospital and parents with children with disabling conditions... We have gotten scores of those kinds of folks, and probably hundreds of those kind of folks over 12 years, to them with their stories and had exceptions made, which they had the right to do. There is nothing illegal about it, to make sure that that kind of thing didn’t happen. And I had a couple people at one point say, ‘you just gotta stop doing this, we are so depressed here’... We developed a relationship with the treasurer’s office as somebody that was a bleeding heart liberal, okay; that was a good thing because we stopped them; we called to their attention folks that really did desperately need help and whose home should not be taken and it would not have been in anybody’s interest if they were.”

We see in this relationship how sovereign labors of both care and calculation are outsourced, while the power of exception stays put.

This relationship had started with vignettes the director would write after doing house visits, wearing out the ignition to his car visiting homes on the foreclosure list to figure out whether they were occupied, scanning the yard for toys and the porch for wheelchair ramps if he was unable to talk to folks. But the housing coalition simply didn’t have the capacity for these home visits since the numbers exploded, sending out mass mailings and relying on relational networks to get the word out. I ask the director how the work has changed through this scaling up; he says,

“Sometimes when you visit a person on a Sunday afternoon or something on their porch, you really could get a better feel for what is happening. It is one thing to have a young mom trying to get help; another is to see her there with her four kids, and *well okay, she’s got a hell of a lot to manage*... We would go out because sometimes you could see why you’re not getting a response to those letters. The hardest core (and this is the hardest part), the hardest core is still out there, and we’re not getting to them, and I don’t know how we do that and do the numbers. Do we sacrifice the numbers for that? I don’t know what the answer is.”

The infrastructures of mass communication are not coextensive with those of mass shelter – and the coordinating efforts are not mass but piecemeal.

The director understands the value of these stories of vulnerability he provides to the treasurer, though in 2015, such details were captured in cells of a spreadsheet rather than vignettes. There have been years passed when the treasurer has agreed to take all owner-

occupied homes off the list. In 2015 however, in the face of tax foreclosures at historic proportions, these stories had to come with a down payment. These down-payments only bought the homeowner the time already spent past the deadline, to justify the treasurer's continued willingness to negotiate with the long delinquent debtors.

After collecting basic data as a tax counselor, I would scan a printout from a title search for their address on the county treasurer's register of deeds and calculate their down payment. At this point, some clients would find themselves at a dead-end over just a couple hundred bucks; sometimes, the client would nod gamely at an amount that matched their entire monthly income, already planning where they might nurse some liquidity out of their social networks and other assets.

With this obstacle in mind, we move to the paperwork. This step could be very simple or incredibly arduous depending on the history of the title, and how much paperwork had already been done. Often times, the deed holder was not in fact registered with the county because they had not been informed that they had to do so at the point-of-sale. We had this form on hand, assisting them in filling them out and sending them to the treasurer's office to file. Past a six-month grace period, the county charged a penalty fee of late filing of up to \$250 – a payment they would have to make without guarantee the treasurer would agree to enroll them in a payment plan; a payment in addition to the down payment that needed to be footed right away; a payment that often left clients dumbstruck if not resentful that they had been left unaware of such a simple bureaucratic chore to secure the legal title they lawfully held.

Sometimes, the home had been inherited, the registered deed holder deceased. In many such cases, there was no will, simply the legally unmitigated stuff of family intimacy – even with a will, or at least, no contestation of the occupant's claim, such cases had to go to probate

court to be adjudicated. As a tax counselor, I would still calculate a down payment to get the home off the list, while scheduling the client for a meeting with a staff lawyer to handle probate. Dealing with such volume, the director (already in negotiations with the treasurer) would likely be able to save such homes with evidence that the declarant was in process and regular payment forthcoming. To qualify for a payment agreement with reduced interest on outstanding debt, there was yet another form to be filled out, certifying the property owner as primary occupant – again, often a long-standing and uncontested fact, instrumental to tax policy and yet largely underutilized. This form, they had to take to a different building downtown.

Once we had gone through the story and the calculations, filled out the paperwork and gone through the instructions on getting it filed, there was an additional form we could introduce for those clients (most clients) living below the federal poverty line – distressed owner-occupant exemption form, through which homeowners could qualify to be exempt from property taxes. Many of these clients had been eligible for the exemption throughout the accrual of their tax debt; but the highly under-enrolled program had no retroactive effect. Getting the exemption would still be crucial to staying off the foreclosure list, as their five-year payment agreements for their arrears already stressed their budget, without accounting for new tax bills each year. Some clients left the office with the exemption form as well as the rest of their paperwork, confident with the new plan they had to manage their tax debt and move on from this crisis. Others were so buoyed by all they would have to do simply to get off the list, or simply still buoyed by finding themselves on the list without their knowledge, that the additional prospective step of the hardship exemption would fall on ears hard of hearing anything further than the crisis in their laps.

I heard the work of tax counseling described as “front-lines work” by my new colleagues, who were used to fielding volunteers temporarily lightening the load. I had volunteered after studying the abstractions of tax policy and making them either heads nor tails of what was at stake. I was terrified with my first few clients that I would miss some technicality and botch their case and cause them to lose their homes. The paperwork – the acronyms, the offices, the calculations – is simply that opaque. But I got the hang of it rather quickly with practice: a single case looks opaque; but across many cases, the formula is rote and predictable, once you have rehearsed the script (cf. Carr 2011). It was still consequential to get right: one wrong turn is wasting precious time and needed money, as many of these clients must jump through several hoops just to be available to jump through several more: taking off of work, arranging childcare, navigating mobility issues, taking unreliable public transportation, paying for sparse and increasingly expensive parking downtown.

Indeed, as I got a hang of the script, I came to understand tax counseling involves not only translating and mediating these technicalities but also assuring and motivating clients there was still hope even if there was no guarantee (cf. Lea 2008). Some arrived motivated for this first step in fighting for their homes. Others arrived anxious, depleted, at the housing coalition as a last resort. If multiple cases made the paperwork legible to me, this newfound transparency could not be transferred to the client. It would remain stubbornly opaque to them, in the concrete details not absorbed by the paperwork. But it was ultimately their responsibility to perform compliance, and this performance requires energy and resources from folks who are in this position because they are short on energy and resources.

“You just gotta find a way to connect,” says the director of counseling people in crisis. It’s not just the paperwork; it’s a relationship, holding their property claims in the social

covenant. Perhaps symptomatic of his will to connect, his patient labors are not disciplinary:

“Maybe I’m the great enabler, but I think losing your house is too important. We all do dumb things, we all make bad choices with their incomes and what have you from time to time. but when a poor person makes a bad choice, and for a few hundred dollars, loses their house, that is a little different from you or I making a bad choice and not being able to have a nice weekend or whatever.”

While he models this ethos in his office, it can make his relationship with the treasurer’s office difficult:

“Whereas early on some folks over there were sympathetic after 4 or 5 years of constantly dealing with more people than they can manage, they start blaming the victim, and things get sort of ugly.”

I imagine he understands the difficulties of motivating staff to do such taxing work that does so little to solve problems that are their perpetual responsibility – work that hums with regularity, lull into boredom and monotony, only to be punctuated by explosions of intense activity that ends not when the job is complete but when a deadline is passed.

But I am still flummoxed by the botched job the treasurer’s office does in response to the 2015 crisis. They certainly have more capacity and a wider reach than the housing coalition. And yet, many of the clients I saw had already been touched by the treasurer and not only not informed of prospective remedies like a hardship exemption. The treasurer’s staff had not even been offering the emergency relief passed by the Michigan legislature to reduce penalizing interest rates that inflated tax arrears by 18%. The emergency legislation had been announced to calm anxiety over the outsized crisis, assuring informed publics the State had the situation in control. But that information was not being provided to the publics who were supposed to benefit. Many of our clients had been to the county with cases for which this legislation was designed, but nonetheless, had been signed on to the old terms, responsible for the unaffordable high interest penalties policymakers had acknowledged was fueling crisis. They had defaulted,

as the history of the old specialized payment agreements had shown they would. Think of all the homeowners who went to the convention center and would never access the legislated relief; think of the homeowners figured out the interest-reduced plan but only after having gone broke making inflated payments for which they will never be refunded. Think of all of the cash the treasurer collected; think of all the homes that don't make it.

The interest-rate reduction was accompanied by another piece of emergency legislation, packaged and sold by the mayor as an answer to the plague of speculative investors sucking dry real estate holdings without paying their tax bills. It prohibits previous owners from repurchasing their properties in the county auction, after the last deadline has passed. This law is problematic in itself, as speculative investors face few obstacles in re-purchasing the property under a differently constituted license. But it is truly prohibitive for owner-occupants, robbing the housing coalition of its remedy of last resort.

The nonprofit had been "bitten by the auction bug" some years back, deciding not to leave the auction game only to the business savvy and using it to help homeowners keep their homes. The auction incentivized strategic default, allowing them to clear a backlog of tax debt that they would never be able to pay otherwise. Says the director, "As an advocate, you are always advocating for the person you are working with; and 90% of the time, that is also good to be in the best interest of everybody; and 10% of the time that may not." In other words, the county needs to collect; municipal government must be funded. But there are cases in which it has not been in the client's best interest to pay the full bill when they are willing to take the risk of going to auction. "You can't necessarily say they were scamming the system," says the director, "the system is broken...this auction thing that isn't perfect, but it's the one way of leveling it, do a 'take-over' – you know, when you were a kid, (when I was a kid), you can't

decide on the call in baseball, so it was, *alright, takeover*. You redo it, you start from fresh, and you make sure you get things right going forward.” So the first law to head off this crisis facing Detroit’s homeowners? No more takeovers. Once the deadline is passed, your home goes to the highest bidder – except for you. Anybody but you.

Out of the 67,000 foreclosed homes in 2015, the treasurer claims 40,000 were put into payment agreements – but that doesn’t mean they stayed off the list. The housing coalition is unable to track success with their clients; the treasurer doesn’t provide this kind of data – defaults simply get rolled into the next cycle of crisis. In fall 2015, the county put over 28,000 homes on the auction, 10,000 of them occupied. Says the chief deputy treasurer to the press, “We want to keep people in their homes. We realize it’s bad for neighborhoods. But there are services provided for homes. If you don’t pay your taxes, your neighbor is subsidizing them for you. That’s not fair.” This is how liberal hearts bleed in 2015.

The director has plenty of high-grain resolution ideas for reforming the broken system to close the many cracks through which low-income homeowners are falling. It could be done better, but he asks whether it could simply be done differently: “We need to look at, how do we fund government? Is collecting taxes on homes really the best way?” Although he has been accused of being a carpetbagger when he has openly questioned the county’s policy, this white guy is actually a lifelong Detroiter, and he harbors a vision for the city’s revitalization that would truly value its unique assets: “There is so many homes that could be available for poor folks, that there is great promise; but the frustrating part is that nobody seems to see it or see any value in taking advantage of that.” If only the qualitative value of care vested in homes sheltering citizens could be reckoned against the tax revenue stream. “They don’t need more empty homes; they don’t need more people living in the homes that have no interest in

maintaining them.”

If only the county could recognize incomparable investments:

“Some of the best investment we’ve seen in Detroit is by people that are the scourge of the earth to others, folks that are referred to as squatters, folks moving into homes and putting their labor into it and putting furnaces and putting hot water and putting tons of work into the home... These are the folks that are bringing back some neighborhoods, and yet they’re not the folks that are seen as being worthy of dealing with.”

The coalition doesn’t recommend squatting, as all these investments do not accrue legally. If they are found out, they not only lose it all but earn penalties. The director asks, “Yeah, they broke the law to be there, but what you do? Would you prefer to have a vacant lot?” Of course, such a lot would only be vacant after an expensive deconstruction and demolition process. It seems the laws are made to be broken, unless you are considered the scourge of the earth.

I remember best the last client I saw during my tenure at the housing coalition because he was the last client. The deadline had been pushed back to the end of June, to the beginning of July, then to mid July. In the last days passed the last days, we were accepting down payments from owner-occupants even without the title in order (I cringed thinking of all the clients I had sent to put down \$250 at the register of deeds). We were now getting a trickle of renters who had discovered the yellow bags containing final foreclosure notification for their landlords, and who would be eligible for auction – we opened files for them and told them to call back for pending dates of workshops in which the housing coalition could train and assist them in the online process. I was happy to relieve my newfound colleagues of one final client before I left, as they settled back in to office monotony after the crunch. The client had a yellow bag in hand – the first one I had seen at the office. He was not a renter. It was his yellow bag, and we were passed the last deadline extension. There was nothing I could do for him. No hope I could offer – he could come back to the office when he had the move, there might be some affordable

housing the coalition might help him find. We sat, mostly in silence.

When I finally left the office, he was sitting in the sun on the steps, his yellow bag still in hand. I waved blankly; he waved back. I rolled down the windows to let the heat out of the Tercel and drove away.

History From the Block

[blight, never]

I conclude by introducing a home I would've never known if the owner had not made a community out of her struggle to keep it.

Jennine and I talk while she takes a break at her salon on the east side, tucked deep into a large complex including not only small business owners but senior care facilities and a youth-based community program featuring high-tech, small-scale production equipment. Jennine calls the salon “a nurturing center” and considers her business, like her activism, all part of her ministry – community service guided by her deep faith in God. She says she loves the thrill every time of her clients’ astonished reactions when they see her work on their hair come together: “When you look good, you feel good. It changes a person’s attitude. It’s a passion for me. Because for so long in my life I didn’t feel good about Jennine.” She nursed me through the most embarrassing set of anxious haircuts I gave myself preparing for fieldwork. I am grateful to God for her mentorship in which she has nursed me through my incapacities in acknowledging my gratitude to God – a practical unseating of worldly saviors of market value; a sublime submission that dwarfs state demands for compliance with its normalizing intervention; a profound means of relating without commensurating comparable identities.

Jennine has cultivated her faith through struggle, becoming a single mother at sixteen. Her two daughters are now grown – the elder, following her mother’s footsteps as a hairdresser

in Atlanta, and the younger, entering into communications after graduating from Michigan State. While Jennine had to rely on herself and raising them, example she sets is to be open, available, and loving for those who rely on her. She is the president of her block club, which serves as a vehicle for organizing community cleanups and distributing information about resources. But when she first started organizing, she realized the heart of the work was just what she had always done – looking out for her neighbors, attending to elders, mentoring youth, sharing food, providing support for everyday emergencies.

She realized this identity as an organizer and began building relationships with other organizers and activists in the city in 2012, when she lost her home on the tax auction block and fought to get it back. Her home sits next to the home she grew up in, which she bought for her mother for whom she serves as a caretaker. She had only purchased the home in the previous year, buying it for a low price from the owner and taking on over \$10,000 of his back taxes. The structure had been vacant, so she had to invest every dollar she had saved in replacing stripped parts and making it habitable. With all of her liquidity vested in making the house a home and to protect it against further stripping, she missed a payment on her newly acquired backtaxes and believed the county would give her time; she had been assured in negotiating her payment plan, she would not face the usual punitive terms because she was a new homeowner. But this assurance would turn out false: she left town to bury her dad, for whom she had long served as a primary caretaker, and came back to discover her house was already on auction, selling before she could do anything about it. The title was cleared; the county's hands were tied.

But Jennine was not about to give up. She heard about a group of eviction defense activists who rallied to her cause, including incidentally, my friend Tristan who believed communities could experience the strength of their own power defending the homes against

eviction dumpsters. They tracked down the buyer, who turned out to be a woke hipster with ties to Detroit's activist community. He had refused to sell Jennine back her house for nothing less than what would make him a five-figure profit, casting suspicion upon her responsibility as a homeowner throughout. After mounting pressure from activists threatening to blast his reputation and carefully mediated negotiations, they settled on a four-figure profit, and Jennine successfully purchased the house that was already her home. She credits God: "These things happen for a reason. It happens to make you grow." With all that she had learned and all her new relationships, she started organizing more formally on her block, discovering: "We were all going through the same thing, and nobody was talking about it."

This organizing has led her to become increasingly involved in the civic life of community development and blight removal – community politics prone between the work of demanding more and of harnessing what is available. While her organizational roles and projects have shifted over the years I have known her, one vision has remained constant since our first meeting: to secure a library for her community, redressing widespread illiteracy and providing a shared space to connect. She has secured a stripped property in the neighborhood she is fundraising to rehabilitate and create such a community space, after having successfully raised funds in her activist networks to help pay off those backtaxes. It is a slow, long-term project, as young, mostly white folks rapidly snap up salvageable housing stock in her increasingly valued riverside neighborhood and its close proximity to the island park taken over by the State on a 50-year lease.¹⁰ Along with all of the cleaning and repair, the work of regular maintenance on the property is ongoing.

¹⁰ While there has been a chorus of praise for the State's reinvestment in Belle Isle Park, the aggressive police presence that has accompanied the transition has raised questions among activists and residents about who is meant to enjoy these investments.

I have learned this staying at Jennine's, as I do when I return to Detroit. In contrast to my millennial lifestyle of bouncing between apartments and neighborhoods, I have had to learn how to notice maintenance so as to contribute before it becomes a problem: shoveling sidewalks, sweeping the porch, keeping the garbage disposal schedule. It is a habitus of care I see my millennial type neglect in the Detroit neighborhoods they are moving into, who are prone to romanticizing the city's lush natural abundance was to never make the time for stewarding it. But Jennine and the neighborhood matriarchs with whom she organizes are not working to keep Whitey out; they are simply seeking for their community's investments to be honored, for the value of their wisdom to be recognized.

Jennine has found this wisdom her whole life in the stories shared by elders, friends, and family; she has recruited me to document such stories, seeking to build an archive could be as invaluable to her neighbors and future generations as they have been to her. *We're making history here*, she reminds me again and again, punctuating cycles of meetings, actions, and block parties. I keep on anticipating the making of history, as it passes me by. She means something else (cf. Trouillot 1995), remembering the caring elders she has lost; this neighborhood raised her: "There is history on that block. I love Field Street." She really does: it is incomparable. And, of course, blight cleanup: so much of the information she receives to distribute as a representative of her community is oriented by the imperatives of the Blight Task Force and inflected by the community engagement apparatus it feeds. But if I am tempted to be cynical about blight cleanup, I would only reproduce in myself the blight technicians' utopian fixation on eradication and refusal of the ongoing refuse of progress. Jennine doesn't have time for such fantasies, as maintaining the block is only one rhythm in an ecology of responsibilities – to her family, her business, her home, her neighbors (whether they be down the street or doing life

upstate). Her phone rings constantly. I constantly worry about all the projects we aspire to complete together, when I can't see how it will come together. She teaches me, to leave it to God.

We couldn't always keep up with the small grant cycle for community-building; Jennine couldn't always make it to the end of the long series of hoops she'd have to jump through on somebody else's clock. But in a pinch and on a shoestring, her gift for building community would shine. In the late spring of 2015, Jennine's block club participated in a citywide effort called, "Motor City Makeover," in which the City provided T-shirts and extra dumpsters to support volunteers' hyper-local efforts. Bright and early, we take a minute to breathe and pray, before driving down the block, honking the horn to rally the recruits. By 10 AM, there were two grills going and the first rotation of neighbors pulling rakes, pushing mowers, and picking up trash.

I couldn't pull, push, or pick up, headed into surgery on my shoulder – I had a trusted university doctors who told me my debilitating pain was anxiety; it was a black woman at a county clinic in Detroit who honored me with an x-ray, discovering obsolete hardware from an old surgery impinging on my nerves. In other words, they told me screws were coming loose in my mind, and it turned out, screws were coming loose in my body. I am still reckoning with the aftermath of the failed diagnosis. I felt anxious, unable to contribute to the speed and efficacy of the making over. Jennine – who is herself waiting for a knee replacement once she gets her blood pressure down – wasn't concerned: I was missing the point. I was delegated to take pictures for the social media archive, posted up next to the neighbor delegated to serve hamburgers to volunteers, passersby, and later, even the neighborhood police officers. It started to rain at 5 PM, just as we had finished closing down the grill, sprinkling clusters of fresh-cut blocks throughout the city. *See how everything comes together?* Jennine asked me, as we laughed at

my inconceivability in the morning of getting through the day. *That was really a blessing.*

Epilogue

With tax foreclosures down at 90% from their crisis peak in 2018, legal activists win a salvage victory for remaining homeowners with the savvy to respond to letters. They had filed a class action suit, protesting the plethora of obstacles and dearth of information preventing low-income homeowners from accessing the hardship exemption. Their claims were negotiated with the City, which joined their legal opponents in celebrating the terms of the resulting settlement: the City would now be required to mail notices to low-income households annually notifying them of the program, while streamlining the application process and making it available online. In addition to these prospective efforts, the settlement included provisions to aid qualifying homeowners already in foreclosure in partnership with the housing coalition – the City foregoing the recovery of tax dollars owed, and the housing coalition taking on the liability of property repurchasing (ACLU 2018). The mayor refused activist demands to extend the deadline and reach of this reparative emergency program, claiming his legal obligation to fulfill the terms he negotiated settlement and reminding the public of the overwhelming statistical turnaround of the foreclosure rate.

There have been strong whiffs of scandal coming from the Blight program, with a federal grand jury convened to investigate the skyrocketing costs and insider bidding for demolition contracts under the mayor. Corruption crusader Robert Davis broke word of the investigation in 2017 and the number of suspect contracts being approved by the public-private land bank authority with no public oversight. The mayor has conceded the overpayments, claiming they were an error of “moving too fast” to keep up with the ambitious demolition schedule rather than deliberate or strategic malfeasance. Nobody has been indicted to date

(Dietz 2017).

The only whiff of scandal to threaten the titan's reputation came in 2017, when his company unrolled A controversial marketing campaign across the storefront windows of one of his downtown holdings. The offending image depicted a crowd of white people, consuming public space, with the slogan – “See Detroit As We Do.” As photos of this white vision went viral in critical social media publics, the titan released an apology for the “tone deaf” ad, explaining its “bad taste” – they had simply not finished the complete picture, which would include more diverse image panels. Apparently taking off his hat as the body politic's expert surgeon – diagnosing and treating based on the appearance of blight – the titan claimed the privacy of his company's epistemology:

"Who cares how 'we see Detroit'?! What is important is that Detroit comes together as a city that is open, diverse, inclusive and is being redeveloped in a way that offers opportunities for all of its people and the expected numerous new residents that will flock to our energized, growing, job-producing town where grit, hard-work and brains meld together to raise the standard of living of all of its people."

His company would not divulge where responsibility for the ad laid; the titan's public statement simply concluded, “We will be better at this next time” (quoted in Crain's Detroit 2017).

CHAPTER 4

The Deserving Body Politic starring in “The Grandest Bargain of Them All”:

Episode 1) Pension Promises & the Virtues of Civic Obligation

Episode 2) Derivative Dealings & the Vices of Speculative Risk

Episode 3) Triumphs of Consent & Tragedies of Settlement

On November 7, 2014, a federal bankruptcy judge legally “resurrected” the City of Detroit in the eyes of capital markets, confirming a budgetary plan projected to launch the City into sustained solvency by sacrificing over \$7 billion of its unsecured debt load. As the case coincided with the end of the tenure of a state-appointed emergency manager and his extraordinary authority over municipal governance, the judge’s ruling concluded thus:

In our nation, we join together in the promise and in the ideal of a much grander bargain. It is the bargain by which we interact with each other and with our government, all for the common good. That grander bargain, enshrined in our constitution, is democracy.

It is now time to restore democracy to the people of the City of Detroit.

I urge you to participate in it. And I hope that you will soon realize its full potential.

This chapter examines the landscape of settlements the comprised of the plan of adjustment confirmed and enacted by the court, impairing contracts by offering a proportion of cents on previously promised dollars. I examine the histories of debts incurred, as authoritatively narrativized as a diagnostic of the city’s crisis, along with the process of negotiating settlement outcomes, narrativized as an emerging ethos that serves to model the

character of the body politic produced by restructuring.¹ Exploring the moral grammars of fiscal virtue offered by state actors and taken up in mainstream reporting, I show how the image of the fallen debtor conditions a sacred image of necessary intervention while providing a foil through which the body politic's saviors emerge (cf. Roitman 2014). In the redemptive arc that structures of this narrative, as it was crafted in court and media headlines, I show how "democracy" is not simply suspended in emergency but recalibrated in the restructuring process, around an image of the general will that subsumes unruly historical differences and erases excess from the body politic's authorizing narrative. I consider what the image of the bargain instructs on the foundational logics of the American social contract recalibrated by the court: a compromise resulting from consent among disputing parties. This image not only reinforces the structural antecedent of property to civic freedom, but also directs us to be unequal outcomes of such a deal: what kind of bargain are competing sides getting out of the consent of the governed?

I intersperse these ethnographic accountings of the State's accounting with the perspectives of parties to the Grand Bargain who both consented and rejected the settlement. In the frictions of these accountings, I seek to explore the affective pause required to calculate the value of creditor claims – in which the actuarial and moral mingle, and are ultimately decided by a judge – that precedes and thereby defuses the historical charge of other forms of legal and political claims. The habitus of consent thereby begets consent (Mauss 1973; Locke 1690), even when the context of domination that secures it is intimately familiar: as the traffic in women (Rubin 1975) persists in the grammar of adjudicating contractual claims – a sexual economy in

¹ I use "narrativize" in Hayden White's sense of constructing the moral significance of historical events through their emplotment (1980).

which whiteness has historically conditioned the very possibility of legal protection (Hartman 1997). Rape not only makes visceral abstractions of actuarial violence in the sexuality of the body politic; it also illuminates the underbelly of the financial habitus being cultivated from hedge funds to college campuses.²

Allow me to introduce the Grand Bargain with a retrospective reevaluation of expectations (Scott 2014). As the heat of the water struggle died down, I expected that force of political mobilization would shift along with the emergency manager to another vulnerable population stress to life-or-death threshold by his restructuring: the largely African-American civil servants facing the reduction and elimination of their post-retirement benefits. Seeking to channel that energy in support of a grassroots group of retirees persisted in objecting to the grand bargain settlement, I volunteered to make a YouTube video that mimicked the style of the activist documentary on the water shutoffs. In the video, the black-and-white text that accompanies the voices of retirees (my own voice) claims that hundreds will gather at the courthouse on the opening day of the confirmation hearings in protest, urging viewers to join (Detroit Ain't Broke 2014).

Maybe (maybe) 200 gathered to protest this historic occasion. I was puzzled by how the mass momentum had deflated, by how the climax of political spectacle in the streets gave way to the climax of legal spectacle in the courtroom. But the Detroiters who joined the protests nonetheless were not at all deflated, persistent in their determination. They didn't seem surprised either numbers, and I realized that I wasn't either – once the urgency of anticipating the historic day had passed.

Over a thousand people had shut down the streets surrounding the courthouse during

² See Ho (2009); Luyendijk (2015).

the eligibility hearings; but that was when the unions were still in the fight, before they had withdrawn their objections as a condition of settlement. Hundreds had marched down Woodward Avenue protesting water shut-offs; but the rallying cry, “water is life,” required some technical work to connect to the claim, “hands off my pensions!” This slogan emblazoned the T-shirts of retiree activists rejecting the capitulation of their representative organizations to the liquidation of the retirement benefits they had sacrificed throughout their working lives to earn. They promised to keep protesting, to keep appealing, until their state constitutional rights to their pensions and federal constitutional rights to electoral democracy were recognized. They were flanked by a regular group of revolutionary activists of their generation, who saw the political dominance of the big banks as the most urgent front of struggle.

But this elderly group of hell-raisers were otherwise on their own – Detroit’s emergency manager had raised his fair share of controversy, but the headline-grabbing mobilizations seemed to have wrapped up by these hearings, his last act and final performance. The climax had passed, as a majority of retirees had consented to settlement, and the sacrifices they faced had been greatly reduced from the numbers that had initially started panic. The persisting retirees objected, the cuts were still life-threatening to many of their cohort – but the public coverage of the case presented their vote to consent as a statistical confirmation that their sacrifices had been reasonably apportioned.

But where did this proportion come from? Pension obligations, and the derivative terms through which they are increasingly financed, are just too damn complicated for a general public to verify. They entail many assumptions and shifting variables, while offering a concrete bottom-line that is as objective as the political and legal exigencies of managing such debt. The numbers are made up; both/and, the numbers are real. In court and in the media, the numbers

require a fair amount of narrative work and tonal direction on the part of the experts who produce them to provide any clue as to the forms of action the numbers necessitate. In Detroit's case, the numbers necessitate drastic action: a conclusion based on calculated abstractions of financial risk; a conception of risk that appeals directly to deeply racialized and gendered images of crisis that stick to the city in the hyper-mediated imagination; an imagination that matters directly to investors strategically evaluating the financial field. The necessity is made up; both/and, the necessity is real.

The language of deserving comes ready-at-hand to navigate the central issues of implementing fiscal austerity through emergency receivership: People deserve democracy. People deserve water. But there is a faltering pause when a financial calculation has been forced, as it is in municipal bankruptcy: People deserve how much percentage on the dollar of their underfunded pension liability? Let me do my homework, and get back to you; in the meantime, incomplete expertise in financial calculation offers an alibi for avoiding both the incalculable suffering entailed in the equation and collective impotence to redress it. The complexities of actuarial calculation and legal obligation forestall political judgment under liberal grammars of recognition.

I have failed serially to understand these complexities while trying to prove that the retirees did not deserve the sacrifices they now bear, in answer to the deeply moral narrative work of the state that concludes to the contrary – a narrative that proffers that they perhaps deserve worse but have enjoyed the humanitarian mercy of the state and corporate class. But what if this question of deserving is a trap – to evoke anti-blackness affectively while dodging racial discrimination, to evoke deeply ethical sensibilities about debt while naturalizing the devaluation of black labor and property claims, to recruit publics to accept judgment without

disturbing dominant calibrations of value? How do anxieties about fiscal virtue play out in the exchanges of liquidity that constitute financial debt? How do moral possibilities of the body politic in liquid markets compare to the impersonal and dispersed narrative constitution of financial agents and institutions? How does the faith in liquidity structure moral valuations of the state?

To address these questions over the plot that follows, I track state and mainstream media narratives framing the actuarial black-boxes of financing pension liabilities in an increasingly predatory financial context. Thinking across the dominant narratives (and the grammatical, affective, and calculative work they do) and the perspectival narratives of participants in the case (and the alternative histories and valuations they offer), I offer an oblique method for considering the concrete effects and lived experiences of emergency restructuring – not so much to recover these effects and experiences from their abstraction by calculation and negation by narrative but to face the epistemological violence of abstraction and negation itself (cf. Hartman and Wilderson 2003). I suggest such violence to the possibility of understanding the politics of market value obscures the terms of the disagreement about the very reality of calculated pension liabilities and the ways in which this disagreement extends far beyond Detroit's case or actuarial technique. At stake is a question of how to distribute the extreme wealth and extreme risk generated by financial technologies increasingly underwriting the means of making life on this planet – the context by which the values of actuarial calculation come to make sense in practice and in which the significance of legal consent

Allow me to conclude this introduction by returning to the retrospection of YouTube, shifting away from the insertion of my own disembodied voice to retiree voices as they tell their own story. I do so to highlight the lessons they offer in characterizing the markets in which their

contractual claims are valued and adjudicated, offering a perspective informed by the experience not only of fighting for the claims in this context but also of laboring over decades to operate the municipality as this context has taken shape.

1. *"Because they figure, most of us are poor and black; most of the media is predominantly white, so y'all don't care."* – Bill Davis

In focusing on the figure of the debtor, the contexts of white domination in which debt is valued are naturalized and obscured.

2. *"If you give the courts enough hell in the streets, they'll suddenly find that somewhere in the Constitution a little piece, that says, 'oh, oh, maybe this isn't right.' But if you don't do anything in the streets, then you can be assured, they aren't going to do anything for you."* – Mike Mulholland

Popular mobilization is controlled for in financial valuations of "political risk" (LiPuma 2017), illuminating the inflection point between market confidence and legal process.

3. *"Let it be known – today it's us; tomorrow, it's going to be you."* – Belinda Myers-Florence

After the triumphs of settlement, the debtor must survive the aftermath, and this aftermath illuminates a financialized context we all must survive (Honig 2009).

Episode 1) Pension Promises & the Virtues of Civic Obligation

In this section, I explore the “pension tradition” in Michigan as it is taken up by Detroit’s integrated civil service only to be reevaluated by professional accounting standards. I consider the thick conception of obligation embedded in this hallmark of civil service, defined through mutual investments of care, as it collides with a conception of obligation emerging in the age of financialization. Although this conception looks thin and therefore general in crystallizing obligation in terms of contract and reducing its intergenerational temporality to a calculus of present value, the moral framing of this actuarial conception in fact offers a thick vision of the manifold risks posed by increasingly precarious debt markets to which we are all assumed vulnerable.

I interview the Democratic state representative at the community resource center she has set up in a west side neighborhood of the city that falls within the awkwardly-drawn borders of her still union-strong district. We know each other from our overlapping circuit of community meetings at which she is always frenetically helpful, making up for her political impotence in a tea party-dominated legislature by circulating information about resources and offering her office’s letterhead whenever it might make a difference.

I ask her about the vote by the state legislature to sign the State onto Detroit's grand bargain settlement. She had voted yes, although she tells me people assumed she was gonna be a no, and she almost was, until sitting down with the Democratic caucus leader who co-signed the legislation. She voices his pitch: “Show me a light of, what other better alternative is there? Let's get out of this bankruptcy as soon as possible. And the fact of the matter is,” she adds, “Labor was so [she pauses] confused.” She is visibly exasperated, telling the story of how the public-sector unions went neutral on the deal, after supporting it, which was, of course, after opposing it, and then going neutral again; and then going after the state representatives for

voting for it, after the fact. Before the vote, she had been pushing them for a position, but the most she got was their lawyers, giving the legal arguments. The unions were silent on what mattered to her most – how would residents get impacted? She says, “They should have been knocking on our door every day giving us updates and letting us know what was going on.”

The state rep claims this failure by the unions left her with no leverage to oppose legislation on pensions when the organizations representing pensioners were not even asking her to. Without that leverage, she believes her colleagues would dismiss her as “just trying to be a ‘no’-person” – implying a loss of credibility in future legislative negotiations. When does ‘no’ really mean ‘no,’ and when is it a weapon in a game of political gridlock? It sounds as if the tea party has been not only been successful in playing this game with the legislative process but also imposing its terms on everybody else (cf. Masco 2017). She is weighing all of these calculations of political capital being played across fickle unions and dogmatic legislators, but can only trail off after concluding: “even though your gut is like, something is wrong here...”

The state rep ponders the dogma of her Republican colleagues, noting that the governor did not make the grand bargain vote quid pro quo or seek to barter political capital to secure the vote. She grasps to express his position: “It was true to him. This was the best thing he could do.” She voices him: “*Well, think about it, this is what’s going to get us, you know, get Detroit, up.*” She looks at me with a fascination with his sincerity I have come to recognize and share: “He really believed it, Molly. And he was actually passionate about it. I don’t hate him for it. That’s what people voted for I guess.”

Toward the end of our conversation, the state rep and native Detroiter reflects on how used the city is to weathering endless cycles of crisis. “I always tell my colleagues, Detroit is like the mom, the mother of the state. We get all the unemployed, the needy, the poor, and the sick.

We [she switches] she gets everybody, she takes everybody, and she also gets neglected the most." She laughs and gives me a conspiratorial grin, telling me a story she jokes her staff hates:

"I got so mad at one Republican who wanted to cut mental health funding. I was like, should I do what Castro did?...Maybe I should empty out all our mental health hospitals in the City of Detroit. Maybe I should, and take them all, put them on a bus out to [wealthy suburban] Rochester Hills, and dump them there."

She makes clear, she would never do that. She isn't laughing anymore; she is almost wistful as she recounts the history, fact checking for details with her assistant at a nearby desk:

"Castro did that. He emptied out his jails in the 80s. He stuck them all on a boat and sent them down to Florida. Did you know that? [I did not.] He just emptied them out, Molly, stuck them on a boat, a couple of them. It headed right there, hit right there in Florida. And then we couldn't return them because they became refugees. Yeah, it was interesting. Sometimes I wish I could do that. Sometimes," she conjures her Republican colleague and addresses him with a gusto, "You want to start taking them? You don't want to help us?"

The laughter in her voice subsides again: "You know what it is? What the US has, with Cuba – what do you call those? Where we can't bargain with them? Embargo – the state had an embargo on the city."

**

"MANY FATHERS"

Consider this account of the national crisis in public pensions, related in a white paper authored by a partner and associate attorney at Jones Day, the national firm from which the emergency manager was recruited, and which he, in turn, hired to represent the City in Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy:

"The crisis among the nation's municipalities has many fathers ... Not unlike private entities, municipalities across the nation have found themselves trapped in an extended cycle of declining revenues. Plummeting real estate values and high rates of foreclosure have eroded the property tax base, negatively impacting income. Widespread unemployment and, in some cases, decreasing populations have depleted revenue from sales taxes and other forms of taxation. In some cases, the shortfall in revenues is compounded by "out of the money" derivative transactions and tumbling markets, which have depleted many municipalities' cash positions. Moreover, the cost to municipalities of issuing debt to replace this lost revenue is

rising. The low interest rates traditionally enjoyed by large municipalities are becoming harder to find, whether because of the general "tightening" of the credit markets resulting from the financial crisis or because investors are beginning to take notice of the confluence of factors currently threatening municipalities. Municipal debt traditionally was considered a relatively "risk-free" investment, but that has changed in the current market. Municipalities now find that their debt is the subject of an increasingly robust market and credit default swaps – one of the vehicles many claim was a leading culprit of the global financial crisis in the global sovereign-debt crisis. But perhaps the single largest problem facing municipalities today is a dramatic and growing shortfall in public pensions" (Merrett and Ellman 2011: 366-367).

Among the many fathers, public pension funds are the largest, according to accounting. According to accounting, which can only notice "the confluence of factors" as they are noticed by potential investors assessing the costs and risk of lending. Out of this confluence and the crisis of confidence it produces for municipalities seeking to finance long term costs of labor and infrastructure, what is the effect of singling out public pensions? How do the very practices and assumptions of accounting that produce the sheer size of pension deficits reflect the historical context of this confluence on which confidence crucially hinges? Indeed, as we will see, the economics models upon which the epistemology of this white paper relies have a difficult time accounting for the role of confidence and the variegated confluence of factors upon which investor judgments rest – while such models function directly to influence market makers, they externalize such social activity of making the market (a practical reality for all sorts of market actors) because of the emphatically unexamined assumption that the market is a transcendent, natural, and mechanically-rational totality unto itself (LiPuma 2017). In this section, I interrogate the productive tension between the faith in the natural force of the market and the productive work of changing accounting standards, alongside the faith in the body politic and the productive work of changing political regimes. I thereby seek to unsettle narratives that make a bastard out of Detroit's pension obligations, made a shameful responsibility of the devalued civil service, and ready to crop out of the budgetary picture. By problematizing the

numerical figure of unfunded pension liability while naturalizing the evolving context of financial domination by which it is calculated, these narratives not only set the stage for pension claims to be settled by liquidation but also acts out a deeply gendered and racialized image of fiscal virtue on which the new Detroit is to be settled.

The City's pension problems are born in 1961 – when a Michigan Constitutional Convention inscribes the previously ad hoc investment into state law, granting pension claims legal protection and requiring the units of government that offer them to pay into the pots annually. The social contract of high liberalism was right at the cusp of its waning. Detroit was only a decade into the steady structural leak of well-to-do taxpayers, vesting their tax dollars in newly incorporated suburban municipalities outside city borders. After its wartime peak, the auto industry was being restructured regionally but not yet globally. And civil rights organizing on the part of Detroit's growing black constituencies had not yet threatened open rebellion. White people were still in charge – and trying to head off an impending sense of insecurity over postwar triumphalism. The constitutional amendment to protect pensions as a contractual right was introduced with no partisan controversy; the most discussion it begged was over the impenetrability of the technical language used to express the annual actuarial funding requirements. There was no speculation as to the scenario that the pension pots would one day stop taking in new members via new hires proportionately to new retirees. The intention of the amendment, on the contrary, was to make the civil service attractive and competitive for new hires.

The constitutional amendment worked to correct the legally dubious status of public pensions according to a Supreme Court ruling that held them as a gratuity – a fund supplementary to regular compensation and thereby legally simple to diminish, impair, or

eliminate. As the constitutional delegate, Mr. Binkowski explains in the record, “[The gratuity ruling] has held true today in spite of the fact that we have our concept of deferred compensation. And many of you who are living in the metropolitan areas, if you will pick up the newspapers over the weekend and read the ads by the Detroit civil service or the Wayne County civil service, or any of the other municipalities, you will find in their ads they play up the aspect of liberal pensions. And there is no question that when an employee today takes employment with a governmental unit, he does so with the idea that there is a pension plan or retirement system involved.” While the 1961 constitutional protection defines pensions as a contract and thereby integral to employee compensation, the structure of deferral assumes a body politic with the structural integrity to make good on these promises – a structural integrity rendered obsolete by a financial regime not quite imaginable in 1961; a structural integrity we will find underwritten by an image of moral integrity defined as credit-worthiness, fashioned in an image of the racial integrity of the state that in 1961 was being directly challenged.

When Detroit elected a black mayor over the course of the next decade who promptly integrated the civil service, the city apparently defied the (white) image of integrity on which the security of the state’s backing of pensions presumes. This anxiety – that black citizens formally recognized by the fourteenth amendment as deserving of equal protection under the law posing an internal and possibly existential threat to state sovereignty (Hartman 1997) – is expressed in regional (white) common sense about the city, reflecting the racialized decision governing the line that constitutes criminality (Ibid): “The city’s first African-American mayor, Coleman Young, once infamously told ‘pushers,’ ‘ripoff artists,’ and ‘muggers’ to ‘leave Detroit’ in a speech later misrepresented as a proclamation that white people should move out” (Bomey 2017:19). This integrated civil service expected the constitutional protections of their pensions to

be upheld by the state; but this legal expectation of state sovereignty to provide equal protection will be deflated by a structural economic shift. As the vision of who constituted the civil service changed historically, so has the vision of the market in which pensions are designed to sustainably compensate on the generationally deferred schedule. This design has been rendered obsolete.

If public pensions were constitutionally protected to make the civil service and thus municipalities competitive for capturing tax dollars, the game has changed. Pensions are designed for slow and steady growth – the bulk of the principal invested for slow and steady returns; the benefits to members paid out slow and steady until their deaths; beneficiaries trickle out on their own time, insuring one another from either side of the mean life expectancy. They are also designed to admit new members, for slow and steady contributions to keep the pot funded. But the city's infrastructure is itself an infamous object lesson in the obsolescence of the promise of nationalized industrialism to grow slow and steady wealth to share and care for everyone. The concept of the pension is much older than its apotheosis in the high liberal alliance of state/worker/corporation – “George Washington prevented a mutiny in the Continental Army by intervening personally in a dispute over pensions during the revolution” (Sgouros 2017:7). From this seed of deferred compensation as incentive to sacrifice for the greater good, the institutionalization of pension systems emerges out of broader social movements in the 19th and 20th centuries that looked to harness growing national wealth to eliminate dire poverty through forms of mutual insurance and other forms of democratizing finance, including savings bonds and mutual funds (Ibid:19) – mutual insurance pools that were racially segregated according to actuarial risk assessments on human capital that trace back to the transatlantic slave trade (Katznelson 2005; Ralph 2012). The collective, impersonal,

institutionalized logic insures where personal savings might fail, while pooling costs of administration and investment advising that otherwise add up (Ibid). It is precisely this vision of intergenerational wealth, aggregate security, and slow and steady pacing that is now proving unsuited for emerging technologies and infrastructures of financial investment to which our means of living are collectively pegged, just as the pools are racially integrated. While the obsolescence of Detroit's productive economy is overdetermined to the banality of the pornographic, progressives (I suggest) are slower to recognize the forced obsolescence of liberal investment logics.

To conceive of the lag between progressive political temporalities and accelerating market tectonics, let us consider the year 1973 – when Coleman Young is sworn into office, and those competitively attractive civil service jobs are extended to black workers previously legally excluded. The embargo commonly called “white flight” digs into the tax revenues backing those jobs; but this wave of disinvestment is actually late. Suburbanization had been inaugurated in the postwar triumph by racially-discriminatory federally-financed home loans to returning soldiers (Katznelson 2005); the liquidation of urban manufacturing was already decades underway. 1973 – we have a scary oil crisis that destabilizes American auto's dominance as the rise of Japanese fuel-efficient automobiles threatens the hegemony of the American Corporation. 1973 – with the recession setting in at home, banks are finding tax incentives on foreign investments more enticing than the tax exemption on municipal bonds that had helped cities borrow at such a low rate in the years that they established their generous metropolitan social contracts (Phillips-Fein 2017:76).

None of this looks good for Detroit's new administration in terms of opportunities to revitalize the tax base and bring jobs to residents. But pensions are quarantined from the City's

operational budget as an independent actuarial fund with its own planning horizons; it is built to weather such market instability. But 1973 is significant for a reason that escapes our lineup of the usual suspects of structural disinvestment – it heralds the birth of the derivative. If globalized deindustrialization destabilized postwar domestic economies, the derivative opens a new frontier for old white boy capital to reestablish its dominance – a frontier that capitalizes on the new forms of risk introduced by globalized connectivity and de-nationalized supply chains by betting on it (LiPuma 2017). While the derivative market is often characterized by both insiders and critics as fictitious capital, parasitic on the real economy, its expanding proportions tell a different story – the face-value of all derivatives contracts stood at an economically inconsequential \$20 million at their birth in 1973, and today look something like two quadrillion dollars (Ibid:94). This frontier is confined by no boundary or sector and is only expanding, reaching to exhaust limits of not only space but time – trading on wagers of objectified risk, this Wild West maps a one-to-one, minute-to-minute, Borgesian map of the global economy itself, a deadly real abstraction (Ibid). Every wager has a winner and loser, amplifying the volatility on which the wagers are based; it is structurally the opposite of mutual insurance (except, perhaps, in a cyclical schedule of mutually assured destruction). But the demand for these derivative products is setting the tempo to which all other market instruments must keep pace.

As the story of the Grand Bargain unfolds, we will see how participating in the derivatives game proved both an irresistible temptation and a doomed-to-fail adventure for the City. But before attending to how the derivatives markets appear in the pension history, let us consider where they do not appear – as the invisible backdrop, the market climate on which the pensions float. Built to rise on the tides that lift all boats, pension investments must now survive the accelerating rushes, sudden shifts of current, and upwardly draining pressure of the fully

globalized, deregulated pool of money. These funds have thus far maintained securities of a bygone era, while growing with the enormous wealth generated by this new market. The "fiscal reality" heralded by Detroit's bankruptcy in which public pensions have been refigured as a partisan issue – a symptom of public excess, a form of social welfare rather than deferred compensation – is not just the story of shrinking revenues but of strategic redesignation of investment pots that once looked like assets to a liability threatening to drown the city in a new era of retrenched recession.

We thus arrive at the beginning of the story of the “grand bargain” settlement that triumphantly resolves Detroit’s bankruptcy, according to the newly-minted mythology on the case, *Detroit Resurrected* – authored by the local business reporter who had exclusive access to its unfolding and most powerful participants throughout; who masterfully captures the particularly regional consensus (or perhaps, cease-fire) on “racial politics” (Bomey 2017 2017). This authoritative narrative opens with a scandal of excess – the “neglected mother” of the state found compromised, so lost in the struggle to make ends meet, it is she who is neglecting her basic responsibilities while indulging in luxuries she cannot afford.

"Detroit was broke – and broken. The city government had morphed from the municipal services provider into a retiree benefit supplier, distributing four out of every ten dollars from its budget to fund pensions, pay for retiree healthcare insurance, and to service debt, most of which had been issued to pay retirees. Without drastic action, that figure would ballooned to more than seven out of every ten dollars by 2020 and continue rising" (Bomey 2017:1).

The City was out of quick fixes, over decades of raising taxes, laying off workers, and devastating basic services – strategies that "provided temporary relief to the budget but ignored the fundamental source of Detroit's debt crisis" (Ibid). The fundamental source, we find, in the politics of aggressive unions and easy politicians:

“Instead of negotiating deals that Detroit could afford, unions repeatedly scored contracts that ignored the city's fiscal reality: retiree benefits consumed the city's budget, redirecting money

away from public safety. At city Hall, a cascading series of ineffective politicians – lacked the will, foresight, or ability to make drastic changes – turned to Wall Street to foot the bill for their fiscal recklessness, choosing debt over the hard choices necessary to protect the people of Detroit ensure the financial security of the city's retirees" (Ibid:2).

Indeed, the City and its public-sector unions had failed to take notice of the new fiscal reality in which they are operating – in which public pension investments are no longer valued as fundamental sources of civic strength and long-term security but condemned as parasitic remnants of an obsolete social contract. We will not find the change in the investment game articulated in historical or political terms; rather, it will come down to the expert technicalities of actuarial accounting standards.

"In the corporate world, generally accepted accounting principles govern pension bookkeeping, making it difficult to skew the impact of legacy benefits. But government accounting standards historically allowed cities to disguise the full effect of these costs on their budgets. 'The problem is government pensions aren't regulated, so they can do whatever they want,' said [a corporate attorney hired by the emergency manager to represent the city]. What's more, actuarial assessments for pension funds are part mathematical science, part fortune-telling. Actuaries try to predict the future by applying formulas to projected investment returns and mortality rates among pension holders. This allows employers to estimate their pension costs. But actuarial methods involve a surprising amount of guesswork, sprinkled with a heavy dose of worldview" (Bomey 2017:55).

In this account, we take the City's worldview as problematic and that of the State's experts as fiscal reality.

The worldview of such a fiscal reality can be usefully fleshed out through the feminization of the racialized body politic in crisis (Cox 2015) – the care-taking mother of the state, neglected by the many fathers of unruly fiscal liability. In other words, "fiscal reality" poses itself in the garb of mathematical objectivity; but the worldview that contextualizes and thereby gives value to those numbers is structured by an ideal of the body politic that is unmarked, white, and male, problematizing the body politic in crisis as problematized, black, female. The State's story of the City's crisis coheres around a common sense that takes for

granted white, masculine ideals of scientific objectivity and fiscal self-sufficiency that devalues collective investment and individualizes responsibility for vulnerability. I make explicit the gendering of the problematized body politic both: to demonstrate the racial dog-whistles (Haney-Lopez 2014) this story blows, casting the City as a municipal welfare queen in its grammar (Spillers 1987); to explore this antiblack, misogynistic structure of coherence ordering financial logics otherwise rendered inscrutable by the insider-claims to expert objectivity. In other words, what sense can be made by thinking of the body politic as a body?

Detroit had been hiding the fat of her pension excess with calculations that reflected an apparently naïve worldview about the value and security of her pension fund on the market. Historically, flexible accounting standards have allowed public bodies to work the numbers around the exigencies of governance, balancing the books that reflect both immediate operational expenses, long-term capital expenditures on infrastructure, and the even longer term horizons of civil service retirement (Sgouros 2017). As a political subdivision of the state protected by the tenth amendment from forced liquidation in bankruptcy, municipalities have had the actuarial means to prioritize operations and shape their longer financial horizons around these needs. But according to fiscal common-sense, such flexibility has invited municipalities to kick the can down the road, allowing slick politicians to seduce voters with promises they have no plans to pay off. But the professionals are whipping those government accounting standards into shape, forcing public pensions to be rendered transparent and commensurate among other flavors of debt on the open market, flexible to the exigencies of investors evaluating this debt, and along with it, the desirability of dealing with the municipal debtor. Detroit's worldview would have to change along with these standards, as her finances are subject to new forms of scrutiny and new technologies of risk assessment.

For starters, Detroit has to drop the assumption that she is immune from the risk of liquidation as an entity of the state. The experts pricing her risk of default are no longer assured by the promise of state backing. A municipality cannot be liquidated through bankruptcy like a corporation, but it is the state's authority under the tenth amendment that protects her – the municipality's own legal authority is entirely derived and subservient to that of the state. But the municipality can be liquidated by the state government that so created her (from his rib, so to speak). Detroit's pensions presumed the City would outlast the civil servants she pledged a pension; she presumed her own perpetuity. But in the crucible of bankruptcy and in the hands of our corporate-crossover governor, the fiscal death and legal dissolution of the municipality, the City of Detroit, is made a real and imminent threat evidenced in the legal process. The end of these long-term securities is possible – perhaps not really tenable, but the possibility is captured as a risk-value in the pricing instruments of investors. The potentiality of this event in that calculus change everything for evaluating public pension systems, whether or not the event is ever made political reality. The threat has a numerical value, along with the narrative value of precipitating rebirth.

With fiscal death on the risk-pricing table, the City's conception of her total pension liability must be transformed. Those pension promises used to appear spread out over tens of decades and tens of thousands of workers. Thanks to new accounting standards mandated by the Government Accountability Standards Board, she would now have to tabulate the aggregate to report on the same balance-sheet in which she managed her regular operations (Sgouros 2017). She would have to add in bright red ink for all her potential creditors to see the "present value" of that total liability – an aggregate value reflecting what Detroit owed to each individual worker, if each individual worker were to collect on his lifetime due, in total, all at once,

tomorrow. Such a worst-case scenario may sound practically impossible, but investors demand the City demonstrate she is ready for it. Each and every claim on her budget factors into the price assessing her default risk. A number once considered an arbitrary snapshot of the pension system's ever-changing position in an ever-changing market, a number useless to the fictions of predictability upon which municipal budget planning is based – this number is now seized upon as vital information, signaling every dollar in line for a claim on the City's budget if the market bottoms out tomorrow. The worst case scenario, no longer a possibility so marginal as to be absurd, is now rendered the most objective threshold for measuring the City's risk.

While the progressive proponents of traditionally-funded pension pots decry the overnight crisis created by focusing so much attention on the present value of total unfunded liability – citing all of the advantages of mutual insurance squandered (Ibid) – such arguments aim to show why the total unfunded liability doesn't make sense as a number directing governance. In this sense, these critiques miss the point – the demands that municipal governance reorganize around total unfunded liability are not oriented by the needs of governance but by the demands of the investment market and the derivative landscape in which the long-term futures presumed by governance must be rendered ready for disassembly and reassembly, comparison and competition, and made attractive to the margins opened by practices of leveraging these futures by the minute.

The emergency manager would also deploy newly standardized accounting assumptions of his own in estimating the City's total unfunded pension liability. Detroit had been far too optimistic, he concluded, in the annual rate of return she expected on the principal of her investment in the market. "What is a reasonable rate of return to expect on your investments? Anyone with an online investment account knows that past performance is it an

indicator of future results. Responsible families, businesses and government entities project conservative rates of return to avoid unexpected shortfalls in the stock market doesn't perform well" (Bomey 2017: 56). The irresponsible pension fund had projected a rate of return that aimed to capture an average over decades – “smoothing” expected returns between good and bad decades, a common but newly obsolete actuarial practice. The responsible behavior is to survive on a disciplined budget that assumes a conservative rate, covering your ass in the bad years while allowing you to enjoy the surplus in the good years as a reward. The kind of planning stability that retirees receiving pensions and municipal governments operating cities might value seeks a way out of the behavioral incentives to correctly leverage the market game.

But this is a market increasingly stratified between winners and losers, eliminating the expectancy of a mean between them. Derivatives trade on volatility; investors have to survive it, there is no option to sit back and ride it out. Rate of return is not pegged to the health of the market as a whole but the healthy performance of the competitor. “By simply maintaining an artificially high projected rate of return, [municipal governments] can lower their annual costs and spend money on other priorities" (Ibid:56). Smoothing is artificial – the real rate is calibrated not to the market but the investor’s relative and changing position in it. Says the Wall Street investment banker hired by the governor to consult on Detroit’s behalf, “They had grossly underestimated the liabilities and overestimated their assets. It's the way they ran these things. No one had bothered to tell them before. We told them the truth” (Bomey 2017: 56). Girl, you are grossly underestimating your liabilities and overestimating your assets. You're welcome.

At the scales of dollars and time at stake on a municipal balance-sheet, how exact are these expertly black-boxed calculi objectifying the City's risk-values to make her marketable? How accurate are they in actually calculating her risk of default to an investor – that is, the risk

they won't cash in on their expected return in full? The accuracy of these projections in actually predicting the future turns out to be beside the point. So long as the demand for such an assessment by dominant market players is in play, its objectivity is taken by initiates and true believers in the free market as natural laws governing its volatile movements. And yet, these market magicians and adherents deploy this objective information through competing strategies and actively make market conditions – a deeply interested form of social reproduction thick with ritual and zealotry that obscure and erase this fundamentally social character of derivative knowledge production (LiPuma 2017). The emergency manager repeated – and the press repeated, and repeated, and repeated – that without drastic action, Detroit would surely run out of money over the next decade, based on its financial position in 2013.

This inevitability will never be tested; drastic action has reset the game for the City. We do not have access to these expert formulas and projections; we have no way to test them. But the assumptions that produce the present value of unfunded liability and feed into those calculations delivering this terminal diagnosis make headlines and demonstrate by the force of panic they induce that drastic action is necessary – *the City of Detroit, \$18 billion in debt! Detroit's retirees, holding \$7 billion+ of debt over the City's head!* The shock value produces the market conditions in which the intervention becomes necessary. Whether the number is manufactured, cooked up, or manipulated, the loss of confidence in Detroit's finances and capacity for self-governance that the number produces are real enough.

The unfunded pension liabilities, fatty as they are, only weigh a couple billion on the balance-sheet. They get a lot of attention in the press because of their constitutional legal standing. But the true obesity on this budget, standing at 5+ billion, is the City's retiree health benefit program – the so-called "Other Post-Employment Benefits" (OPEB) debt. The

government accounting standards board (GASB) targeted these notorious public programs in 2004, requiring they restructure as actuarial funds and announce themselves on the balance-sheets; they had been previously funded on a “pay-as-you-go” basis, operating ad hoc without much transparency for potential investors to assess the risk of the program as a legacy commitment, potentially competing with the repayment of their own loans (Sgouros 2017). As an actuarial fund, the program is a clearly defined pot of money that can plan and account for the future it presumes. However, because the City had not been pre-funding this commitment, the switch in accounting rules generates an enormous unfunded liability overnight. Tom Sgouros calls this the “original sin” of unfunded liability that inaugurates these actuarial funds – pension systems and OPEB alike – as they transition onto the open market from pay-as-you-go schemes (2017), predicated on assumptions of steady tax revenue and civil service employment being made increasingly obsolete by financial markets.

With the present value of its unfunded liability exposed, OPEB becomes a scandal – how could retirees expect to maintain “Cadillac health insurance” as the City broke down? Like the pensions, this present value describes the worst-case-scenario risk-threshold that individualizes each claimant and imagines each claimant cashing in their full share of the promise tomorrow. But paradoxically, that full share accounts for the cost of healthcare inflation over the decades in which the pot will actually pay out. And in these calculations, the cost of healthcare inflation is presumed to continue at the current rate over the next 50 years. Says Sgouros: “50 years from now, if healthcare inflation is not lowered significantly, all 50 states will have been bankrupted by Medicaid costs. The federal government will only have avoided a similar fate by printing enough money to devastate the value of Treasury bonds, causing worldwide financial instability...The GASB rules and practice are akin to planning for an asteroid collision with

Earth by putting away enough money to pay the electric bill when it happens. The asteroid collision could happen, but the electric bill will hardly be anyone's first concern. The irony is amusing, but if saving for the electric bill actually interferes with taking protective action for the rest of society, it is actually destructive" (2017:20). Such an asteroid collision structures the calculation by which Detroit can be portrayed as spending four out of dollars in retiree benefits. But to consider the time-horizons and collectivities in play, it shifts the locus of responsibility, scandal, and excess to the healthcare industry (cf. Dumit 2012).

We can detect the religious fervor LiPuma identifies in the asocial sociality of the derivatives market in the rich imagery of sin and romantic conventions of redemption we find framing the technical work of accounting – traveling from the courtroom and legal records to interviews and mainstream media reporting. In attributing the divine logos of natural forces to the mathematical models of the market, generated from within their own position and force on it, these market believers slip readily into the sovereign conventions of emergency powers they have legislated for themselves, casting their cohort in the redeeming role of the Christ figure sent to save the City of Detroit from herself. I suggest it is in the deeply racialized and gendered assumptions cast upon the fallen body politic that we can discern the contours of our interventionists' self-making projects – it is upon her body that this sovereignty is constituted (Hartman 1997). The sacrifice of her excessive flesh and redemption of her fiscal integrity sutures together the gap LiPuma identifies between the ritualized mathematical abstraction of risk that assumes the market totality and the visceral competition, relative positioning, and zero-sum gambling by which traders make market conditions.

In other words, the selective embodiment of the racializing violence done by financial abstraction pushes LiPuma's analytical frame: his argument rests on a diagnosis of

misrecognition – the dominant epistemology of the market calls it natural; it is, in fact, social. But this diagnosis simply offers a complementary frame of over-determined action. Indeed, he notes that market participants often recognize the social qualities of market-making that they enact; but this recognition does not refigure the compulsive demands of the market totality. Calling it social allows for the sovereign power of state intervention to manage financial habitus by legislating modifications of behavior and thereby engineering limits to the totality. But the deterministic circuit between market participants and the market totality remains intact. Why not accept at face value the claims of these market faithful that “liquidity is a religion” (LiPuma 2017:195)? Why must this profession of faith be diagnosed as a misrecognition? Perhaps there is something reassuring about this diagnosis and the possibility of prescription it allows. Perhaps it is less terrifying than conceiving of cold calculation as not instrumentality but zealotry, of racialized sacrifice as not ideology but unthinking habitus (Asad 1997) – the worship demanded and price exacted by the gods of boom and bust. Perhaps it hits too close to the homes we make within the market totality. If the cockpit driving this totality is empty (Luyendijk 2015), how do we live our lives on board?

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I meet the official retiree representative at the Big Boy across from Belle Isle, which has since been sold and shut down, a nonprofit farmers market operating in its wake until the holding company decides on the developing plan. She is eager to tell her side of the story, as an appointed member of the creditor committee appointed by the Department of Justice to negotiate on the retiree's behalf. She says most people don't really know what to believe. Throughout our conversation, she slips into the defensive without prompting, although I know very well the detractors she is arguing with – the retiree activists who believe she sold them out

by agreeing to the terms of the Grand Bargain and relinquishing their right to challenge:

“You just don't know how many times I've been verbally attacked in meetings, only because I was trying to save them from not losing more than they lost. They tell me I threw them under the bus. My response to that is, yeah, so the tanks wouldn't roll over you. So that is what you want to believe, yes, because the tanks were coming there to smash you, to crush you.”

You can't eat principles – that was her position on the vote, boiled down to a slogan. She describes what happened as a foreign occupation, a description not inconsistent with the position of negotiating. She didn't think they deserved bankruptcy; she thought Detroit had earned a bailout for its role in American history. But she saw the emergency manager's Powerpoint auditing the City's financial position and forecasting its increasing precarity; the threat of a judicial cramdown haunted her:

"It wasn't worth taking a chance of losing 30 or 40% of your pensions, not knowing when or if you would win a lawsuit because by then probably half of the retirees would be dead anyway. It takes a lot. And we would have not lived a quality of life they [she summons her detractors] enjoy.”

She suspects it was her management experience in human relations that earned her her spot on the committee. She had experience negotiating healthcare contracts; after retirement, she went to the private sector where she learned to watch economic trends. She started to worry about the health of the payment pots.

“I was watching this [employment rates] go like this [she shoots her hand at a downward angle]; and then, the percentages of increases [in healthcare costs] going straight up. So it was a no-win situation, and you had to say, we've got to do something to control it. We've got to sit down, and the people are going to have to pay more into it, or we are going to have to put the programs together so that not everybody is getting the same type of [insurance]. But nobody had time. Nobody had time to do that. So what they wind up with is nothing. Because they don't have any more money.”

As president of the retiree organization, she had spent years going to city council, requesting appropriations for the pension system with no controversy.

“We probably should have been more watchful and more aware, in watching trends. But you know, when you're working, somebody else is doing it. It wasn't your job to watch. You think

you got administration, and they're watching; administration is not watching. Administration is too busy doing administration and didn't want to lose their jobs, lose their appointments or whatever, so they just let things slide, and that's what happened."

She describes her participation in the bankruptcy as a trial of endurance, regularly demanding her attention seven days a week over the course of over a year. Court hearings and negotiation sessions during business hours, and strategy sessions with her legal team to debrief and prepare in the rest of the time. It was her job to be trapped within the terms of the case; she was under a gag order to keep the contents of negotiations confidential, even from her creditor constituency.

"On December 10, the bankruptcy was over, and there was a nervousness about us. All of us. And we commented on it. And I'm saying: none of us drink alcohol; none of us smoke cigarettes; none of us are having drugs in us; and yet we had this unsettled feeling. And we must of been coming down off of some kind of emotional high. That is the only thing I can tell you. My doctor said that was definitely it, you are probably under stress you didn't even realize, as you are in my court every day, and if you aren't in court, you are in meetings, or you are at home doing whatever; and he said that takes its toll on you."

And the cuts hadn't even taken effect.

She reflects on the demise of labor, the rise of robots, and the elimination of face-to-face training and service:

"I don't know your age, but you're young. You don't know what it's like to really be free. There's somebody watching you all the time, whether you know it or not. Your telephone [she starts and stops] just figure, whatever, they're watching you all the time. They can find you. You have no privacy. You have no life that is not involved with these people. [They] can watch you anytime."

She reflects on how the world has changed since her youth, reminiscing on the lost safety of streets:

"It was a free world. Even though I was a minority, and we had restrictions on us we were still free we were still able to do the things we wanted to do, maybe restricted as to where you went and stuff like that, but we didn't have people watching over us...Nobody bothered us. But not now. Children don't have any freedom. Most of them are stuck in a room with a computer, or a game, that's what so sad. There's just no freedom, and you guys don't even realize it. You do not realize you are really not free."

Her claim makes me uncomfortable, immediately bringing to mind the privileges and resources at my disposal, the mobility I enjoy that constitutes my methodology. It is this privilege and mobility that makes me part of the class displacing the civil service in this restructuring – which makes her claim even more uncomfortable to consider. If the people with power not even realize they are not really free, what are they enacting through the fantasy that they are – a fantasy enabled by gaming and structured by surveillance?

She says her greatest contribution to the case was her faith:

“I pray all the time. I believe that God has directed me here. He is taking care of me. I knew, I was praying, that he was going to do something to help us because [she changes tense] most people don't even think about it: we don't control our lives. He does. That's what people have to realize.”

She prayed and prayed and prayed, and one morning, the negotiators who had threatened 50% cuts were offering 4.5%. Her claim makes me uncomfortable, immediately bringing to mind a diagnosis of misrecognition of the strategic maneuverings of state and capital. But perhaps state and capital don't control our lives as much as people think.

Episode 2) Derivative Dealings & the Vices of Speculative Risk

In this section, I explore the innovation of derivative contracts, a legal instrument that trades value that “only exists in contemplation of the law” (quoted in Ho 2011) – derived from the present value of other contracts, e.g., pension obligations. The promise of derivative instruments is to distribute risk and rationalize indebted futures by their sale on an open market; but these instruments have been critiqued as a form of gambling, increasing the global wealth gap in the high-stakes risk/reward sensation it games (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Entangled in the moral languages of obligation, the history of a disastrous derivative deal in Detroit demonstrates how the possibilities of regulation and criminal enforcement of this market hinges on white public sentiments, cultivated to associate criminality with black masculinity and submit to banking institutions to which collective futures are increasingly hitched – passing responsibility down from the makers of derivative markets to the fiscally desperate suckers who turn to them for relief.

I meet the communist attorney at his office on Jefferson, where you can feel how close you are to the river. We had never spoken personally, but he recognizes me from the protest circuit I haunt and he plays a critical role in planning and populating. He is friendly, frank, and has the distinctive swagger of the aging New Left. He describes coming to Detroit in 1970 along with a cohort of radical student activists who had splintered off of the weatherman who had splintered off of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society).

"Detroit was the greatest city to be in. It was the center of the black liberation movement, and all the groups were centered here...It was the one place where black struggle coalesced with the working class struggle because there were so many black autoworkers."

He worked in the factories for a decade until a workplace injury allowed him to transition to organizing full time.

He is systematic in narrating the history of struggle from then until now, from the first

attacks on Detroit in the late 1970s when the auto industry went through their first major rounds of restructuring, eliminating half their workforce in a "very conscious effort to defuse the power of black workers." In the 1980s, his group launched a "job is a right" campaign, asserting, "you work in a plant, that job is your property. You have a right to defend it, and to occupy the plant." The campaign was unsuccessful; the restructurings went on. In the 1990s, they were one of the first to campaign against privatization, of city jobs, running a petition campaign that succeeded in passing an anti-privatization ordinance: "it's still on the books actually, but it is not enforced anymore." After Mayor Young died, a new regime was ushered in, openly representative of and conciliatory to big business and the suburbs.

"A lot of those leaders [of the black liberation movement] were killed. The Black Panthers lost 28 in a year, murdered by the FBI. So it was kind of a generational gap from the revolutionary era. The new generation of black leaders were more yuppies, they didn't come out of the struggle..."

By the early 2000's, "you have a whole different leadership" – and the new front of struggle. He got his law degree in this period, to represent the stream of homeowners threatened with foreclosure by banks that had entrapped them in predatory loans. By the time the bubble burst and the occupy Wall Street movement emerged, protesting the political dominance of the "1%," he had spent years fighting foreclosure battles in court and watching Detroit's neighborhoods – which had been stable despite population loss – be absolutely devastated by mass dispossession of working-class homeowners and subsequent neglect of the properties the banks vacated. When the emergency manager struggle emerged, his group saw it as an extension of this struggle with the banks – while it was an assault on voting rights, the ends were more telling than the means, in mandating these appointed emergency managers to service loans over all other budget priorities.

It was with this history and experience that he found himself exercising his legal

prohess in bankruptcy. The communist lawyer earned his spot in the bankruptcy history, representing a revolutionary comrade who was also a retiree, and therefore a creditor to the case, in court, challenging the settlement of an enormous debt incurred by the City through a derivative instrument that had gone bad – an instrument the City had wagered would turn a profit by leveraging the pension pot. Spoiler alert: the City loses big when the subprime bubble burst, and the market collapses in 2008. I have heard the terms of the wager explained before, but I only just keep up as he explains again.

“It's not as complicated as it sounds. They were making big money. Essentially, they benefited from their own fraud. They created the conditions for the government to bail them out and to cause the interest rates go down to nothing.”

The banks' own fraud in the mortgage markets produced the conditions by which the same banks won the wager they had made with the City: the wager had been pegged to interest rates they caused to crash. I get his explanation, until I try to peg “interest rates” as the subject of a sentence, then I am lost again. Which is too bad, because this is precisely his point – interest rates don't go down; people make interest rates go down.

If Detroit is to blame for making the bet, the City would not be the only one:

“It's everywhere. They did every city. Every city got locked in [to such derivative instruments tying the value of their debt to interest rates made volatile by widespread fraud]. Baltimore. Philadelphia. Harvard University. These were everywhere. It was a clever manipulation. The cities are particularly vulnerable because cities are not corporations. They don't deal with these complex financial instruments.”

Detroit's pension systems were actually doing well compared to the national cohort. “The pensions had a one year shortfall. They [the banks] could have given [the City] a one year loan. But it was a way for them to get control of the financing of the city.” They made money on the fees, putting together the instrument; they made money on the interest, when the instrument went bad; they got leverage over city governance when the instrument was terminated – a

termination built into the instruments that cost the City hundreds of millions in penalty fees. I must have a blank look on my face when he explains the new debt incurred simply by these penalty fees because he slows down and explains again, and then one more time until he coaxes an incredulous, "what?? whoa," out of me.

It is this case that is being made by the "Make the banks pay!" demand.

"It's hard to prove they knew there was going to be a collapse two years later [after the deal with Detroit]. But there's a lot of evidence [that] they knew what they were doing. They knew what their policies were. Any rational person was predicting a collapse. The real crime was the rating agencies are supposed to regulate the stuff. They encouraged it because they make money off of it."

But the City's political leadership wouldn't touch a case building against the banks.

"The attitude was if we take on the banks, we are not going to get any loans. But you are already not getting any loans! It's destroying the city! [He goes back to voicing the politicians:] We can't do anything because we are so hard-hit, we'll be completely bankrupt if we do that."

Bankrupt if you do; bankrupt if you don't.

He reflects on his impact on the bankruptcy process, raising the banks' culpability in court, challenging a settled payout for the fraudulent deal and demanding reparations from the banks for not only interest paid out but also properties and tax revenues devastated by subprime mortgage lending.

"I don't know anything about bankruptcy. I did it for nothing. I don't have any resources. We were the only ones that went in fighting. We fought inside, and we fought picketing because it was the same thing. Where does the money come from? You have to counter the narrative the city is broke. Our narrative was, the city ain't broke. The city was robbed. Let's go after the robbers. [The presiding judge] was nervous. He actually overturned two swap [derivative settlement] deals. He didn't do it out of the goodness [of his heart]. He was nervous at the resistance to it because we were picketing all the time. The *New York Times* would have our signs, cancel the debt! Make the banks pay! They were covering that. The *New York Times* were putting up our pictures. They were putting the message out. You better be careful, if you're too open about what you're doing, people are going to be hip to it and will start fighting. Class struggle."

I posit that perhaps the arcane nature of bankruptcy and the complexity of the deal contributed

to the struggle blowing over. He shrugs,

“It's not that complicated. Everyone understands the banks. Everyone in Detroit knows what the banks did to their neighborhoods. It's personal. So it wasn't like, it's hard. It's the opposite. It wasn't hard for the masses to understand. It was hard for the so-called leaders to have the courage to take on the fight.”

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“ZOOMED IN”

Consider “the social” of the natural, “asocial” market forces the economists claim to divine through the objective mathematical calculations they employ, in this reflection of a former Goldman Sachs “quant” – a mathematics PhD employed to preside over the numbers – as he recalls his role in the trading of complex instruments:

“Peering into these deals was like looking into the zoomed-in penetration shot in a cheesy porn video. You could barely tell which end was up, which part was which, or more important, who exactly was screwing whom. The quant aspect involving detailed matters of future risk and optionality almost didn't matter in the end. One lacrosse-playing Penn graduate would agree on a price via phone with another lacrosse-playing Cornell grad, and life would resume its speedy course to another deal. Quants were the eunuchs at the orgy, the fluffers on the porn set of high finance. We were the ever-present British guy on every Hollywood World War II film: there to add a touch of class and exotic sophistication but not really consequential to the plot except for perhaps conveniently to take some bad guy's bullet” (Garcia Martinez 2016).

Zoomed in, you can barely tell who exactly is screwing whom. But in this zero-sum game, somebody is getting screwed. In this section, we turn to the scandal in which the ever-present derivatives market makes its spectacular entrance in Detroit's pension story. Zoomed out with the hindsight afforded by bankruptcy, it is clear – the City got screwed. In the narrative framing of the so-called “cops and swaps” deal in the record, we find the court at work locating moral responsibility for an ignominious liaison, as part and parcel of the work of negotiating and adjudicating settlements. This work will entail hearing political demands for an alternative adjudication of responsibility, a demand for reparations paid as justice by the banks for screwing the City so profoundly. Indeed, such demands become posed as political risk that

factors into the calculations determining settlement, subsumed into the price of resolution at an unverifiable proportion.

I suggest debtor morality subsumes reparation politics by playing on two imaginaries that naturalize and privilege its calculations: first, the body politic as the responsible agent framed by the scene of the deal stripped of the banks' agency in setting of scene; second, antiblack patriarchal assumptions about the character who gets screwed, and the affective stakes of identifying with the screwer. The authority of these familiar imaginaries domesticates the raw power of the banks to dominate the legal process from crafting the contract to adjudicating its impairment. I seek to unsettle these narratives by zooming in, working through the logic and calculations of dealmaking from the vantage point at which you can barely tell which end is up, in which you might just believe the romance that nobody is getting screwed – that it is lovemaking.

The year is 2005 – the pensions are not in good shape and not because of the size of their total obligations. In fact, they had enjoyed a surplus as late as 2002, riding the boom of the Clinton years, outgrowth of financial trading, and the dot-com bubble. The shortfall that follows is attributed to “poor investments and mismanagement” of the funds by local leadership, a local event only incidentally compounded by structural declines in tax revenues (Bomey 2017: 22). Take these problems together, and the City does not have the cash to make her actuarially required contribution for the year, as mandated by the same constitutional provision that protects Michigan's public pensions from diminishment or impairment. What are the options? The City has to pay it to avoid a legal fight with the unions, who are not lining up to volunteer their workers' vested compensation and compromise their long-term claims to get the City out of this immediate crunch. The City could scrounge together those funds by cutting expenses in

the form of layoffs of active employees. The mayor did propose this, to the dismay of city council representatives. In a moral failure this saga characterizes as typical of local democracy, these elected representatives fear job cuts will make them unpopular and cost them in election season – says the City's auditor general of that time in hindsight, "I remember council-members saying, 'these people need jobs'... The fact that the city had deficits was not even a part of the conversation" (Bomey 2017: 22).

Aside from the political logic of representing the interests of the constituencies that puts you into office (whether you evaluate such an action as shrewd and self-serving or fulfilling duties of electoral democracy), we might reason through an economic logic for hesitating to cut jobs by no means extrinsic to the story: if the City's budget was showing symptoms of a "death spiral" (explored in previous chapters), as taxpayers move out in a rational response to the deterioration of public services for which their tax dollars are supposed to pay and take with them revenues available to fund those services (further precipitating deterioration), then cutting public sector jobs might deal with your immediate deficit problems but risks further undermining your tax base in the long term. Consider, many of these civil servants are taxpayers in the City of Detroit, and civil service jobs are among the few good jobs still available in the city. But layoffs are never counted as an example of "kicking the can down the road," which is not a logical contradiction only if we accept the moral and technical evaluation of Detroit's civil service as corrupt and incompetent that is taken as common-sense in this history. It is indexed by the auditor's emphasis that the argument against layoffs was that these people need jobs – not that they deserve them, not like they could find another job. They are not competitive in the labor pool; as if their compensation for labor was a kind of handout.

If Detroit is going to kick this can down the road, she could simply borrow the shortfall,

meeting her obligation and adding the debt to her tab. Her tab, of course, is growing at the costly interest rates of such short-term loans. There are no good options, yet the City must act. Whether she cuts spending, sacrificing the quality of her covenant with taxpayers, or takes out another short-term loan, compounding the interest payments she is paying out, it will cost her more than the calculated required contribution to contribute this requirement. It will be another setback amidst many, and right at a moment when it seems possible the city might move ahead. In 2005, new investment energies are beginning to circle Detroit's downtown; the promise of a comeback is in the air; the city's redemption in the hands of her own electoral democracy. If the City could just leverage these investments, build on this optimism, she might just get back on her feet. With such promise in the air, must the City continue floundering under the growing deadweight of her enormous pension liability? Might there be a way to leverage this liability to her advantage, through the promise of a comeback? Indeed, in 2005 another speculative bubble was in the making, promising a boom to market players – the only way out of these limited options on a limited budget is to get off the sidelines and into the game.

On the record, the history of the cops and swaps begins with the distinctive persona of the mayor elected to represent the body politic, authorized to consent on her behalf to this contractual liaison and credited with "engineering" this incredibly complex deal. The judge presiding over the City's case would call the deal, "nothing more than a common bet... [The city] lost catastrophically" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 91). The global powerhouse banks with which he partners, UBS and Merrill Lynch, are cast simply as "the bookies that couldn't be ignored" (Bomey 2017: 92). The moral content of this mayor's character is the focal point in the scene of his gamble; it is his actions that make this history, that realize the possibility of this deal – and therefore court its consequences. The agency of the bookies in crafting such a field of

possibilities is not put to question, the agency of market-making functionally elided by taking the market as a natural backdrop. Whatever technical, mathematical, and legal labor required to craft these derivative instruments, "the bookies" simply take bets, as passive channels of market activity (LiPuma 2017). The bookies don't have faces, they don't have names; they simply carry out a taken for granted institutional function. Nonetheless, we might pause, and ask: do we imagine the City of Detroit saw bookies, sitting across the table from these powerful market-makers and their teams of experts? The experts' models may not account for the agency of market makers, but certainly, the players do in practice (LiPuma 2017). I am working in reverse, starting from the constrained structural position of the municipality at the juncture in which the cops and swaps were made possible by the banks. Only after examining the collapse of the market as the condition of the collapse of the deal will we return to the problematic character of the mayor who performed the critical act of consent.

The cops and swaps represent a classic "deal with the devil" (only who plays the devil is disputed) – the deal offers hope of a true happy ending, offered to a desperate city otherwise out of options. Rather than risking her credit on a fight with her unions, the deal rallies bipartisan faith of investors and unions alike in the City's future. Rather than cutting jobs, it promises to stimulate her economy. Rather than another small, expensive, compounding loan, it offers a long-term opportunity to refinance at a better rate that is promised not to grow. Here is how it works: Instead of simply borrowing for the one-year shortfall, the City borrows enough to cover the entire unfunded pension liability at its present value, selling "cops," or "certificates of participation" (to the banks to sell to investors) for \$1.44 billion in cash. Such a cash infusion serves to shore up the City's perpetual deficit as the market revitalizes, giving her time to cash in on the speculative promise of an investment boom. The "swaps" are a wager welded to the

cops to allow the City to truly cash in on this big play. The City sells the bulk of the cops at a variable rate, getting a better value for the increased risk. The banks then swap this variable rate for a fixed one, allowing the City to pocket the higher value of the variable rate while repaying the debt at a fixed rate. Of course, if the variable-rate sinks beneath the fixed rate, the City will be paying the difference – that’s the wager, “the common bet” to which the judge refers.

Zoomed in, the zero-sum wager seems win-win. In the first place, the banks get paid in the millions for administering the instruments. And by design, the swaps promise to fulfill the dream of derivative instruments in democratizing speculative capital by rationalizing the distribution of risk: the banks are institutionally oriented to deal on variable rates, circulating along with fluctuations, unlike a municipality that is institutionally oriented around fixed costs and long-term planning, with no capacity to maneuver quickly to hedge investments around volatility. The derivative promise is to serve the value around risk appetite; and as long as the market appeared hungry, there would be plenty to go around. In hindsight, the complexity of the cops and swaps appear to disguise fiscal weakness; zoomed in, this same complexity offers a mathematically-verified, expert-sanctioned, innovative instrument for leveraging beleaguered assets toward the ends of building them.

Zoomed in, everybody was in on the game. Indeed, while the wager rests technically on the fluctuation of interest rates, the tremendous performance of confidence in the deal itself proved critical to its value – the cops would have to be sold on the market, after all. The City boosted their value to investors by insuring them, recruiting yet another creditor to later hound her in bankruptcy negotiations. Thanks to the insurance and the intricate legal architecture that allowed the City to extend past her own legislated debt ceiling to borrow the enormous sum, the deal occasioned a parade of support and accolades: glowing letters from legal consultants, a

AAA rating from the Wall Street ratings agencies, “Midwestern Deal of the Year Award” from *Bond Buyer’s Magazine* for the mayor who signed the City onto it (Kurashige 2017). When some on city council hesitated to approve it, pointing to the size of the risk, they were called by a colleague as,

"obstructionists [who] have decided to gamble the city's future, its reputation, its ability to deliver services, and lastly its credibility by opposing this measure for the sake of political gain, rather than making a decision based on good public policy or in the interests of the city's residents" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 25).

Once the public sector unions put their political weight behind the deal, this remaining opposition caved in. The City’s political process was not external to the value of the deal, as the transparency of democracy affects her reputation. If the deal was just a common bet, it was critical that nobody jinx it, spooking investors with mention of risk.

At this point, the City should have declared bankruptcy, according to the judge who would rule the City eligible for Chapter 9 almost a decade later. The City could have gotten out from under the weight of pension liabilities by liquidating them, with a few less very powerful creditors to settle with in the process. The City could have readied herself for revitalization by cleaning up her credit through the disciplinary process of bankruptcy. Undoubtedly, her retired workers would have put up a fight for their constitutional rights, drawing out the process; she would be unable to borrow through the uncertain tenure of the case; she would be putting her fate in the hands of a federal court run by regional judges not historically friendly to the City (See Chapter 2). But the deal with the devil was too tempting of an alternative. If the City’s hand could just stay hot, she could make fiscal muscle out of the deadweight of her pension pot.

Zoomed in, you can’t see subprime mortgage foreclosures beginning to pick off Detroit homeowners offstage. You can't see the coming avalanche of such foreclosures brought about by the incentives offered down the lending chain to push such loans onto borrowers who were in

no fiscal position to afford them. You can't see the racist distribution of this predation, bound to hit majority-black cities like Detroit the hardest. The ballooning of the subprime mortgage market was not driven by the demand of these homeowners to refinance but by the demand in the derivatives market for derivative instruments that bundled and sold such risky loans with AAA ratings, backed by obscure mathematics and the promise of distributed risk. As this market in "collateralized mortgage obligations" ballooned, another emerged in its shadows – the "credit default swap" market, in which savvy investors took a wager against subprime mortgage futures. As the favorable terms that lured vulnerable homeowners into subprime mortgages expired and these mortgages went bad *en masse*, so too did the value of those collateralized mortgage obligations that had promised to hedge such a risk. It turns out, you can't distribute risk by aggregation when the aggregate itself collapses. As those derivatives tank, those who had wagered against them now had cause to collect – but where was the liquidity to collect? The banks had bet more than they had to pay; the insurance agencies had insured more than they had to back.

These twin derivative instruments – collateralized mortgage obligations and credit default swaps, respectively inflating the bubble and sucking it dry when it popped – were very different instruments than the cops and swaps. They worked to leverage a different kind of asset than a pension obligation; they wagered on a more volatile future. But together, they accelerated a crisis of liquidity that sparked a crisis in confidence that would bring global money markets to a standstill, and life as we know it to the brink of collapse. Sovereign governments like the United States and its European allies now had a wager to make – they could let the free market play out and let the big banks collapse. They could bet against the global financial systems underwriting their infrastructures and stability and see what happens.

Or, their regulatory bodies could intervene, as they did. As a result, interest rates don't simply fluctuate; they drop to nearly nothing – nobody is making much return off of credit made available by a bailout.

The bubble the City had to bet on had popped. Detroit had, of course, not outsmarted the system but had been proved to be just another sucker. The City is left holding the buck on her wager, locked in to paying a fixed interest rate that was set in inflated market while the banks pocket it all as the variable-rate has bottomed. She is now on the hook for that enormous debt, at an interest rate that is now proportionally high as the credit market freezes, revenues fall, and her expenses shoot up – indeed, the subprime mortgage crisis devastates Detroit's neighborhoods, taking its toll on her remaining tax base while increasing the costs of policing, maintenance, and blight removal, as homes once occupied and maintained by taxpayers and first generation homeowners are laid waste by the absentee landlords of big banks.

The City's pension systems are taking in no returns, raising the City's required contribution, while paying excessive interest on the swaps, out of a shrinking budget in a market everybody expects to continue shrinking, and no new creditors are forthcoming to refinance. The credit agencies take note and lower her bond rating – and if the crash wasn't enough, the downgrading triggers a real worst-case scenario – not a hypothetical one that had been included in her balance sheet, but one that had been tucked away in the contracts binding her to the cops and swaps. The downgrading of her credit constitutes a "termination event" according to the swaps contract, giving the banks a way out of a liaison with a losing partner. The seemingly favorable terms of the swaps had depended on Detroit's good credit – it had depended on the value of the City's bonds remaining lucrative for the banks, no matter which side of the swap they were operating on. In other words, the banks had only ever agreed to pay

the difference of the variable-rate on the cops so long as they were a good sell; if the City's finances appeared weak enough to devalue those bonds, the banks had given themselves a lucrative exit strategy. Considering how much the fixed rate was costing the City, you would think it would be a blessing to terminate contract. However, the termination event was written by the banks to protect their interests. The termination event entailed penalty fees amounting to \$400 million. Due, all at once, today. The City loses the swaps wager when the rate goes down instead of up; but she loses catastrophically when her credit is downgraded. It turns out the true stakes of the bet were on her reputation.

Now the City is really in trouble, as the Wall Street loan sharks are pounding at her door demanding payment of roughly half the size of her entire budget. The City pleads mercy – if the banks exercised their rights to take Detroit to court and make her pay up immediately on the \$400 million termination fee, the City would have no alternative but to declare bankruptcy. Unwilling to give herself up to the disciplinary process of the federal court and the sacrifices it would require in liquidating assets heavily depreciated by the market slump, Detroit offered the banks the only thing she had left as collateral on the deal. If the swaps had been taken to bankruptcy, they would have likely been vaporized; but with this collateral, the banks would have leverage on their claim. Detroit was in effect promising to pay her debts in the full but buying herself more time to do so. She pledged her most vital revenue stream in the wake of dwindling property tax dollars – the taxes she collected from her casino economy, which had become central to funding her most basic services. Gambling, it turned out, would be Detroit's last resort to fend off the costs of her gambling.

Detroit was now paying about \$50 million a year on the cops and swaps with a gun to her head, as the presiding judge will later put it – the casino cash was collected monthly in a

lockbox before it was released to the City, allowing the banks the option of trapping the cash if the City defaulted. Says the governor's Wall Street consultant on the collateral: "This is what really got the city in trouble. Banks always behave the same way. They ask for the sun, moon, and stars, hoping to get, like, a little bit of earth. In this case, they got the sun, moon, and stars. They didn't in their wildest dreams expect to get everything they asked for" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 29). Indeed, the only leverage the City had was the threat to declare bankruptcy; pushed to the edge, her only other option was to jump, fall into the fire, without knowing if or how or in what form she would emerge. But the City was not ready to turn her assets and obligations over to the federal court; she negotiated on the bank's terms, and now her bookies had her life in their hands.

Enter the hero of this saga: "For more than half a decade Detroit had been a dream maker for financial creditors. Until Governor Snyder decided Wall Street had profited enough" (Ibid:29). The decision to enter bankruptcy was no longer in the city's hands. Detroit's incapacity to say no and protect her assets had made her a fantasy for predators seeking easy prey. They fed off of her most vital resources at her most vulnerable, feasting off of public dollars amidst a recession in which the banks were only standing because of public intervention. Banks will be banks; but they had had their fun. The state patriarch was ready to intervene. Who would the legal process hold responsible for this scandalous liaison?

Let us think with the emergency manager at this point at the outset of his tenure and leading into municipal bankruptcy. His mandate is to restore the City's capacity to make regular payments on her debts – not to clean her out for good. His work is to clear the way for new investment in a manner that invites new investment. The swaps are hogging a huge amount of revenue while adding no value to the city's revitalization – and they are holding the City's basic

services hostage. The situation is not exactly inviting new creditors to get involved. But the emergency manager has leverage of his own, in the legal potential of claims being made by the activists on the street who oppose them. First and foremost, there is the questionable legal status of the cops that first floated that pension debt – the \$1.4 billion had broken laws limiting how much the City could borrow through a shady workaround involving a pass-through through a shell corporation that was begging to be challenged in court (Kurashige 2017). Second, there were the potential fraud claims to be made against the banks for their involvement in the crash that caused the City to lose the bet. There were, of course, Department of Justice investigations and prosecutions underway at the level of homeownership, identifying racially discriminatory and predatory practices in the subprime mortgage market in which the banks capitalized deliberately on hidden risks and insider knowledge of the market. The emergency manager could go after the banks for "leveraging "superior information" about future interest rates" (Ibid: 106) – basing their own position on insider knowledge about the stability of interest rates, while letting the City believe it was a sure bet.

And of course, there was the fact that the swaps wager on interest rates had been pegged to the LIBOR index – the preferred rate of these blue-chip financial institutions because they controlled it. The bookie UBS was one of the institutions fingered in the scandalous and illegal manipulation of these rates throughout the period of the subprime mortgage bubble and over the duration of Detroit's swaps contract. That is, UBS bet the City that the rates go down, and UBS was a party to manipulating rates downward. The City of Baltimore, at the time the Michigan governor was passing the Emergency Manager Act, was throwing its weight behind a lawsuit, suing its swaps bookie for its role in manipulating rates. Municipalities and nonprofits that had bought into swaps contracts – in aggregate, \$300 billion – were floating bonds pegged

to a municipal bond index, specific to this market. But the swaps that claimed to insure these bonds were pegged to the LIBOR, which looked fine on the surface because these indexes historically move together. But during the crash and the period of rate manipulation, LIBOR rates fell much faster and at times dropped even as the municipal bond rates spiked. In other words, cities like Baltimore and Detroit were facing increased cost on their swaps contract at the same time that the costs of the bonds went up – "exactly the opposite of how the swaps were supposed to work" (Gandel 2012). Experts working on Baltimore's case claim the LIBOR manipulation "caused municipalities to pay .2% more than they should have. With \$300 billion in swaps outstanding, the manipulation could have cost municipalities as much as \$600 million a year" (Ibid).

It was certainly enough to bring the banks to the table to negotiate a settlement through the bankruptcy process, despite the collateral they held that would otherwise secure them from liquidation. Would it be enough to put up a fight? The emergency manager testified, "There were strong legal arguments" to sue the banks instead of settling; but weighing the "countervailing factual arguments," he concluded the City's chances of prevailing in a suit were "50-50" – "a tossup," as one of his cross examiners put it (quoted in Bomey 2017: 106). So what were the "countervailing factual arguments" the emergency manager was weighing? He testified to the legal leverage the banks held in "safe harbor laws" legislated by Congress in 2006 to protect derivative swaps from liquidation in bankruptcy (Ibid:100) – legislation justified by the risk of systemic destabilization such liquidation could entail, in the possibility of a chain reaction of the liquidation of these complex and interlinked bets affecting one another (cf. Schwarcz 2013).

Suing the banks would of course involve a very expensive and a very lengthy trial, and

the clock on the emergency manager's 18-month tenure was ticking. Was the City really going to take on the big banks in court? Wall Street banks with bottomless legal resources and much more at stake than Detroit's little money – such a case could set a precedent that would threaten their entire portfolios, changing the calculation on the litigation risk for the entire market. Even given the evidence, it would be a legal uphill battle. With all the scandal and fallout of the LIBOR manipulation, the banks were settling and paying fines; prosecutions were limited – the banks are structured through revolving and insulated complex structures that limit liability and responsibility for such actions that protect the financial institution as a whole from the liability risks taken on by specific desks and traders (Luyendijk 2015). Baltimore would have to prove "loss causation" in their case – "that bankers allegedly fixing rates in London directly hit Baltimore's bank balance" (Rushe 2012). Their city solicitor was confident in their case, and yet stated "his one fear was that just as some banks were too big to fail, this could be a case that was "too big to try"" (Rushe 2012). Was bankrupt Detroit really in the position to take such a stand? The emergency manager's mandate, remember, is to restore regular debt repayment – how long would the City have to wait for new investment, as potential creditors watched her suit drag out and drain her budget? And if the City took such an aggressive stance, the banks could move on their hostage and trap the casino money for whatever duration it took for the City to win a court order to release it.

The questionable legality of the deal was enough to drag the banks to the negotiating table without threatening their hostage. It was enough to influence the calculations shaping closed-door mediations, and in some indeterminate manner, the payout agreed to in negotiated settlement. Bankruptcy could promise certainty and solvency, by settling the dispute, arriving at a number that would close the book on the deal; a legal battle with the predators who made it

would have complex and contested implications that would destabilize her immediate financial outlook in the process. If the cops were ruled illegal, would the pension systems be ordered to return the \$1.44 billion they borrowed, as the institutions who had insured the deal demanded (Bomey 2017)? The banks' position, according to the emergency manager, was simple: "You took my money. You are not gonna pay me. I want your firstborn and salt of the earth" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 167). Whether or not there was a devil in the details of the deal, the City took and most surely spent the money; she was asking for it. If Detroit wanted to test her odds on the market, who was the bank to refuse her?

The derivative game hinges on differences in information; it motivates a wager, the spread between a consensus on present risk and different assessments of that risk going forward – assessments based on information and therefore different positions (LiPuma 2017). There would not be the occasion for a wager if there were not different assessments of future risk, founded on different assemblages of information about the market – "the game within the game turns on the production of knowledge itself" (Ibid:83). The City's confidence in the banks acknowledges their superior information about the market, which makes it the right institution to manage risk through derivative instruments; now, who is mad that the bank used the superior information as an interested party to capitalize off of the City's vulnerability and optimism?

Whatever the banks might have said to the City in pitching the deal, what remains is the cold, hard legal language of the contract that resulted. It is the City's fiduciary responsibility to know what is in that contract. "In the financial world, *caveat emptor* – or *buyer's beware* – is a perfectly normal and widely accepted legal principle for professional players..."; the culture, the *habitus*, of these bankers is not to ask whether a proposal is good or evil, right or wrong, but

to "look at the degree of reputation risk" in making the deal, calculating the optimal proportion of your take to the power and bad blood of the loser (Luyendijk 2015). The banks win not only because they have superior information on the market; they also have superior legal expertise in crafting contractual terms – and of course, they institutionalize practices and competitively drive markets, setting the very market conditions they are betting on (LiPuma 2017).

We can see how the banks profit off of the collapses they produce structurally and through the habitus of countless actors in the countless deals and countless portfolios; but the economic models on which the court has faith have no epistemic tools to identify the banks' responsibility. How would you even begin to conceive "loss causation" in individual deals, so carefully crafted to minimize reputation and litigation risks? How would you begin to address the aggregate responsibility of these institutions in the collapse that torpedoed the cops and swaps for the City of Detroit? The house always wins. Everybody knows that, according to the hindsight of fiscal common-sense. This common-sense blames the victim: like the dispossessed homeowners who refinanced mortgages they could afford with mortgages they couldn't afford, Detroit had a choice to enter the game; like the dispossessed homeowners who bought subprime mortgages not even because they had subprime credit but simply because it was the product the lender was incentivized to push, Detroit could have done her homework.

Of course, the archive does not record the emergency manager's calculations by which he decided to settle. His legal team claimed attorney-client privilege on the legal memos in which they evaluated the swaps before the trial, further black-boxing an already complex calculation (Bomey 2017 2017:100). In turn, when the emergency manager presented a payout figure for the court's approval at \$270 million, the judge presiding over these immanently public hearings had some of his own calculations to make. This judge's objective is to accelerate the

case by achieving consensual settlements and eliminating objections, to confirm a plan of debt adjustment and release the City anew on the credit market, eliminating risks of legal appeal and political resistance that would cast doubt on the City's borrowing future and the feasibility of its plan for fiscal rebirth. The settlement was facing resistance in court from other creditors, who were competing in this zero-sum game for their own payouts, which would come out of what was left after this settlement. There were also the protesters making headlines outside the courts; they are not acknowledged on the record, but only when the judge lets them in to the court process.

Our communist attorney goes after the emergency manager on the stand, calling out the banks for their role in the foreclosure crisis and LIBOR scandal, implicating the banks' culpability not only in the swap settlement but the structural conditions of the City's downfall – "however tenuous the connections may have seemed from a legal perspective" (Bomey 2017: 109). But how tenuous did the connections seem from the perspective of city residents and dispossessed homeowners? Our communist attorney is characterized in the official narrative by a "feverish populism," which quite literally pathologizes his political approach and conjures the threat he posed to the orderly court process as well as the possibility of containment (Ibid:108). Comments counsel for one of the bond insurers backing the swap deals, also fighting the swap settlement to protect their own payout: "He didn't ask questions like, what color is Mars? He was a lawyer...I think in some respects he came to embody the people of the city. I think that actually played a role" (Ibid:109). Indeed, he was cross-examining an emergency manager who was supposed to be embodying the people of the City. That was his legal status and capacity in the courtroom; but the legal perspective that dominates the court's procedure and the public record is not entirely determinate in bankruptcy. At stake in this court is market confidence in

the debtor; therefore, everybody's got a finger to the political wind, factoring such potential risk into speculative calculations.

The judge stunned when he turned down the first settlement proposed by the emergency manager, stating in court, "Every transaction, including this one, that the city has entered into in connection with these swaps and cops has been with a gun to its head. That has to stop" (Ibid:101). The emergency manager comes back with another deal at \$165 million. The judge stuns them again, stating,

"The court stated earlier and states again that it will not participate in or permit the city to perpetuate the very kinds of hasty and imprudent financial decision-making that led to the disastrous swaps and cops transactions. Those practices have already caused great harm to the city's creditors and to its citizens. In the court's view, one goal of this Chapter 9 case is to end these practices so that the city can truly recover from its past mistakes and move forward, and the court intends to conduct itself accordingly... [If the city won't stop making bad deals,] the court must be the one to stop it" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 110).

It is not the apparent fraud of the banks the judge cites as a factor in throwing out these deals. Rather, it is a simple question of enacting the kind of fiscal discipline the city needs going forward. Detroit could simply not afford such a generous payout for such an ill-advised transaction, with so many more settlements to go. The payout would be proportional to the fiscal discipline in question. At the same time, the judge reasserts the strictly formal, legal perspective that identifies the emergency manager as embodying the City – a bad deal made by an elected mayor sits grammatically in the same drawer as a bad deal made by an unelected emergency manager, as far as the behavior of the one debtor, the City of Detroit, goes.

However conscious the judge had shown himself as to the pedagogical nature of the court's process to the public and the importance of the tone of the publicity surrounding the case, he had apparently not taken notice of the protesters lambasting the banks outside and the tenuous legal connections made by the communist attorney. "It turned out incidentally – I didn't

foresee this – that that decision probably did more to enhance my legitimacy as a fair and neutral judge in the case than anything else I did...Like I say, I was not expecting that or thinking about it at the time. But it did happen" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 112). Offstage, the judge had converted to the faith in settlement being cultivated by his appointed judicial mediators – if he was too strict in turning down settlements, he would undermine their authority at the negotiating table to achieve such settlements. He finally approved the third payout proposed, at a mere eight-figure \$85 million. The case for fraud was off the table. Good luck with your appeal, Baltimore.

While some readers may be suspicious of the judge's true intent in turning back the settlement, I suggest another point emerges if we take his actions and retrospective narrative at face value, casting light on the many calculations in play. His legitimacy as a fair and neutral judge was enhanced when he did not show favor to powerful banks and did not rubberstamp whatever the state's unelected representative proposed – demonstrating a distance from actors in the case whose legitimacy was under scrutiny outside the courtroom. Inside the courtroom, these same actors' legitimacy was not in question, and his acts of judgment articulated an entirely different register of justice – that of fiscal discipline. The apparent coincidence demonstrates how a political question about legitimacy can absorb and accommodate a legal rubric of fiscal discipline through the concepts of fairness and neutrality. It can therefore appear to answer for the justice of the case as fair to vulnerable creditors and neutral to racial difference – answering the terms of its critics, while leaving the logic of "the deal" intact – between two consenting parties, both responsible in their own fashion. With the case for fraud legally off the table, it is settled, and the evidence is never heard, forensically examined on the record; the case goes on, leaving that potentiality in the dustbin of history. The claim for reparations – the

alternative solution to the City's financial crisis, legally tenuous but politically potential – does not show up in the official history. The City was out another \$85 million after already paying out hundreds of millions on the deal over the years with a gun to her head. She wouldn't be getting any of it back; the best for which she could hope was an opportunity to move forward.

If there was any excess anger and hurt at the ongoing violation and injury of the cops and swaps, the City and its publics would be delivered a culprit to embody the aura of criminality seething from the deal. The mayor who signed Detroit's name onto the disastrous deal is the only party with a public face. He is far from a picture of innocence and integrity and is revealed as the true fraud in this drama. Elected at the tender age of 31, he was dubbed "the hip-hop mayor" in the press, which loved to dwell on the aesthetic details of his black masculinity, from his Kangol hats and diamond-studded earrings to his flashy and expensive suits and cars.¹

"He oozed charisma – and the persuasive force of his personality captivated voters. With the physique of an offensive lineman and an electrifying rhetorical touch, the charismatic [mayor] inspired Detroit for a time. But lurking underneath the shimmering surface was a stew of incompetence and corruption" (Bomey 2017: 20).

Indeed, this portrait of excess and seduction, limned by muscular intimidation, offers a legally responsible party for the "sharply negative turn" the City's finances took in the decade of the subprime mortgage crash (Ibid:20). He is credited with engineering the deal, an extraordinary agency endowed on a man whose previous experience before taking office had been teaching in Detroit Public Schools and serving in the Michigan Legislature. As mayor, he stands in metonymically for his "team," administration, and authority to sign and finalize contracts. Never mind his chief financial officer, instrumental to the cops and swaps, who would

¹ See Gillespie (2010) for a history of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's dramatic rise and fall.

transition from this public service to higher ground with a lucrative position with a bookie investment bank, party to the deal (Kurashige 2017:58).

Of course, the hip-hop mayor's administration would not be criminally investigated for engineering the deal. That happened in the clear light of day, winning him political clout and accolades. But the hip-hop mayor was going down. He resigned amidst the scandal after getting caught lying under oath about an affair and a "sexting" scandal that dominated headlines as the evidence was uncovered in court. But the perjury charge was short time. Then he got hit with the real charges, uncovered by an FBI investigation, for pocketing and passing around tens of millions of dollars in sweetheart contracts. Over the course of his sensational criminal trial in 2013, he is charged for embezzlement and racketeering and prosecuted in court of public opinion for the full scope of his sinful access – *Raucous parties! Luxury vacations! The mysterious death of the stripper!* This character evidence dominates local headlines up to his sentence of 28 years of hard time. The conviction lingers in the air as the procedural white noise of municipal bankruptcy commences its low incessant hum.

Enter another hero of this saga: "In a remarkable twist the announcement of [the emergency manager's] appointment...occurred only three days after [the hip-hop mayor] was convicted in his criminal conspiracy case" (Ibid:38). The good Christian, world-class professional of a legal expert takes the place of the lying, swindling, partying criminal as the model of black masculinity authorized to represent the City of Detroit in court and in the record. In this sense, the history of the hip-hop mayor's fiscal sin and the emergency manager's role as Redeemer offers us a true scapegoat for the cops and swaps. The hip-hop mayor was not held legally responsible for the deal; his criminal conviction hinged on an eight figure amounts rather than ten. The public, it seems, was ready to forget the hip-hop mayor, to put those

mistakes behind the city (Ibid), as bankruptcy commenced. He serves almost as an explanatory preface to the story of the case; he is not a party to bankruptcy – the emergency manager now represents the City. The fact that his moral failings and criminal conviction play such a role in the story of the case allows us to understand the hip-hop mayor's role "in carrying the people's sins away into the desert," being expelled from the community to make way for its renewal (Asad 2015:96). He is expelled not only through the conditions of his confinement but in being relegated to a past – the history of the city that died, left behind by the city that is resurrected.

The hip-hop mayor has his defenders, even if he does not fit easily into the redemptive role of underdog hero, wrongfully accused. There are yet alternate readings of the hip-hop mayor's fate. After all, it is common knowledge that throughout Southeast Michigan, the very mechanisms by which the suburbs have been developed have rested on and by which the city has been excluded from regional economic growth has rested on public contracts going to friends, being kept inside circles of privileged stakeholders. The Wayne County executive had only recently been forced to resign under similar circumstances; but no FBI investigation was underway. As one friend put it, the hip-hop mayor was "too smart" – believing he could play this game with the same impunity as his white counterparts. Maybe he isn't the villain, a role excised from a saga in which the climax is not the defeat of an antagonist but of consensus among protagonists. Maybe his story is a tragedy – a bright young man leading his historically maligned hometown at a crossroads of great change, great promise, and great danger, in which the city's fate would be sealed by a coming collapse caused by structural forces far greater than he, the City of Detroit, any individual banking institution, or even a global superpower, could foresee, prevent, or control (cf. Scott 2004). Indeed, at his sentencing hearing, the judge told the hip-hop mayor:

“You were defiant, sometimes arrogant and often accusatory to people you blamed for your situation. At a time when the city needed transparency, accountability, and responsibility, you exhibited hubris and privilege at the expense of the city”; the story concludes without his voice: “He did not speak at his sentencing hearing but shook his head in disagreement as the judge admonished him” (Bunkley 2008).

The cops and swaps served to refinance the pension obligations, and this link is made fate in the record by the morally dubious quality of both debts. As financial instruments, both are incredibly complex and arcane in ways that defy the practical imagination – the former, for its intensively compressed temporality and competitive structure, the latter for its aspirationally perpetual temporality and aggregate structure. In the last section, we saw this official narrative diagnoses retiree benefits as the driving cause of the City's fiscal crisis; the cops and swaps, it identifies as “dealing a death blow to the budget in the long run” (Bomey 2017:21). The long history of pension obligations and the event of this disastrous deal are welded together in the diagnosis of the city's terminal fiscal condition under its elected black leadership – the poor fiscal discipline of expecting future growth to pay off present investments, an apparently obsolete liberal model of building publics reevaluated by the emerging common-sense of austerity governance: “Let future generations pay the bill while you glean a short-term political boost” (Ibid:23).

Episode 3) Triumphs of Consent & Tragedies of Settlement

To conclude, I explore the romance of the social contract that narratively hinges on consent. I suggest romantic narrative conventions convert the violence of sacrifice to the triumph of rebirth (cf. Scott 2004), generating market hype at the expense of historical memory. The thick moral universe of this tale offers an image of the body politic forced to surrender to the brute economic and legal force of the state, while re-integrated into its indivisible sovereign authority through the legal place holder of consent. I suggest this image marries the terrorizing yet calculating patriarch to his hysterical but compliant partner in the social contract – a settler family immanent to its foundational logic (Locke [1690] 1980).

I meet the retired police captain in a communal conference room on the ground floor of the swanky new high-rise he inhabits downtown. He received his law degree in night school while still serving and used it to advise pro bono a colleague appointed to the official committee of retiree creditors. He was now using it to appeal the case. He gives me more of his time than I anticipated, which, downtown, means a parking ticket. The \$45 I pay for that ticket will be dedicated revenue for a special collection of bonds issued in a bankruptcy settlement.

He describes the composition of the official committee, appointed by the Department of Justice to represent tens of thousands of retired workers across two pension systems – the general retirement system, and police and fire. The committee was exhaustively representative of the diverse interests within and across these groups, which he says created conflicts between the particular interests they came to the table to represent and their fiduciary responsibility to the entire group.

"At the beginning of the bankruptcy process, everybody had the same agenda; at least, the retirees, was to save your pensions. But once you get into the process, it looks like it's every man for himself."

As a lawyer, he had trouble understanding how they were all being advised and represented by

the same law firm "because bankruptcy is basically a zero-sum game," as they all seek payouts from a limited pot.

He describes the breakdown of the creditor classes, consequential to the dynamics of the vote to consent to settlement, "you hear the expression in politics; in bankruptcy, they use the same term: gerrymandering. They gerrymandered the classes." He explains what he has come to understand as the "method to that madness," which separated civilians from the sworn in terms of pension payouts, then lumped them all together for healthcare. They scare the civilians with deep cuts to get them to settle; "it's not uncommon, they do a lot of those types of things; they're called death traps, where you cut a deal like that." Then, a big group of police and fire weren't going to lose any of their pensions, so they don't even vote in that class. But then, everybody gets a vote on healthcare; but not everybody has something at stake because only some are Medicare-eligible. So you have all of these voters scared into accepting, and all these voters happy to accept. He acknowledged that it was a tough call to accept the pension cuts, and he could see voting either way – a cramdown of steep cuts would simply "hurt too many people." But the healthcare vote made him mad (He and his wife are not Medicare-eligible).

"With healthcare, we would've gotten the exact same, whether we voted yes or no...If it was a no vote, there would have to be a cramdown. I think it would've still happened, I think we would've lost healthcare. But I wanted to make it hard for [the presiding judge] because if there is a cramdown...there would have been lines of people giving testimony, talking about their personal situations, and how people are gonna die because of this...I wanted to put it on [the judge], okay, you want to approve taking away healthcare? Listen to the stories, and do it. I think he got an out."

He is not optimistic the emergency manager's budget will deliver the City from its fiscal problems.

"Maybe this isn't a perfect analogy, but it's like people in the police department. They would get PPOs, personal protection orders, and, that's nice, but I would tell them, a personal protection order is just a piece of paper. It's not like a bulletproof vest. It's not going to save your life, waving this PPO. The bankruptcy gets rid of the City's debt, but it doesn't fix the city's future."

Over the long hours he spent with the official committee, getting "steamrolled" by hours and hours of actuarial detail, to produce this "snapshot" of pension liability, ripped out of the context in which that number makes sense to him as a vested retiree who has watched it over the years, he sees the whole Grand Bargain just perpetuating the problem that created the pension shortfall – it gets the City out of paying into the pensions for 10 years. But he notes,

"There is a real animus against pensions out there. There are people that believe if you get ten cents from the government, you don't deserve it, somehow it's nefarious and it's wrong – because they don't have pensions."

He directs me to scroll through the comments of any article about pensions in the *Free Press*:

"You'll see the vitriol, it's amazing."

He is no convert to the Grand Bargain and sees the celebration of the art museum as elitist, entirely irrelevant to residents of the city.

"If anybody believes a Monet is worth more to future generations than to current retirees, then they should have to make their case, and not just yell, public trust! That's what I believe. The museum tries to have it both ways – most of the art was bought with public funds. When it was convenient, they went to public funding. Now it's not convenient, and they want to be a public trust. It made me sick watching the testimony of some of the foundations, patting each other on the back about this grand bargain they did."

He plans to find out his appeal as far as it will go, making the State make its case in court and not behind the closed doors of settlement. He believes he is right, legally and morally, but acknowledges that his appeal is a long shot, politically. But, he says, it beats golf, as far as retirement hobbies go.

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"FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE RAPE"

Consider the claim of cultural historian Saidiya Hartman in her examination of "the measure of humanity" producing subjugated racial subjects of chattel slavery, inscribed both in legal practices and moralizing narratives of the antebellum South:

“At issue here is the construction of ‘woman’ not as a foundational category with given characteristics, attributes, or circumstances but within a particular racial economy of property that intensified its control over the object of property through the deployment of sexuality. Despite the proclaimed ties of affinity between those born and bred together, the enslaved female was subjected to violence within the plantation household and within the public arena. Within the private realm of the plantation household, she was subject to the absolute dominion of the owner and also experienced abuse within the slave enclave, and in the public sphere absolute submission defined the relation of the public to the black body. The law's failure to recognize rape as neither crime nor injury can be related to the prerogatives and entitlements of the private sphere, the full enjoyment of property that define the rights of slaveowners, and, in the public sphere, the necessity of black submission and the decriminalization of white violence requisite preserving the public good” (1997:100-101).

Indeed, Hartman shows such racialized grammars of public/private realized through the interplay of criminal and property law are deeply ingrained in narratives of seduction that “[make] visible the mechanisms that deny, repress, and re-describe injury and that produce and sustain chastity as a racial and class entitlement” (1997:104) – so much so that “cases [of rape] were dismissed in which the race of white women was not explicitly declared” (Ibid:99). In recuperating quotidian, intimate “scenes of subjection” often omitted from histories of slavery that focus on “excessive” exercises of violence, Hartman illuminates affective and grammatical sensibilities of American anti-blackness by no means purged by legal emancipation but rather embedded in concepts of agency, responsibility, and punishment.

I seek to examine such remainders through conditions of consent that settle Detroit’s “grand bargain” with retirees, gendered and racialized through the sacrificial labors forced upon them and the legacy of the black body politic bankruptcy serves to lay to rest. I explore the “measure of humanity” produced in the court process as it factored in to the legal and financial calculations of settlement, inscribed through un-redressed injuries of violation and the virtuous language of the law in adjudicating the resurrected public sphere. In the ruling confirming Detroit’s case, the judge refers to the Grand Bargain thus: “it is a vast understatement to say that the pension settlement is reasonable. It borders on the miraculous.” If we follow ethnographic

theorist Audra Simpson in cultivating historical consciousness around the context of domination and threat that frame retiree consent to the settlement (2016), what sort of a miracle is it?

It is summer, 2013, shortly after the emergency manager's Chapter 9 filing on behalf of the City of Detroit – the Chief Justice of the federal court handling the case is on a golf vacation in Florida. He has only recently been appointed as lead mediator for the case, by the federal judge he appointed to preside over it. So the legend goes, he is pondering the monumental task before him, weighing the crushing load of debt, costs of revitalization, and the emergency manager's controversial proposals to cut pension payments in half and monetize the city-owned Detroit Institute of Arts to satisfy creditors. The Chief Justice sees the pensions and the art as the "bookends" of the case – both were grabbing national headlines, as the unions organized street protests and editorial boards commented on the scandalous disgrace of liquidating this once-great American city's cultural heritage. He concluded that their fates "were inextricably linked," as both parties geared up for a long legal brawl – "to resolve the bankruptcy, he theorized, you must transform a previously binary equation – art versus pensions – into a holistic formula" (Bomey 2017: 130). On this glass table at his golf resort in Florida, he grabs a legal pad and starts doodling – "he wrote the word art and drew a box around it, symbolically representing a lockbox around the DIA and protecting it from financial creditors" (Ibid). Around this lockbox, he diagrams stakeholders and assets, drawing arrows and dollar signs, calculating the potential flows of liquidity that could resolve the case without penetrating that lockbox. His doodle has been enshrined today in a place of pride at the DIA; it is here, the story goes, that the concept of the Grand Bargain was born.

To make this formula work, the Chief Justice was going to have to do the unprecedented

– raise money to resolve the case from stakeholders in the city’s revitalization who were nonetheless legally external to the case. He organized a meeting with leaders of corporate philanthropies vested in the city to pitch the budding concept of the “art trust,” channeling his personal hero, Winston Churchill, by leading the agenda with a quote – “A pessimist sees the danger in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every danger” (Bomey 2017: 142). At first, his audience emphasized, they were not going to bail out the City, or “help correct the bad decisions of leadership in the past” (quoted in Bomey 2017: 143). But the Chief Justice succeeded in converting skeptics to believers over the course of the day, as the meeting evolved into dinner with family and as friends, talking baseball and Churchill. Said the philanthropic executive who hosted at her suburban estate, “If people are going to give money, they have to know each other. It’s like any other business” (Ibid:144). The heavyweight foundations took on the task of “championing the cause to give confidence to the smaller foundations that the deal would work” (Ibid:144). The story bursts with the “buoyant mood” of the “behind the scenes” fundraising campaign, dotted with moments of exuberant inspiration, infectious presentations, and tearful commitments to abandoned family legacies in the city. Of that fateful night, a judicial mediator later commented,

“The reaction of some of the leading foundations was that the art and the pensions were important pieces of all of this, but the most important outcome was to save Detroit. That was kind of breathtaking” (quoted in Bomey 2017: 144).

The foundations had come together with a projected pledge of \$350 million – money that would be earmarked for retirees in exchange for the art collection, which would be transferred to a nonprofit trust. This “anchor institution” of Detroit’s revitalizing downtown would never again be threatened by the City’s fiscal distress; as the COO of the DIA commented,

“This institution lifts the city above being just another impoverished city. The DIA is 100-plus-year investment in the human potential of Detroit, and the human capital of Detroit” (quoted in

Bomey 2017: 169).

And at only a fraction of the collection's estimated valuation: as competing creditors built a legal case for monetization, they got bids as high as \$1.75 billion for the entire museum, and Chinese investors offering upwards of \$1 billion just for the Chinese art collection (Ibid:168). But to sell a piece of artwork sitting in the museum's basement would compromise the collection according to its stewards, signaling to donors the legacies they imagined they were vesting for generations to come would be subject to the fiscal exigencies of the municipality preoccupied with shorter-term human potential problems. Indeed, the unprecedented philanthropic intervention into municipal governance was so much bigger than municipal governance. Says the CEO of the Ford Foundation, which had just moved back to the city from its headquarters in New York, on his role in the deal:

"It's because of what Detroit represents in the American narrative. In the American narrative, the idea of cities equaling opportunities, cities equaling jobs and economic opportunity, and city is also regrettably meeting decay and decline – Detroit manifests all of that. So it is symbolically, metaphorically, America's most important city. If we don't solve the challenges of Detroit, we won't solve the challenges of America" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 6).

But the foundations did not plan to foot the bill for saving Detroit on their own. As a condition of their investment, they required the State pony up and match the funds. It was not immediately an easy sell to a state legislature dominated by tea party insurgents hostile to the idea of a bailout, mixed with a deeper historical hostility to the city. But the nerd-accountant governor lobbied them with a fiscally-conservative case, pointing out the Grand Bargain would keep retirees "self-sufficient rather than having them fall into the social safety net" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 195); the Republican Majority Leader noted his members "were concerned about the messaging...you could call it an insurance policy against the state budget getting hit" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 196). Indeed, the messaging concern over the state of the social

safety net belied a more basic liability the Grand Bargain legislation served to insure – the deal would require the retirees to consent, waiving their right to challenge the bankruptcy and pursue the State in court for its own constitutional pension protections. But the legislation did not stop here – it also included provisions for an oversight board to enforce the emergency manager's budget on the city's elected leadership for up to thirteen years after the case's close.

Says the governor's Wall Street consultant,

"The city had proven for decades that it's not accountable. It wasn't responsible. So if the city expects to borrow from the capital markets again, the markets will expect that someone will ultimately be responsible for ensuring that the city does not repeat the sins of the past" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 198).

As the legislation came together, winning unheard of bipartisan cooperation that wowed the press, one tea party conservative "fired a last-second shot at the city's unions," insisting they ante a few million of their own to the deal. He wanted them "to feel some pain if the state was helping them out," later commenting, "I saw it as essential that everybody come together and participate in the recovery, or else it would be too easy to slip back into bad habits that brought Detroit there" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 199). Corporations and unions, Republicans and Democrats, all had "skin in the game" (Ibid:198), investing in the case to invest in the City, investing in the City to invest in a shared future for the State of Michigan in an increasingly fierce regional competition for jobs and tax dollars. The passage of the legislation was announced with much fanfare at the Diego Rivera court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, emphasizing the value of the collection's integrity inscribed into the very building that housed it. The case's saviors paraded before the mural, famously illustrating the sweat and toils of industrial autoworkers under the watchful eye of their pale and miserly employer, announcing with triumph the settlement that promised to deliver Detroit from bankruptcy – by offering workers philanthropic relief in place of their legal claims, restructuring the publicly-owned art

assets into a privately-held public trust, and institutionalizing state oversight authority while eliminating liability. Risks to investors hedged at every corner of the settlement, the Grand Bargain converted the stigma and uncertainty of bankruptcy into hype and confidence in the City's story.

The contributions to the Grand Bargain pot reduced pension cuts from a threatened 50% to a looming 11% down to a merciful 4.5% – but if the retirees wanted it, they would have to consent to the deal and all of its conditions. Tens of thousands of retired workers were recruited to vote in a process run by a private firm in El Segundo, California. Each received an individualized ballot, which calculated their options as the monthly pension payouts they would receive – they could choose this lower dollar amount, to refuse the settlement, or this higher one, to consent. There is no opting out, as the court has the authority to “cramdown” the worst of cuts without creditor consent, if it so decides. If retirees wanted to fight, they would have to live with these steep reductions through a lengthy, uncertain legal challenge. To win, they would have to find the means to outlast the City's world-class lawyers and court – who are getting paid out of the shrinking revenues the retirees mean to claim. Such a battle would devastate the City financially and its shot at revitalization – another kind of cost calculate for workers who spent their working lives serving this city.

These ballots were accompanied by thick disclosure statements, offering the transparency of exhaustive actuarial details to inform retiree consent. And yet not quite exhaustive, as retirees would end up receiving a slightly thicker second copy, disclosing further technicalities that had been omitted in the first – in addition to the celebrated 4.5% cut, retirees who had invested their individual savings with the City would also see a portion of their earnings “clawed back,” making their monthly reductions closer to 20%. The clawbacks were

treated as an actuarial detail of the saga, as such earnings on personal savings had been deemed excessively generous in the first place, if entirely legal and accumulated through commonplace practice. But the clawbacks show the power of calculative sensibilities about investment value in the arena of bankruptcy, in which the law is made through the breaking of contract: in this case, the financial common-sense of austerity regimes dismisses the long-term investments of majority-black, public sector workers, when the City they serviced was so clearly broke. It raises questions about the possibilities of leaving an inheritance, when the value of this inheritance is structured by not only capital accumulated over histories of dispossession but also the political contexts in which that capital has a shot of accruing.

Many retirees were already on the brink of poverty before any cut; and after this, they would be losing their health care benefits for which there are no constitutional protections, no legal grounds to recuperate. Their fixed incomes would now have to accommodate healthcare premiums on the exchange market upwards of a grand a month, many with comparable costs for necessary prescriptions. With the grand bargain settlement, retirees could at least apply for subsidies from a small income stabilization fund, which was theirs to float on the market. The days of guaranteed care were over – but through the management of the fund, retirees carry the responsibility-cum-opportunity to earn some stability for themselves on financial markets. In a calculus of deadly probabilities, this pot will stretch further as more members die out.

Indeed, after the case was closed, the City ran the numbers and found herself facing a pension shortfall yet again – it turns out, the emergency manager had not updated the mortality tables he used in his calculations to reflect the longer life expectancy statistics currently sanctioned by the actuaries. The City is now responsible for the shortfall, however long remembers live. After the long months of stress and uncertainty around the case, there is no

precise way to calculate state liability for premature death. It happened somewhere offstage. Such tragedies do not fit into the saga of the case – which is perhaps why headlines heralding the 4.5% mercy cuts didn't pay much mind to the elimination of cost-of-living adjustments. Such incremental increases to a fixed income only matter over the course of years – plenty of time for other miracles to allow retirees to keep up with the costs of their healthcare, water bills, property taxes, the families they likely support and neighborhoods they likely stabilize.

The Grand Bargain gives us a miracle now, when the City needs it – and the retirees consent by a landslide, as their unions and representative committees drop objections and campaign for the deal to their memberships as another condition reached in negotiations. They thereby resolve outstanding objections and speed up the case's confirmation to a record-setting 18 months. The landslide is heralded as a heroic sacrifice on the part of retirees and commitment to the city's future. Of course, the half of eligible voters who simply did not return ballots were counted as consenting – if you don't say no, it is as good as yes. Those one in five voters who refused the settlement, who were ready to sacrifice for a fight – they are marginal to the final victory of the bankruptcy saga, serving at best as a human interest story appended to the real news. Detroit exits bankruptcy and enters a new era of political consensus around the city's revitalization. With no constitutional doubts or pending litigation to cloud her future, Detroit is free to borrow again.

While at the Chief Justice was in Florida hatching plans to protect the integrity of the art, Detroit's retirees were in the city protesting the emergency manager for his comments in an interview with the Wall Street Journal. He had said,

“For a long time, the city was dumb, lazy, happy, and rich. Detroit has been the center of more change in the 20th century than I daresay virtually any other city, but that wealth allowed us to have a covenant [that held] if you had an eighth grade education, you'll get 30 years of a good job and a pension and great healthcare, but you don't have to worry about what's going to

come" (quoted in Al Hajal 2013).

At the protest, a retiree who had spent 38 years serving as an auto mechanic for the City responded with a comment that made headlines: "You get knots in your stomach when you think about losing your pension. I want to be able to continue to eat tuna fish. I don't want to have to go to cat food" (Ibid). The emergency manager quickly learned his public relations lesson, as he realized the political risks to his success as a negotiator; the image of tunafish over cat food became a staple in his team's talking points, asserting the threshold of humanitarian care the State took in its expert calculations.

Indeed, by the confirmation hearings in which the negotiated terms of the Grand Bargain answered the legal criteria of bankruptcy, "the human factor" had become a legal argument against the objections of the bond insurers who had backed the cops and swaps and held their own claims as creditors independently in the case from the banks that had authored the deal. These bond insurers argued ferociously for a piece of the grand bargain pot, reasoning the settlement failed to meet the court's criteria of fairness and equity, as a privileged one set of creditors over the rest. The judge never took this argument seriously, as this creditor privilege was a condition of the contributions; and as the mayor of Baltimore stated when announcing that city's class action suit against the banks that had manipulated the LIBOR rates, "We can't afford to leave money on the table" (Rushe 2012). But on the record, these pragmatic and legal arguments remains framed by "the human factor." In the narrative of confirmation, the judge declares fairness not on the basis of any precedent legal tests but as a "matter of conscience" – "several factors naturally inform this judgment," he said, including his own experience, education, and sense of morality" (quoted in Bomey 2017: 238). There was no scenario amidst the saga in which the retirees weren't screwed – with a tuna fish dinner as the incentive for their

consent projected into the public imagination as the moral threshold protected by the court.

As for the bond insurers holding out through confirmation, the emergency manager had made his negotiating position clear from the outset, according to lore: “I’m going to fuck you. The only question is how bad” (quoted in Bomey 2017: 42). The bond insurers put up a spectacularly vicious fight, accused by the emergency manager’s legal team of “ambush,” “scorched-earth litigation strategy,” and even “carpet bombing,” eventually prompting the judge’s admonition: “Let’s keep the war analogies to a minimum” (quoted in Bomey 2017: 170). Their top-shelf legal team knew they were fighting with the disadvantage, “as a matter of public perception, helpless pensioners curry more sympathy than villainous financial creditors” (Ibid: 205); comments counsel,

“I think most people would say, ‘who cares about a couple of swap insurers? It only matters in some ineffable macroeconomic way that we’ll never really track down.’ But I think process matters a lot... I think if you don’t do things the right way, there’s a cost of that that becomes difficult to assess. And because it’s difficult to assess, maybe that’s why no one cares about it” (quoted in Bomey 2017: 205).

How might we assess it? These are not the creditors who made the suspicious cops and swaps deal; they are the ones who backed it – the City paid them for insurance to achieve a AAA rating and value for the cops; when the City finally defaulted on the deal in 2013, these insurers covered the cops buyers. And their capacity to recoup that capital in court underwrites their willingness and capacity to back such deals, and for the lowered risk of insured bonds to nurse liquidity across the volatile market. For these insurers’ claims to be repudiated in bankruptcy – and set in line clearly behind pensioners – would “cast a shadow over every other city bringing debt to market in the future,” market analysts warned (Walsh 2014). As the bond insurers neared a negotiated settlement with the emergency manager, they called out the big banks that had made the deal they had insured, demanding these banks participate in making the insurers

whole for allowing them to get recruited to the legally-vulnerable deal (Ibid). But there are no headlines announcing what came of those negotiations: it was resolved behind closed doors.

The bond insurers finally announce their settlements, withdrawing their fierce objections and becoming partners in Detroit's revitalization – they receive their payouts in the form of land transfers and development deals for downtown and riverfront property, including the arena named after boxing great, Joe Lewis, that will be cleared for deconstruction once the Red Wings move uptown to their new home in the sprawling Lil Caesars Hockey Town Complex. At present value, the Joe Louis is worth nothing, or less than nothing, according to the emergency manager's lawyers; indeed, the bond insurers' payout looks small in terms of the depreciated present value of their newly acquired landholdings. Comments their lead attorney, "The way our deal is structured, we do well if Detroit does well, which I thought was creative" (quoted in Bomey 2017:227). Nobody was left to object.

In his ruling confirming the case, the judge says of the emergency manager's decision not to monetize the art collection under the auspices of the Grand Bargain:

"The evidence unequivocally establishes that the DIA stands at the center of the city as an invaluable beacon of culture, education for both children and adults, personal journey, creative outlet, family experience, worldwide visitor attraction, civic pride and energy, neighborhood and community cohesion, regional cooperation, social service, and economic development. Every great city in the world actively pursues these values. They are the values that Detroit must pursue to uplift, inspire and enrich its residents and its visitors. They are also the values that Detroit must pursue to compete in the national and global economy to attract new residents, visitors and businesses. To sell the DIA art would only deepen Detroit's fiscal, economic and social problems. To sell the DIA art would be to forfeit Detroit's future."

He also acknowledges the hardship, "in some cases severe," of the pension reductions, stating:

"This bankruptcy, however, like most, is all about the shared sacrifice that is necessary because the city is insolvent and desperately needs to fix its future. All of the city's unsecured creditors are making sacrifices. Others sacrifice too, including the city's residents and visitors, and even the State of Michigan and its residents. Even the city's professionals are now contributing to this process and to the city's future. As noted, substantial majorities of the two pension classes accepted the necessity of shared sacrifice for the common good of the city. That collective

judgment is entitled to substantial consideration here.”

Through the “bookends” of the art and the pensions, we gain a view of the qualitative framing of all the actuarial calculations that went into designing the fiscal shape of the new Detroit – the invaluable values that make a city competitively attractive; the necessary sacrifices accepted and shared by all, to each their portion.

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I meet Bill Davis, president of the grassroots retiree association protesting the bankruptcy in the streets and objecting in the courts, at a Coney Island diner down the street from the federal courthouse where we meet frequently as participant and observer of the proceedings. Bill started at the City's sewage plant in 1978, six years after the city's first African-American mayor began integrating the municipal workforce. Retiring after six promotions, Bill found himself in the large class of creditors holding their pension payments as claims against the City. He was facing not only the reduction to his monthly pension payment, the elimination of annual cost-of-living increases, and the loss of healthcare benefits, but also the legal "clawback" of interest earned in the savings account he had vested with the City. Despite this financial pressure, Bill is leading the charge to challenge the case, along with retirees who objected through its last day and long after the State's victory lap.

Bill is a fierce opponent of the emergency manager legislation that laid the legal groundwork for the bankruptcy. This legislation had been defeated by a union-backed popular referendum in 2012, only to be revived in the lame-duck session that followed. “These emergency managers primarily go after and attack black communities and people of color,” he tells me, explaining how the policy was first implemented in the school system and worked effectively to break up the teachers’ unions that had countered the power and influence of the

state's corporate-backed Republican Party (while driving the school system even deeper into debt). "Unions are principally strong and a lot of black communities, so it's like a double whammy, taking away our fourteenth amendment rights, the normal rights we should have under the U.S. Constitution" – rights of equal protection under the law for all citizens, necessitated by the U.S. Constitution's foundational incorporation of racial slavery and achieved only through civil war. As for the terms of citizenship under emergency management, Bill describes it as "taking away everything and giving nothing back in return."

Bill doesn't buy the so-called consent of retirees who voted as a creditor class to settle. As you can hear him say in the YouTube video that opens this chapter, *How can you tell somebody, 'I'm going to shoot you in your head, or shoot you in your foot?' Either way, you lose.* He sees very clear winners emerging from the case: "There is a real big pay-to-play-type scheme going on here," he observes of the raises and cushy new jobs offered to members of city council who offered their stamp of approval to the emergency manager's plans to restructure city assets. And then there is the emergency manager himself and the firm from which he came and which he hired to represent the City in court:

"What the city is paying out in legal and consulting fees, if they had given that to the pensioners and retirees, the pension funds would have been 100% funded – if [the emergency manager] had started paying into the pension funds, instead of using the money he stole from us to help finance raping us."

Bill's characterization of rape and plunder echo histories of forcible settlement and extraction that recontextualize the State's characterization of consent and rebirth in colonial traditions of ideologically-justified racial domination. He doesn't dwell on the state's ideological justification; the material interests of the emergency manager policy are clear enough, outlining who exactly has benefited from the emergency restructuring of public systems. "It's something they have been planning for years, they have just been waiting for the right moment to be able to do it," he

believes. "It's all calculated to steal assets and reward their friends and family plan." What Bill calls a friends and family plan for antiblack, antiunion state power, this same state-formation recruits us to call simply: the social contract (Mills 1997). Nothing is sacred.

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I meet Walter Gary Knall at a Subway across the street from Wayne State's athletic fields. Walter is a retired analytical chemist who worked in the City's health department for over three decades. He delivered testimony objecting to the bankruptcy in the very last days before its confirmation, and he is very eager to offer the arguments he made on the stand to anybody willing to listen and get the objectors' story out. He jumps right into this testimony with me over turkey subs and potato chips: "I feel like the attack on the pensions is unjust...and the numbers were made up fictitiously to make Detroit look bad." He starts first and foremost with the hundreds of millions owed to the City of Detroit by the State according to the revenue-sharing agreement upon which it had reneged, and then right into the culpability of the banks who had swindled the city out of hundreds of millions with the bad swaps deal, and then onto their culpability not only in swindling people out of their homes during the subprime crisis but also in swindling the city upon taking possession of the homes, evading tax bills and water bills and/or leaving them empty and neglected.

Walter has been fighting the state's weaponization of consent to restructuring since it was forced on the City in 2012, through the consent agreement that was supposed to prevent emergency receivership. He testified in the city council hearings over the consent agreement and witnessed the rushing of the vote, as the committee presented an inch-thick document of 5,200 pages without enough time for council-members to read and review the changes it contained. While the council's counsel advised against the vote and the city charter violations it

entailed, it narrowly passed. Walter remembers, "It was an uproar. They had so many deputies there to control the people." They kept the hearing in the small council chambers, despite the full auditorium across the hall: "There were people that had to sit outside in the hallway." By the end of the bankruptcy, the council votes would be unanimous; space would be made; the uproar would be controlled without deputies.

Walter has been interviewed on the local news and by journalists from New York, Japan, France, and Canada – a global milieu looking to Detroit as a "test situation." He says they were getting more recognition from outside of the state in the local newspapers. He thinks a lot of the improvements to city services enacted by the restructuring regime were just "new gimmicks to get the public's opinion." He believes they were deliberate in cutting off the lights, to pacify the people by turning them back on. The emergency manager effectively shut down garbage pickup hard-balling the unions off-stage, and then got credit for cleaning up the unsustainable buildups by privatizing collection. Walter says once pacified, the people "would not pay attention to the real issue of what's going on."

Echoing many activists, Walter believes Detroiters are being pushed out to make the city into a playground for the superrich and to control the water-ways by which Detroit is connected not only to international trade (along the Canadian border) but also to 20% of the world's freshwater (in the Great Lakes region). He traces the crisis to the Reagan Administration's defunding of cities, which he witnessed firsthand as a municipal worker since 1978. When I asked him about race, he laughs after stating simply, "I think it needs a lot of work still." He goes on,

"There's been more avenues open...but they will take power away from you. So many people that have become rich, and within a short period of time, it's all been taken away, and so it depends on the machinery: if I agree with what you're doing and let you go, [that's one thing]. But once you start voicing opposition, then they start trying to cut you down or entrap you."

Walter's account of racial progress raises the question of the social contract that is supposed to secure all citizens both freedom of expression *and* equal protection from being cut down by the state: what exactly is the color and shape of that agreement, when opposition is adjudicated thus?

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Bill and Walter do not believe their interests were represented by either the unions or the appointed retiree associations. Without institutional resources or formal legal representation, these retirees' dissent did not appear legally effective; it was respectfully commended by the judge even as he continued to push the case inexorably forward toward confirmation. But this dissent kept a critical perspective on the City's financial history and the State's emergency intervention on the table and in the record – a perspective shared by many Detroiters with no part in the bankruptcy's final act. Bankruptcy seeks to settle this objecting perspective and thereby consign it to the pre-history of the "New Detroit" birthed by the court's process. Their insistence thus illuminates the cracks in the consensus sutured together by the court – an interruption to the "happily ever after" of confirmation that lingers as the story goes on and unsettles the certainty of its framing. As retiree activist Yvonne Jones puts it at the end of the YouTube video that leads this chapter (Detroit Ain't Broke 2014): "Always, you have to stand up for what you believe in, even if you stand alone. You can't sit back and wait for someone else to fight."

CONCLUSION

Happily Ever After

[the force of plans]

Bankruptcy produced a budget, new contractual obligations, new authorities. It also produced a good story: a new story about a new Detroit, as the State's lead consultant put it when he took the stand during the final days of hearings. If the story of Detroit's resurrection is convincing, the City would be at an advantage in borrowing. But if the market doesn't believe the story, then the sacrifices made by Detroit's civil servants to sell the story won't purchase the promised future. It is up to the city now to live up to the story, which the consultant confidently asserts, it can do and should do.

The comeback story promised by bankruptcy is, in a real sense, the comeback story produced by bankruptcy. All the narrative activity framing the numbers instructed residents to the discipline of their new social contract; or rather, it performs this instruction for the market. The question is: is it a convincing story? Is it believable that the discipline will be enough, and feasible that the city will do what it should do (according to the plan) to welcome investment? Or at least, is it a convincing enough story to convince at least dumb money to invest in the post-bankruptcy hype, thereby convincing other players to jump into the game, whether or not they believe the convincing story? The judge rules on the story performed in his court for the debt markets because he is convinced. Or at least, he is convinced that if others are convinced, it might actually come true.

But what does the story actually look like? What is convincing about it? Among the key character witnesses for the "New Detroit" is the executive director of a large corporate foundation leading what is called, the Detroit Future city Strategic Framework. Detroit Future

city is not a plan, although it comes replete with timelines extending 50 years into the future. But it doesn't specify concrete steps or apportion budgets. Detroit Future city is a strategic framework – a vision, even a movement, according to its staff – guiding the plans, steps, and budgets taken by the complex of public and private partners and public-private authorities tasked with implementing the post-bankruptcy plan. The new mayor – who is no longer new – calls it his Bible. The Blight Task Force report is designed to interface, nested within it. The “plan of adjustment” confirmed by the bankruptcy judge is just underwriting: its only legal effect is the immediate cuts in enacts. Detroit Future city provides the story, holding all the pieces together that the plan of adjustment clears the way for. That is, if the story is convincing.

The story has the aesthetic of science fiction, packaged in a nonprofit coffee table book with 100 more pages than this dissertation. The principle of the framework is to turn Detroit's vast land vacancy from a liability to an asset, by innovating sustainable approaches for the municipality to weather destabilizing climates and retrenched budgets. According to its architects, it departs from previous visions of revitalization because it is not predicated on growth, but designed to adjust service delivery and infrastructure maintenance to the actually existing population.

The local professor of law who critiqued the court's feasibility expert also provided a comprehensive critique of the plan's logic of “triage” – strategically investing where revitalization looks promising and divesting where it looks forgone (Kelly 2014). Unlike previous restructuring plans, it entails no forced relocation (and therefore, no reimbursement); over the half-century the plan imagines, some neighborhoods appear to just peter out. I first heard the story from Occupy Detroit activists in 2012, who took the framework as a blueprint for hostile takeover by the gentry. They were convinced the city would explode over it. After

all, it was only 2009 that an earlier version of the strategic framework was released by the previous administration in partnership with the same philanthropy. They called it “rightsizing,” and it did not go over so well in the public hearings that ensued. Detroiters demanded to know where their neighborhoods, communities, and homes had gone, as several were slotted to transform into “green infrastructure,” low-maintenance lots designed to soak up excess stormwater, no longer receiving basic services not supported by a tax base. They went back to the drawing board, recruiting top international urban design consultants and an unprecedentedly robust community engagement apparatus, which dwarfed technical teams in personnel two- to-one. On the stand in the bankruptcy hearings, the philanthropist says the art of the strategic framework is to merge and make coherent the technical expertise and community engagement. He brings slides of his own colored-pencil drawings creatively depicting the manifold forms the synergy the framework is designed to produce. The judge comments from the stand, *the excitement is contagious*.

I spoke to folks in the community engagement sector who remembered how comprehensive the Detroit Future city process was in collecting data, even while the actual use of data and its impact on the plan’s process was a total black-box. The big book merges these pieces in a well-crafted design that is nonetheless incomprehensible: graphics of silhouetted citizens; quotes from engaged citizens voiced in colorful word-bubbles; dense paragraphs of design-prose composed of straightforward words in an inscrutable grammar. It does look like the Blight Task Force report, including the same aesthetic of infographics, repetitions of maps, and inspirational quotes.

But the community engagement efforts are far from over, as the strategic framework has shifted from being a (story) book to acting as a nonprofit with a small budget to seed

community projects here and there, host blight boot camps here and there, put on the community forums hyping local social entrepreneurs here and there, etc. The nonprofit has a very small budget for such a big vision – again, not a plan: it is not the organization responsible for seeing it through. Its technical staff does play an advisory role to the City, which is convincing in claiming it will, can, and should see it through. Besides activists looking for a fight, residents I knew hadn't heard much about Detroit Future city until the bankruptcy's close. As it found its organizational footing, it began rolling out recruitment efforts to get neighbors on board remaking the city bit-by-bit into the reflexively sustainable future it envisions (cf. Lakoff and Collier 2015). In the meantime, there are lots of quick and cheap projects that do not complete the vision but model its aspirations.

The nonprofit's first executive director, a design expert who will soon be replaced by a seasoned politician, tells me about the work at a small café outside the new office in the city's booming university district. He is thoughtful, not only about the technicalities of sustainable design but about the critiques they have received. I guess by the tone of his defense he has heard the project called genocidal by activists, although neither of us use the word. He acknowledges the issues "of equity, of authorship, of identity [that] are always very present in everything we do," if "greater than what we would've anticipated." He reflects, as if his design sensibilities might yet be able to engineer the gap between the political issues that have come up and the technical promise of the work in which he believes: "Our ability to drive innovative work in its own right is not going to change the city but is actually going to catalyze, or demonstrate how others may do that, and that's really our biggest value." If activists portray Detroit Future city as the dystopian boogie man, it will play the role offstage, in rehearsal. Or perhaps the framework is simply not as totalizing as a dystopian imaginary implies.

But it is not just the gap between technical and political, nor agent and author that muck up community engagement. There is also the gap between now and later:

“There is an immediate gratification that we have to deal with. People who have suffered for a very long time want things to improve right now, right where they are, and we can do those things in some ways, but we can’t do it all. We also need understand that if it took Detroit this long to get to where it is, it’s going to take a fairly decent amount of time to come out of it.”

But when he gets going on that long road, he is passionate about the possibilities of Detroit’s open space creating “lungs of the city,” opportunities to generate revenue, food, energy within the city to provide for the city. Because of its open space, “Detroit can be a model for the future, and that model can be one of the most equitable models that’s ever been created.” The difficulty is the meantime (cf. Povinelli 2011).

He illustrates with a story of how he illustrates the stakes of the plan to community groups, putting their concerns for immediate gratification into perspective:

“I’d be presenting and have this laser pointer, right, in this lecture hall, and I’d shoot it across the room. And I’d say, we as a city generally have to make very good decisions right now, strategic about how we use our land, how we drive investment in the city to generate jobs, and so forth. Because if we are off by half a degree here, I am off by 3 feet over on the wall (i.e. the longterm future). That’s the difference between a city that is set in a strong strategic direction that is enduring, and a city that’s going to fail. That’s why this really matters, and there are difficult conversations to have now. These aren’t conversations to force inequitable directions upon anyone, but instead, to come together as a city, to talk about what we value and to talk about how we proceed. To do it with full knowledge of where we collectively need to go, how we might get there, and how we might not get there.”

Community engagement therefore provides a voice with which to tailor the aesthetics of the plan; but it also provides a platform to deliver a strong strategic direction designed by experts with full knowledge of what it will take for the city to endure in the stormy times ahead. The emergency manager is long gone from Detroit, and electoral democracy has been restored: the people can choose the leaders with the will and skill to execute the plan, but the direction has already been determined. Community engagement allows for that determined direction to

be implemented not with force but in conversations with experts who can tell you, if you value your survival, here is how to proceed. Survival, after all, is a 1-0 game.

History, the judge reflects in his confirmation ruling, will be the ultimate judge of Detroit's bankruptcy: whether the sacrifices made truly saved the city, or were a massive mistake. But it appears the history he refers to is the history in books; as the history that is to be made has already been planned out. According to the experts, the city can do it, and the city should do it. If the city fails from here, it will be because its own failings in the precision calculus of sustaining fiscal survival at the low-water mark of American democracy.

The Meantime

[forces of resistance]

The trade-off of immediate gratification against the promise of long-term resilience looks reasonable from a design perspective that conceives of systems in their abstract whole. It also resonates with a deeply progressive ethos of the American tradition recalibrated by emergency management for financially-backed social contract: the true payoff is always deferred into the future, earned by present sacrifice. But not everybody is so willing or able to inhabit the progressive view of an undivided body politic – not when it is always black folks being asked to wait by the white moderates. As Dr. Martin Luther King once asserted from a Birmingham Jail, “This ‘wait’ has almost always meant ‘never’” (1963). If Detroiters are not facing the legal segregation of the Jim Crow South against which Dr. King struggled, a segregation marked by waiting persists across the racialized geography – if not between blacks and whites, then between the Detroit that must wait, and the Detroit that can't wait. Indeed, this latter phrasing was the slogan gracing the governor's appointment of the emergency manager, making

bankruptcy so urgent precisely for the rehabilitation of the city as a debtor with the capacity to immediately gratify its creditors.

Do we have to take for granted that access to capital – accumulated in markets birthed in slavery and enclosure, expanded by imperial warfare, and glutted through predatory speculation – is the best way to distribute who must wait, who must sacrifice? Without this assumption (and the struggle over political power it forecloses), sustainable municipal futures might not seem appropriate as a design problem, however tailored that design may be to community concerns. The entire problem-space would have to shift, the very question being asked (Scott 2004).

Toyia Watts, president of her east side neighborhood association, would not see what she is pushing against the grain of the revitalization consensus for as “immediate gratification” – she has been waiting, has been sacrificing. She is infamous in the municipal political circuit for her insistence, a force of refusal disrupting the flow of general consensus; she is criticized for upsetting the pot, even what she is demanding is what everybody else *says* is happening (Ahmed 2012) – inclusive development of empowered communities. But she doesn’t see the *doing*. All these programs, all these organizations, and all these foundations, she has seen them come and go:

“I really haven’t seen anything structured but the teardown of the homes so far. I’m not going to give anybody kudos because a lot of initiative programs did not work for us in our neighborhood. They had the money – [she names the usual suspects of foundations hailed as city-saviors] – but we didn’t see nothing structured, where people say, *okay, we got it, we’re getting it now, we can make a move, we can make our neighborhoods better now.*”

It is difficult to get neighbors to invest time and energy when they don’t see results. She says they go to meeting after meeting, and there is a lot of talk and not a lot of progress. Remaining at a standstill, she claims, burns people out.

I interview Toyia in her kitchen, in the east side home she inherited from her mother. Her family migrated from Mississippi and has maintained this family home since 1948. We talk not long after the bankruptcy's close, yet Toyia's already been burnt out on all the meetings engaging her community on the various revitalization plans that the emergency manager's restructuring plan serves to facilitate. She has been active in this circuit as her block representative since her mother passed in 2000, and she characterizes the actual work not in the input she gives but the information she receives, connecting her neighbors to the resources necessary to keep them in their homes and to survive: "If we don't get out and get the information, we still sitting in the blind, or in the dark, or whatever you want to label it as. So that's why I get up off my butt to find out what the hell is in my backyard." And she will find out, actively – posing concrete questions of flowery visions, demanding sense out of the jargon, representing her neighbors' perspectives with humor and care, and pressing representatives for a clear stand. She attributes her reputation for taking the room to straightforward resourcefulness:

"I done grew to have that charisma by learning, getting up in peoples' face, letting them remember me: your first impression is your best impression. So they won't forget you when you have to make that phone call to them. When you gotta call them, *Oh I remember you!* I know you *do* remember me, girlfriend! Or man, or whatever. That's my charisma: being out here in the community, dealing with so many organizations, so many people. If only you could see all the business cards I have collected over the years."

She is an expert at making that call. As she is wont to say, *if you don't ask for nothing, you don't get nothing.*

Asking seems like an increasingly obsolete method of doing municipal citizenship in the New Detroit in which the association of longtime homeowners (mostly elderly and low-income) are expected to compete for grants to get anything. I was with Toyia once when she was pressing a local community development program to do more to connect their resources to the

neighbors already there. This young, paid millennial dared retort: *And what is it that your organization has done?* By his aggressively defensive tone, the remark was meant to humiliate her for daring to cut down him a notch; but her playful tone had been meant to test, so as to build, a better working relationship. Apparently, she touched a nerve.

Apparently, holding the candle for over three decades of organizing and advocating for homeowners is not enough to earn this generation's respect. Toyia's organization was founded by the elder Mother Ethel Bussey, a retired schoolteacher, who brought the group together around a campaign to erect yard-lights. Many of these lights still stand today and have been a consistent source of safety as the street-lighting grid has fallen into disrepair and been replaced in restructuring by non-radiant lights that only project onto the streets below – eerily illuminating the streets with enough clarity to read a license plate while leaving adjacent yards in darkness. Back in her kitchen, Toyia recalls the incident: “It kind of hurt me. Because we ain't got a landmark of what we have done, besides meeting each other. We haven't had a landmark: which way we can stand out. We can meet, and we can get stronger, but we haven't stood out.” She compares their situation to a group from a much wealthier area close by, which has been successfully rebranding itself around its boundaries. “Do we need to say stuff like that?” proclaiming the right name, being part of the right brand. It seems a little absurd: “We're overlapping each other.”

Toyia doesn't like boundaries, the emerging best practice in American urban revitalization of picking up a name with some historical aura to delimit a strategic area, as if the Monopoly board needed by community developers to plan and distribute resources was a transparent and fixed reality. Toyia says such boundary-making “cuts a lot of people off. We might have money over here, but this side don't have money or the other side. And that hurts a

lot of people, saying, *well, how can we get included?* But then you want us to come to your meeting??...you didn't include us, [because] *well, that's where the boundaries is*, but then you want to put us on your website??" No landmarks, but she provides a handy image to represent the community being engaged by the organizations racking up the landmarks. They do not seem to respect the authority of her organization's history until they need to draw on it.

No wonder Toyia needs such charismatic force to be remembered. Even in the holding politicians accountable, she finds herself playing this game with the currency of image:

"They come in there like a revolving door...I haven't felt none of them really, *really* for the people: that back in the day, good old people. These young generation, they don't give a goddamn about us. They just want to a check, to me. And I tell them to they face: it ain't about us; y'all just want that check, that little position, that little clout, that notice – *oh that's [Rep. So-and-So!]* – they just want that recognition. But do you really, really, *really* feel the people? Because if they come back, and someone offers them a \$200,000 job, do you don't think they'll leave that job? hell yeah delete that job. Money talks, it ain't about the people."

She names the City council person who left for a \$200,000 job: "[She] act like she cared about us; she didn't care about us. It was about that position and money! Money! Money is the root of all evil, and the politicians is the worst. And they talking about a drug dealer? shit, come on." She laughs at her own indecency in calling out a respectability politics that attune people to the numbers and desensitize them to the people.

She acknowledges the city is in crisis but presents jobs as the problem, not cash flow, noting derisively and more than once, that none of these well-paid officials pleading budget constraints are missing a payday. Indeed, the board has shifted since the heyday of Coleman Young when he still had federal funds to work with – a heyday revisited with much nostalgia by the block-club generation. The emphasis has shifted from *the people* to *that notice*, a politician looking out for you to a politician trying to catch your look. We talk about how things changed – the destructive drugs imported under the open-secret of government collusion, family

structure, the subprime crisis. When remembering the height of mortgage foreclosures, Toyia says it reminds her of the riots in 1967 in terms of the scrapping and burning, as en masse homeowners were shut out of their investments in the American dream through legal fraud enforced by racialized shame. From riots rebelling against the forceful presence of a colonial police-force, occupying black neighborhoods, to riots rebelling against the forceful absence of predatory banks, driving black occupants out of their neighborhoods – indeed, times have changed.

We talk about the visions being presented across the community development sector. I bring up the last pitch we heard at such a meeting, by an organization that uses its funding to educate neighbors to prepare themselves for ecologically self-sustaining futures, thereby increasing their resilience during anticipated crises. I joke with some seriousness, “They’re basically preparing for people to stay poor.”

Toyia laughs, “That’s what you got out of that, Molly?” but picks up the joke, mimicking the presentation: “*Y’all stay poor now. Stay right there. Don’t move, okay?*”

“*Help is not on the way,*” I rejoin.

“*No money for y’all over there. There is vision over here, but y’all stay right there. Because there ain’t no vision for y’all right now.* That’s what you’re saying, in so many words, Molly?”

I try to put my finger on what I find cynical about such cheery pitches: “I’ve heard it in different ways and from different perspectives: *Detroit can make a comeback, but sacrifices have to be made.* Do you hear that, too, and do you agree to any extent?” I wrestle with the force of this bottom-line rationality, but Toyia doesn’t hesitate:

“I don’t agree at all. I thought the main targets was the worst areas. Hell-to-the-no, I don’t agree with that. It’s the worst areas! *Uplift* that areas! Somewhere, somehow, some kind of a way! And that’s why people don’t want to come out. And then you wonder why people are leaving in

droves. And then you're going to rebuild over the people that left, and bring the new people in??"

The planner hears from the community, *immediate gratification*; the community hears from the planner, *you just say right there, we will let you know what year we come in*.

I ask her about the current plans for the worst areas: green infrastructure – land cleared of built infrastructure and replaced by easy-draining grassy plans. She retorts, "Every-damn-thing gotta be green? Everything? In our neighborhood? Why does everything gotta be green infrastructure? Or, greening Detroit: green, green, green,"¹ she mimics, adding the word, "echo," to end the hollow list of options, bringing to mind the empty repetition of market fads (cf. Ngai 2005). She likes to joke about all the people who want to solve every vacant lot with a garden, *I'll be out there pouring bleach!* "This is the city, not the country; take that somewhere else." She has done enough fighting off the elements in the wake of disinvestment; she is not trying to invite more rats and raccoons as neighbors; she wants houses to be built for families. "There's gotta be some better options than that for us. We don't know, and we don't know how to get it. Or, what do we want?"

I have heard Toyia ask this question like a refrain between endless, pointless meetings featuring pitches from outside groups coming in. "We got to get everybody at the table, so we know what everybody is trying to do." She is not talking about a forum for groups with resources to engage groups that represent communities; she is talking about a meeting among these groups, collaborating and not just talking.

"If they want to come into our neighborhoods, we have to really ask, what is it that we want? We have to get it down on paper...I can't be the only one asking. It has to be a hell-of-a majority asking: what we want? As taxpayers, as they say."

¹ See Safransky (2014) for a critique of the "greening" phenomenon in Detroit.

They're always being told, *you don't have enough people*. At least not in the hyper-local boundaries that matter. "We don't know what the City does for us, what the County does for us, what the State does for us. Because we don't ask for nothing." There are bigger pots of money for the citizen bodies to which she belongs; if only they were not cut off by boundaries.

What Toyia is asking to do sounds simple enough. All the new, funded groups certainly have their visions down on paper. But throughout the bankruptcy and its immediate aftermath, there was a strange atmosphere of suspension that seemed to forestall Toyia's growing itch to get concrete about all these promised futures. Everybody from the City could only say, *we have to wait and see* – all that could be done seemed to be promising and planning, as none of these promises and plans could move forward with the plan for municipal underwriting still pending in bankruptcy. All Toyia could do was get out information on resources to her neighbors. She didn't get much information on the bankruptcy itself except from news headlines and my thick descriptions as anthropological observer. She summed up my experience exactly: "I know bankruptcy can either put you in a coma, or wake you up." She was once a union steward for the UAW; she knew the retirees had gotten got.

When I returned to Detroit two years after the case's close, Toyia seemed quite ready to wake up. She was out of patience and done waiting. It's not gratification she has been demanding but some simple r-e-s-p-e-c-t.² She was still organizing according to her modus operandi of getting out the information her neighbors would need to survive and wielding her charismatic power to leave an impression. But the information was getting deeper, as she was reading up more and more on the contemporary politics of gentrification in cities like New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco (e.g., Moskovitz 2017). The waiting period of bankruptcy

² See Galster (2012) for the stakes of respect in the city's history.

had given way to a shower of new investments in her neighborhood – from entrepreneurial bros snatching up properties to flip with mysterious sources of capital investment to greening projects elaborately-designed and fully-planned upon arrival at the community engagement table. Wait and see, indeed.

My now-old friend, Tristan Taylor, had jumped on board organizing with Toyia, drawn to her power to change the air in a packed meeting when she intervenes to call it how she sees it. Tristan is not from this neighborhood, which complicates the organization's authority representing these particular grassroots. Tristan is not from this block: he is from many blocks, having lived all over the east side and, indeed, the west side. In his eyes, the struggle facing this neighborhood is a struggle facing all his neighborhoods – the boundaries boxing up the grassroots neatly also serve to undercut the power of those Detroiters who have not managed to hang onto ownership of family homes.

Tristan was eager to help Toyia move forward in her quest to get down on paper what she and her neighbors really want out of all of the redevelopment plans and revitalization money touching down on this valued riverside area, which they have fought so hard and so long to maintain against the crushing press of disinvestment. But it turned out that to actually make Toyia's dream happen, not everybody would remain at the table. The organizations did not agree on how to proceed: a disagreement that hinged not on the content of what the people wanted but the framing – specifically, on the word “demands.” Those invested in negotiating with incoming developers found the word antagonistic. Tristan believed the word necessary precisely because the negotiation is antagonistic, when one side has all the power and resources. He did not believe the promise of inclusion would include most Detroiters, not when it was bought by polite collaboration.

As president, Toyia found herself with the deciding vote on the question and decided on demanding. Hearing folks recount meeting afterwards, I know it was not an easy decision. There has been a shift in the board, a split among a good group of intelligent people who all want the best for the neighborhood. But the pursuit of surviving the rising tide of investment has split neighbors who stuck so closely together to survive the long and malicious drought: do you play the game to see what you can get; or flip the table on which such games are played?

This dilemma produces structural resonance with all sorts of institutions that face budget retrenchment. I have spent years in the academy with my fingers straining on the edges of the table, begging my colleagues to quit playing and help flip. The table never budged, weighed with unspoken hesitations to address the white elephant in the room. At least I know now who has got my back (although I did throw it out in the process). This structural echo complicates the optics of the disagreement, which sometimes looks like a question of which white outsiders to trust: the ones with big resources and development plans, or the ones with tiny resources and dissertation projects. But optics matter, as do institutionally-backed authoritative claims to expertise, whether competing experts disavow or embrace their political specificity. They need not be determinative to a factor in the calculations structuring the board. I was careful not to take sides, not that it mattered.

That summer, I interview Felicia Denson on the porch of her family home in which she serves as caretaker for her mother. Her father, migrated from Mississippi, bought the house in the 1930s, and it is the home in which Felicia was raised. She intends to keep it: a place her kin can always come back to and for which her parents sacrificed. She is ready to demand:

“Demand is a powerful word. You’re stating, this is what I want, and I ain’t going to settle for less.”

But she doesn’t believe it should strike the fear it seems to:

“I can’t make a decision on their life, how can you make on mine? Listen to us. We are not all so radical, that we want to be rallied up for any kind of chaos or anything. We just want to sit down and have a conversation with *someone* there, at least one or two, who are *really* listening to what we’re asking them.”

It’s the “really” that makes it radical.

Felicia says she is full of what they have been serving in the community engagement process, so she is sending it back: “They come in, and they sell us a short story. Just a short story – it don’t even have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Just a short story, and they figure, *oh, they’ll fall for it. We’ll tell them this, so they won’t be harping about a demand that that they want.*” The Detroit Future city book has more of a timeline – it begins with the ominous, *STABILIZE*, and ends with the ambiguous, *TRANSFORM*. But is Felicia’s investment expected to make it past stabilization? Her family home has long been a source of stability; how is it going to transform?

She is not falling for the short story when the longer story is looking like the extra-local powers-that-be want to wipe black people out. She asks, “How can you wipe out God’s people?” I ask her how she knows they are trying, and she responds,

“They’re making it so hard for us to be able to afford our insurance for our home, taxes, car insurance, health insurance [all expenses on which Detroiters are paying maximum rates and proportion of their incomes]. I mean I’m retired, if they’re cutting year by year by year, I don’t know how long I’m going to be able afford all these things. But: I’m still keeping it all in prayer.”

Felicia is a devout Catholic, and her strong faith motivates her organizing work:

“Each and every day, I say a prayer, but I also try to act on the prayer of getting more supporters to come out, and take this serious, and understand, this is all we have. If they take this away from us, it’ll just be a dream. Or a memory of a dream. Nothing physical we can see or touch anymore. Our parents worked too hard; they gave up sacrifices to make sure we’re here today – especially, I know my parents did.”

She wants her house to stay a house – solid brick – and not get reduced to “a house of the past, a street of the past, a city of the past,” that her children can “tell a story about but have nothing to show about.” With so many powerful futures pressing in, it’s hard to stay present. Felicia wants

more than the stories: she wants to express how she feels, show no fear, and teach the next generation to take up the fight.

What she is saying isn't radical. It is not much different from what the community-engagement designers are after: getting people to come out, expressing their voices, recruiting the kids. But there seems a deep disagreement about what for. This point strikes me as Felicia describes importance of neighborhood cleanups, a valued practice of the community development sector she is working to challenge. She describes the effects that clean-cut grass versus garbage have on inside the self, arguing,

"Beauty brings out the goodness in everybody, just to see a beautiful neighborhood from corner to corner...Because money doesn't mean anything. We could have money stacked from here to the top of the world, but if you're not keeping up the property or keeping up your neighborhood, what good is the money gonna do?"

She presents an inversion of means and ends of the dominant revitalization logic: do neighbors clean up properties to leverage property-value, or do we leverage property-value to clean up properties? Must the monetary value of an individual parcel on the market always come before the meaning of the neighborhoods they bring together? Perhaps it is not an inversion but the antagonism of which Tristan speaks.

Tristan Taylor is definitely a radical. His razor-sharp analytical mind slices through the stories without hesitation. He is observant and listens closely, not only watching games of power being played at overlapping levels of the municipal board but also feeling the pulse of his fellow-Detroiters' aspirations. His heart beats that pulse that has driven pathways of migration and movements of resistance of Black Detroiters as long as the city has stood (Boyd 2017). He would make an incredible ethnographer, and I alternately thank God and curse the devil that he is not another graduate student set adrift. With the educational opportunities and resources he was denied in the segregated Detroit public school system, he would have my

place. No wonder he is dating another graduate student and finds himself integral to another dissertation – the work of Allison Laskey, focused on the resistance to revitalization being waged by Tristan, Toyia, and Felicia. Tristan’s thinking has indelibly shaped this dissertation as my own has clarified in parrying with him over the dialectics of municipal struggle.

Tristan objects vehemently to the “pauperization” of Detroiters in restructuring around fiscal resilience, a future planned around the expectation of continued budget retrenchment and abandonment by state and federal governments. It is an austerity program he sees many activists embracing as a post-capitalist future. For Tristan, a post-capitalist future is only imaginable through struggle for state power and the prosperity his people have labored to furnish, still waiting for their share. All these design solutions avoid the meat of the issue: the people’s struggle to take and express power: “We have to not be afraid to use our power. And stop believing the myth that the rich and powerful are the only ones who determine what happens and what doesn’t happen.” I record our conversation at a bar on a stretch of the Cass Corridor not yet rebranded as Midtown. We have had this conversation before; we will have it again. We never properly sit for an interview.

I describe to him a recent meeting I had attended in which it seemed the main substance had been the exchange of business cards, and that most people who attend the meeting left with nothing but more talk. I describe how careful I find myself in such exchanges of business cards, in the mutual feeling-out of where one stands in the revitalization consensus that can determine whether any further conversation will follow. I am well-disciplined to this game in the academic competition for grants, a seat at the table, a role in the making of consensus terms that will become the standard for disciplinary fields that all those who follow will have to articulate their

projects within. Tristan describes it as how people are taught, voicing the method so as to critique it:

“You are in a competition, and it is your job, however you can, to sell yourself as best as possible to the people who have money and hope you can be one of the people not left out. And if you’re good enough, maybe you won’t be left out. Maybe you’ll cash in. Because what’s the truth? The truth is: in the redevelopment of Detroit, everyone knows there’s not going to be enough room for everybody. And so the hope is, if you’re a person with a scheme – because this is what capitalism is all about right? America especially, it’s the center where people can make their dreams come true if you work hard enough – so if you have a good enough scheme, and a good enough talk, and you find the right person, then you can expect some results. The problem is, the reality is, they are not looking to give much, and it’s not about how hard you work, or even how good your scheme is. Because they’re not really interested. You can talk and beg and plead as much as you like, and you’ll still be left out. But that method is taught to be sacrosanct. Like it is the thing that you must do, the only way that you can survive. Fighting is just too much trouble. Don’t make a bad name for yourself.” And in the meantime: *“No one asks the question, what does it mean if you can’t find anybody to sell yourself to? Well, if you don’t know the answer to that, you’re just shit out of luck, and join the tens of thousands of people who have no opportunity and who have no future.”*

Fighting might be too much trouble, but it’s a fight anyway:

“So you’re itching, fighting to be that few left standing, but that method is taught and practiced by millions of people. Of course it makes sense that that method is taught by the principals and the teachers, by their institutions. Because that is the method that maintains capitalism. It is the method that puts all the cards in their hands. Because it means the fealty to the rich. And at their feet, you worship.”

Fealty to the rich: Tristan’s phrase recalls a feudal form of power, recasting a patriotic faith in the American dream as a futile form of idolatry. I often struggle with him over the totalizing categories of his anti-capitalist analytic: the abstractions of us/ them, the rich/ the people, which so often come undone in ethnographic practices of locating these categories both in the gendered and racialized hierarchies that complicate them and in the ordinary encounters that destabilized them. But this theory of power isn’t just a story to Tristan: the sharp, thin line holding back the vision of leadership he already embodies is concrete, and the antagonists, particular. He makes it concrete to me by expressing his critique through the zealotry of faith. Perhaps I do worship at the altar of capital, when I consider the ways I orient my daily practices

around the judgment of market publics that will value my work (an ever-speculative gambit).

The truth is: in academia, everybody knows there is not going to be enough room for everybody. I am fighting to keep up with the system of schemes, too exhausted to fight it. I must fight simply to do anything otherwise than scheming, to be oriented any other way but the system, whether with or against it grain.

It is this fourth-dimensional openings of world-historical struggles that holds in tension the necessity and freedom by which us/them may be materially determined and yet demands ongoing commitment – we are not reduced to “shells of ourselves,” as Tristan says. It helps to hold in tension the open secret of anti-blackness that structures the system of schemes (Martinot and Sexton 2003), and the shared stake of all people (indeed, earth-dwellers) in the violences it produces. Something crucial to both truths is disavowed in their reconciliation, and the impulse to transcend differences among the oppressed through easy analogical identification of structurally-irreconcilable positions (Wilderson 2003). Tristan would not have a horizontal form of belonging that erases the forms of difference that produce leaders. He suggests in a Fanonian vein (2007), it is those left behind by the scheming that must lead the struggle against the system that sustains it.

With that leadership in view, the aura deflates on schemes that hype market publics. “People read these crazy, fantastical stories of the goodness that is Detroit,” Tristan recounts a headline proclaiming, *there is hope in the city!* He is exasperated:

“Who?? Where?? You mean the people who are part of the Detroit Economic Club have hope? Yeah, but their hope is different than the hope of the community because their interest is different. So it’s making sure to recognize that very fundamental difference. Because you’re right, the power of consensus, and that’s why it’s there. It’s there in part to distort that very basic fact.”

His answer profoundly displaces my understanding of how to negotiate the white privilege that structures my scheming to the idols of capital: where do my interests really lie fifty years from now in the transformed future? Is it really in my interest, now or ever, to pay fealty to the rich? Is it really in my interest, not as it is assessed in market publics but on that truly final day of judgment, to keep my good name clean while God's people are wiped out?

Tristan is thinking about those folks who will never have access to a capital – whose interests will never align, not now, not 50 years from now. He echoes Michelle Alexander, calling gentrification “the New Jim Crow,” a white movement into neighborhoods emptied by the forms mass incarceration she documents (2012). The anti-black racist distribution of exclusion may no longer fall along legally-delimited lines; but the line between those left standing in the American scheme, and those with no future, are mathematically-predictable in their anti-black outcomes (McKittrick 2014). Such a part with no part (Rancière 2004) has no ante to trade-off sacrifice for a promised payoff (Moten 2013). Tristan's insistence is that the whitewashed promise doesn't work for anybody but those getting paid off now and who sacrifice never. Tristan believes in sacrifice – for the struggle, to become the leaders who will confront the payoff game and demand something different. I suppose the very concept of sacrifice gives the lie to the trade-off: what you give up of yourself under the altar of the sacred is definitive, transformational. The trade-off now means you'll be someone else when and if the payoff ever lands. What will you have lost: the fear of consequences, or the fullness of life?

Method

[end scene]

The disagreement over how to play the game of survival has been hard on the block family. But the thing about family is, it stays family even when you are fighting. Disagreement

isn't the threat of an internal enemy that must be eradicated or else threaten our very survival; disagreement is part of survival, how we live on. Years pass. Love is there even when it's painful to feel. We might disagree on who we will become in disagreeing on how to become, but the context into which we are becoming need not fall from view. Whether we be optimistic or pessimistic, hopeful or cynical about what this context holds – the very work of articulating these disagreements illuminates much about that context which we must survive, the shape of that “we.”

Ethnographic method offers a means of translating across incommensurable values and disagreeing perspectives, not to bring them into alignment, but to draw more expansively and reflexively on the potentialities of our traditions of living on (Asad 2018). Ethnographic method engages history as it is lived and structured, alongside but not reducible to how it is told (Trouillot 1995), a method of countering the perpetual amnesia induced by consensus – the happily ever after that a strategically-negotiated moment of compromise has somehow eliminated the substance of the disputes left unresolved or rearranged. Whether for those seeking the rupture or reproduction of the systems we inhabit, ethnographic method can illuminate the missing middle of living across these ripples (Cox 2015). It offers a method of attending to infrastructures in their animacies and allegories: in practices of laboring, adjudicating, and caring, these infrastructures show us something that escapes narrative-capture about who “we” already are, giving weight and shape to the values debated and taken for granted.

My old Sufi Master, Rakiba Brown, understood anthropology better than me: *it's what you do*, she instructed me. She cuts it down a notch, from the institutionalization to the study – a practice, not a receptacle, of knowing (Harney and Moten 2013). During the summer of pilot

research I spent getting to know the city under her wing, she would chide me when I would get carried away with a particular story of Detroit's crisis and captured by the necessities of the vision it offered. I could so easily lose track of my present task of listening, noticing, and learning, when I would instead busy myself with urgent calculations of how to adjust my year-to-date life to better approximate a particularly persuasive vision and act out its storyline. I found so many visions persuasive that I would grow contorted twisting and turning to inhabit them. I wanted the right story, itching for the one that would fit perfectly, that I could settle right into. (They were all a bit too tight).

But Rakiba instructed me to slow down. *It's what you do* – it was not *which* story that made for a good ethnographic question, but the *how* of stories – how we do them, and how they do us (Asad 2018). She had friends and interlocutors across so many groups with different stories. She didn't adjudicate among them but valued all the gifts brought to the work of working together. Her world was whole: she could learn from any perspective without losing her own. Her truth was the illuminated thread that held together the tapestry of her political engagements. I'm still very much an apprentice in inhabiting my truth across the frayed tapestry of my engagements – such courage and clear-eyes takes practice. It is not something I can just put on, like one of Goffman's coats (McIntyre 1983).

I had a romantic impulse following her trails that I could find a way to hold it all together: to reconcile all the disagreements and find the common thread. But Rakiba showed me there were common threads all around, so many that the disagreements didn't need reconciliation. But perhaps, illumination (Benjamin 1968). She guided me to consider how my work could bring these different perspectives together, but not by offering a happily-ever-after. *It's what you do* – it's the practice of bringing together, the experience of translating

incommensurate differences. We might not to end up on the same page, dear reader, but we may find ourselves otherwise from where we began – an elsewhere from which to take up the present task of listening, noticing, and learning.

It's what you do – I have done my best to learn from every perspective I have encountered, including perspectives I have excluded from this account and those that would not engage my anthropological audit. I have let them each inflect my thinking, and I have been surprised by where I find myself, unmoored from opposing sides. And yet, my own values, indeed my own faith, have only become more clear, more distinct, and more true to my perspective. It is a method: I have learned it from her and so many teachers in so many places. The path remains long and uncertain, and I am so grateful for all who have contributed to the stretch of it that has come together here.

My dear reader, for whatever you may have learned thinking with me along the way, all credit belongs to the One Being. The many errors and much errantry belong to my non-existent subjectivity.

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