

Encountering Detroit: The Post-Industrial City as Stage

Elizabeth Currans

The Strip was fueled by outcity money. It was where people from the 'burbs came to feel decadent. The thok-thok sound in the air was the copter limos that bussed people in from the 'burbs to the rooftop of the Strip. From there they would descend staircases that led down inside the buildings. With enough money, you could get a taste of the city without ever setting foot on its streets.

—Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*¹

You probably know that Detroit is the most segregated city in America. Within city limits, it's also the least diverse. White people live in a wrap around porch called the suburbs. Read: no solicitors, wet paint, guard dog. A porch cannot completely hide what is on the inside.

—Christine Hume, "It's Gonna Rain, An Essay"²

Novelist Nalo Hopkinson describes a post-white-flight Toronto in an imagined future where wealthy people drop into the inner city to enjoy nighttime entertainment without encountering urban inhabitants. Creative writer Christine Hume's image of Detroit surrounded by a wrap around porch provides another

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¹ Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 177.

² Christine Hume, "It's Gonna Rain, An Essay," *CURA: A Literary Magazine Of Art & Action*, Spring 2016, <http://curamag.com/issues/2016/3/17/its-gonna-rain-essay-christine-hume>.

way of thinking about the relationship between the suburbs and the city. Together these literary evocations serve as affective touchstones for my exploration of urban performances by non-residents in post-industrial, post-white-flight Detroit.

This essay explores encounters among differently situated people in public spaces from a fraught urban site. The focus of much discussion of U.S. postindustrialization, bankruptcy, and the pros and cons of unions, the fabled location of fantastic urban ruins and a city deeply associated with blackness and white suburban flight, Detroit conjures many feelings—fear, anger, pity, fascination, pride.³ My focus is on the practices of outsiders, who I refer to as local tourists, who visit the city rather than the experiences of residents or on those too fearful or disdainful to visit. By local tourists, I refer to those leaving near Detroit, including suburbanites and people from nearby cities. I explore how these outsiders view Detroit's relative emptiness, its legacy, and its ruins. Concurrent with this fascination are outsiders' approaches to the city's predominantly black and poor residents—they too are objects of fascination and too often treated as bystanders to political and recreational performances staged on the city's streets. While Hopkinson's dystopian description of suburban residents visiting city hot spots by helicopter is markedly more extreme than what I discuss here, this stark frame helps illuminate the feelings that animated two urban performances, the Detroit SlutWalk, a protest focused on sexual violence and victim blaming, and Tour de Troit, a thirty-mile bicycle ride through the city, that are the focus of this paper. Not only, as cultural critic Henri Lefebvre explains, is Detroit produced through "interaction between 'subjects' and their... surroundings," this process is animated by interactions among different groups of people and layers of history that culminate in a topographic, political, and affective geography that resembles the wrap around porch that Hume evokes.⁴

This essay is a primarily autoethnographic account of some of my experiences in Detroit as an inhabitant of a nearby city. I attended the Detroit SlutWalk

³ Nate Millington, "Post-Industrial Imaginaries: Nature, Representation and Ruin in Detroit, Michigan," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 1 (2013): 279–96; John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism," *Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics*, January 15, 2011, https://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/; John Gallagher, *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City* (Detroit: Painted Turtle, 2010); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Amy Maria Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia: Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 18.

as researcher working on a book about gender, protest, and public space.⁵ Some months later, I rode in the Tour de Troit in order to learn more about the area. In the process, I noticed resonances between these two seemingly different events. Both functioned as performances that enabled outsiders to engage the city. The frameworks participants used, of a protest and a bicycle tour, provided a repertoire of movements and relationships to the city that both minimized and maintained divisions between participants and city inhabitants. This essay brings my observations of the Tour de Troit and the SlutWalk into conversation with a few other voices—three people I interviewed about the SlutWalk, a colleague’s observations about the Tour de Troit, and scholarly and poetic engagements with Detroit. My interpretive process also includes engagement with affect, performance, and urban theory. Autoethnography, according to geographer Petra Doan, “combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narratives of the self... resulting in a thick description of life experiences” that reveals “emotion and insight.”⁶ By bringing my experiences into conversation with those of others, I contextualize my views without decentering them. Instead, I use my affective and intellectual engagements with these events as a way to invite readers to think through their own experiences in places they live and visit, including Detroit.

The SlutWalk and Tour de Troit each demonstrate a long-term dynamic between Detroit and Detroiters and suburbanites and other local tourists, such as those living in nearby university towns. In post-white flight, post-industrial Detroit, visitors engage the city as voyeurs, curious about the poverty and the creativity, the devastation and the resiliency. This process is complex, the result of decades of social policy and discriminatory views and practices, but also good intentions and investment in the city.

Careful attention to the processes of urban encounter can provide insights into how local and national, contemporary and historical narratives affect people’s experience of urban spaces and the possibilities, or perhaps impossibilities, of addressing structural issues (meaning systemic oppression as well as infrastructural problems) in encounters between people differently situated in relationship to processes of urban decline and revitalization. Attention to the nuances of interactions between participants and observers during these two events provides a window into a complex, multi-layered dynamic and demonstrates some of the difficulties of addressing the geographical and experiential distances among different groups of people with distinct relationships to Detroit. Thus,

⁵ Elizabeth Currans, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers: Women Activists Transforming Public Space* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

⁶ Petra L. Doan, “The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces – Reflections from beyond the Gender Dichotomy,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 17, no. 5 (October 1, 2010): 636, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2010.503121>.

this paper's argument is less about what should or shouldn't happen than about ways to attune ourselves to urban interactions. While I identify voyeurism as a key and problematic dynamic between visitors and the people and built environment in Detroit, I do so in order to encourage us to think about how and why we encounter people and places in the ways we do.

Voyeurism, Ruin Tourism, and Affect

If, according to philosopher Walter Benjamin, "Paris created the type of the flaneur" then Detroit has come to define the voyeur.⁷ Suburbanites began their forays into the city to witness its depravity and beauty as early as the infamous events of July 1967, variously referred to as an uprising or a riot. Historian Amy Maria Kenyon explains that as soon as federal troops made the area "safe," suburbanites "jumped into station wagons, locked the car doors, and went sightseeing in such numbers that the curfew had to be reinstated."⁸ The city recently abandoned by those with means and those unable to maintain the racially exclusive neighborhoods they desired became a living display to drive through with locked doors. The voyeur is mobile and invested in viewing, just like the flaneur; however, the distance between the viewer and viewed is reified through the metal, fiberglass, and glass of automobile frames and windows. As performance and disability theorist Petra Kuppers explains, the view from the car window frames our vision and allows for "dissociating from the content of our surrounding and focusing on the dynamics, the format, the aesthetics" of the situation.⁹

Contemporary voyeuristic processes of viewing Detroit's abandoned buildings and riding bicycles or staging protests in the city are extensions of racialized and classed processes of urban growth and decline that were underway by the early 1900s. Historian Thomas Sugrue describes the abysmal housing situations faced by black Detroiters in the 1940s. As migrants arrived from the South hoping to escape entrenched Southern racism and find jobs in one of the city's many factories, they were forced into small, overcrowded neighborhoods. Black sections of the city were officially redlined, rendering inhabitants ineligible for federal loans, a process that has had long lasting effects on many communities,

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), 417.

⁸ Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia*, 12.

⁹ Petra Kuppers, "Moving in the Cityscape: Performance and the Embodied Experience of the Flaneur," in *Performance and the Contemporary City: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Nicolas Whybrow (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 56.

something recent unrest in Ferguson, Missouri has demonstrated once again.¹⁰ Conditions deteriorated as houses went unrepaired and more and more people packed into existing structures. The small Black middle-class sought refuge in more elite sections of the city, which subsequently became overcrowded as well. Sugrue explains that “In the postwar years, white urban dwellers fiercely defended their turf. They referred to black migration in military terms: they spoke of ‘invasions’ and ‘penetration,’ and plotted strategies of ‘resistance.’”¹¹ Such strategies included posting signs claiming “Negroes moving here will be burned,” targeting of white people who sold their homes to black people, and demonstrations in front of black owned homes.¹² These actions and the feelings that motivated and emerged in response to them demonstrate the gravity of Italo Calvino’s observation that cities are “made of desires and fears.”¹³

Alongside racial tensions and movement in and out of the city, factories began closing and unemployment rose. By the 1960s, the situation was dire and in July 1967, the now notorious uprising/riot transformed the slow trickle of white and middle-class people to the suburbs into full-fledged flight, a process media scholar Rebecca Kinney claims could also be described as “black containment” within city limits.¹⁴ Thus, the suburbs became Detroit’s wrap around porch through efforts to limit black people’s movement while enabling white flight. Some black Detroiters also fled, triggering another wave of white flight as Southfield and Oak Park became black-dominant cities.¹⁵

These are only a few, albeit prominent, threads that intertwine to produce the affect-laden history of contemporary Detroit. History is always complex. Kenyon describes two people who encountered each other in a morgue in 1967 after one of their sons was killed, demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of Detroit’s history: “[They] already know that a single event... has no single explanation. There are only those tangled narratives, small explanations and large explanations, all equally rooted in a longer history of shared space.”¹⁶ This ongoing chronicle of shared space includes discrimination, fear, and hatred alongside joy, care, and curiosity.

¹⁰ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 38; Richard Rothstein, “The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of Its Troubles” (Economic Policy Institute, October 15, 2014), <http://www.epi.org/publication/making-ferguson/>.

¹¹ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 246.

¹² Sugrue, 247–49.

¹³ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 44.

¹⁴ Rebecca Kinney, “Longing for Detroit: The Naturalization of Racism through Ruin Porn and Digital Memories,” *Media Fields* 5, no. 1 (2012): 5.

¹⁵ Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, Reprint edition (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 231.

¹⁶ Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia*, 16.

Between 1958 and 2010 the city lost nearly two-thirds of its population, creating what journalist John Gallagher calls “ghost streets,” an evocative although loaded assessment that risks erasing people living on those streets.¹⁷ In 2014 there were 713,000 people in a city built for two million and there were approximately 10,000 vacant lots throughout the city.¹⁸ Recent revitalization has brought new investment into the city, but, as in most cities, renewal is uneven and systematically disenfranchised populations have seen little change.¹⁹

Urban renewal often focuses on areas of the city deemed most likely to generate revenue from wealthy residents and visitors, which in Detroit has been accompanied by calls to shut off services to some sectors, including areas where some of the poorest people live.²⁰ Detroit’s financial condition is dire and results from a host of intertwining factors including a shrinking tax-base and political disinvestment. Nonetheless, simply focusing on revenue misses some of the ways that Detroit is flourishing. For example, geographer Sara Safransky describes the care work Detroiters perform in their neighborhoods:

Many residents without legal title spend an inordinate amount of time caring for land. They develop coordinated systems of maintenance, including scheduled moving of vacant lots, boarding up some houses, and planting flowers in front of others to make them look lived in. Some hold antiforeclosure protests, petition against evictions, and demand that absentee landlords take care of land and buildings. Others start community gardens, paint murals, and claim vacant parcels for parks and theater spaces. For some, caring for the land is about keeping up property values and creating safe neighborhoods. Others see the city’s de facto public lands as a commons.²¹

In contrast to images of Detroit as picturesque ruins, empty lots, or a crime-ridden wasteland, Safransky’s depiction breathes life into Detroit’s “ghost streets.” The thoughtful care for land provides new ways of thinking about city life, about sharing space. These forms of care can go unnoticed by people passing through in moving cars, on bicycles, or as part of a mass of protestors.

As local tourists, our encounters with the city were touched by the affective weight of Detroit’s history and the national and international fascination with Detroit. Thus, both the bicycle tour and the protest overlapped with what geographer Emily Slager describes as ruin tourism, focused on “sites of abandonment

¹⁷ Gallagher, *Reimagining Detroit*, 21.

¹⁸ Sara Safransky, “Greening the Urban Frontier: Race, Property, and Resettlement in Detroit,” *Geoforum* 56 (2014): 237–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.06.003>.

¹⁹ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, xxv; Safransky, “Greening the Urban Frontier,” 243.

²⁰ Safransky, “Greening the Urban Frontier,” 243; Martelle, *Detroit*, 257.

²¹ Safransky, “Greening the Urban Frontier,” 244.

and urban decay."²² While neither event set out to tour ruins, both capitalized on participants' views of Detroit as a deindustrialized urban space. The Tour de Troit, which organizers described as encouraging healthy living, took riders past many iconic industrial ruins. The SlutWalk claimed sparsely populated city streets and parks in order to address sexual violence and victim blaming. Despite these disparate frameworks for claiming public space, both events built on Detroit's reputation as "abandoned" and this dynamic influenced the way participants encountered the city and its inhabitants. Put another way, not only was "the site a collaborator in the performance process," to use theater scholar Laura Levin's words, histories and affects were also interwoven in these urban performances.²³

In exploring the dynamic between outsiders and Detroit's ruins and people, literary scholar John Patrick Leary writes: "So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city."²⁴ Thus, the slang term "ruin porn" references this simultaneous aestheticization and romanticization of decline and the concurrent dehumanization of inhabitants, especially poor Black residents.²⁵ Photos titillate viewers rather than engaging the city's inhabitants. The city is depicted much like a post-Soviet abandoned city, Indian slum, or Brazilian favela. This exoticism is central to the lure of ruin photography and to Detroiters' reactions. Leary explains that "to see oneself portrayed in this way, as a curiosity to be lamented or studied, is jarring for any Detroiters, who is of course also an American, with all the sense of self-confidence and native-born privilege that we're taught to associate with the United States."²⁶ Thus, outsiders' gazes threaten inhabitants' position as first world dwellers. As inhabitants of the U.S. we're used to watching and observing spectacles from either the safety of our living rooms or the bubble of the privileged tourist broadening her horizons by vacationing or volunteering in the so-called Third World. The cars that brought suburbanites back to view the post-riot devastation helped transform Detroit into what theorists describe as the

²² Emily Jean Slager, "Touring Detroit: Ruins, Representation, and Redevelopment" (University of Oregon, 2013), 2.

²³ Laura Levin, "Can the City Speak?: Site-Specific Art After Poststructuralism," in *Performance and the City*, ed. D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr, and Kim Solga (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 241.

²⁴ Leary, "Detroitism."

²⁵ Kinney, "Longing for Detroit."

²⁶ Leary, "Detroitism."

“Third World within,” a space within the First World that lacks the privilege of the rest of an industrialized society.²⁷

What, then, of local tourists? Do we remain first world dwellers in this dynamic? Does looking at Detroit affirm our privilege in the process of viewing Detroit and its residents? Voyeurism creates and maintains separation between voyeurs and those they view, in this case people whose lives don’t reflect the privilege generally associated with the U.S. How, then, can we acknowledge this power dynamic in a way that helps unravel it? Part of the answer, it seems, is to engage across the Detroiter-local tourist rift, which requires grappling with the history that facilitated current divisions.

Contemporary ruin tourism builds on a history of voyeuristic encounters. One of the people I interviewed about the Detroit SlutWalk intentionally moved to Detroit from the suburbs because of her commitment to the city. Stephanie views events like the SlutWalk and the Tour de Troit as having the potential to destigmatize the city and to encourage reinvestment in it. Yet she also sees these events as part of a broader process of detached encounters. She explains:

It’s becoming kind of more a curiosity especially for younger people, college-age people, and... I think, “Great. Come. See what Detroit's about. It’s a cool place.” But it’s interesting to me that... [t]hey go to the areas that they know are predominantly people from the ‘burbs because... in their minds, those are the safer areas to go to, you know? So you don't see that many people over at Heidelberg Project,²⁸ [a block of houses and abandoned lots transformed into art projects] which is a pretty rough area, or if you do they are not getting out of their cars. We just took my brother and his family from Oklahoma... and they didn't want to get out of the car. They were freaked out... but as we’re driving through there’s all of these other cars, really nice cars like Subarus and a bunch of white people doing this, you know? Driving really tense and not getting out of their cars.

For her, as someone invested in Detroit, this experience was demoralizing. Tense drivers maneuvered their cars through the site, enabling passengers to view the complexly layered urban space—partially abandoned, overgrown, ar-

²⁷ Richard A. Schroeder, Kevin St. Martin, and Katherine E. Albert, “Political Ecology in North America: Discovering the Third World Within?,” *Geoforum*, Political Ecology in North America, 37, no. 2 (2006): 163–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.05.003>; “Third World Within” (Brooklyn, United States: Independent Progressive Politics Network, January 31, 2002), <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.emich.edu/docview/209607461?pq-origsite=summon>.

²⁸ For more information about the Heidelberg Project, visit their website: <http://www.heidelberg.org/>

tistically transformed—from the comfort of their cars. Yet, their cars didn't enable ease.

This example demonstrates Kupperts' observation that "[c]ities are not just made out of concrete, glass and bricks, but live in the bodies, habits and minds of their inhabitants."²⁹ As Stephanie's experience demonstrates, the city also lives in the bodies and minds of its visitors. Their knowledge of these spaces is, obviously, less intimate, yet it still structures how they interact with the inhabitants and the built environment. People bring their ideas and experiences with them to the city. For Detroit's visitors, this includes fascination with the iconic deindustrialized city.

Both events I explore in this paper required entering and setting foot on Detroit's streets, thereby temporarily reversing the flow of people out of the city. While cars brought them in, once they arrived participants left the supposed safety of locked vehicles and moved through the streets, encountering city dwellers. These encounters were influenced by histories of broken promises, greed, violence, racism, and classism as well as by individual feelings of curiosity, generosity, resentment, and confusion.

The 2012 Tour de Troit: Mobile Voyeurs

The Tour de Troit, an obvious riff on the Tour de France, began in 2001 as a way to promote environmentally friendly, healthy transportation. On their website, the organization describes their mission as "promot[ing] healthy living through running, bicycling and bicycle safety [and] work[ing] to educate citizens, host public events, and collaborate with community and government organizations to support non-motorized infrastructure."³⁰ The event has grown considerably over time. In 2008, there were 1,000 riders; in 2012, the year I focus on here, there were 5,000. According to an organizer, of that 5,000 there were approximately 4,200 riders from Michigan. Ann Arbor contributed the largest number at 350 riders, followed by Detroit at 300, and then Royal Oak, a northern suburb, at 225. 200 riders came from Canada. Additionally, approximately 200 of the 300 volunteers were Detroiters. In total, there were about 450 Detroit riders and 50 non-riders out of 5,000.³¹ In 2013, the march drew 6,000 people. In both 2014 and 2015, there were over 7,000 participants.

On the morning of September 15, 2012, riders met at Roosevelt Park, located on Michigan Avenue and Vernor Highway. Port-a-potties lined Vernor

²⁹ Kupperts, "Moving in the Cityscape: Performance and the Embodied Experience of the Flanuer," 54.

³⁰ "Home," Tour de Troit, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.tour-de-troit.org/>.

³¹ Kelli Kavanaugh, "Re: Question about the 2012 Ride," September 18, 2012.

Highway, which cut through the park toward the shell of Detroit's massive train station, Michigan Central Station. Soon bikers lined up facing the train station awaiting our 9am departure time. Among our registration materials was a map detailing the tour route and noting the sites of historical interest we would pass, including the train station, described as "Detroit's most iconic ruin."

Participants moved through the city at a leisurely biking pace. Even this relatively slow pace helped maintain some distance between bikers and with the people and buildings we passed. My colleague, postcolonial literary scholar Nataša Kovačević, described her experience as: "Not exactly flaneuring but still significantly slowing down the usual pace of the car, Detroit's main product and means of transportation, of segregation."³² Thus, by getting out of the cars that brought us to the city, we were able to slow down, minimizing yet not erasing the segregation endemic to the city as we biked over nearly thirty miles of the city's streets. Riding bikes through a city built by and for the automobile industry resisted the legacy of quick expansion and subsequent abandonment.

Moving through the city as part of a bicycle pack was hyper-presentist while conducting participants into, in Benjamin's words, "a vanished time."³³ History, as represented by Detroit's notorious ruins, greeted participants from the beginning of the tour at the train station to glimpses of Fort Wayne and the old Packard factory. Yet, despite these snapshots of crumbling industrial excess, the present continually asserted itself in words spray-painted across concrete walls filled with broken windows, and in the faces of those who looked back at the wheeled voyeurs moving through their neighborhoods. At one point a friend noticed a fire in an abandoned industrial site. One of the police officers marshaling the ride proclaimed "Everyone look to your left where you will see a fire," and laughed. The bicycle tour was, apparently, both more worthy of his attention and more novel than yet another industrial fire. His response indicated that the fire was part of what we were there to view rather than something for public servants to be concerned about.

While we viewed the city, city dwellers viewed us. Kovačević described her experience: "this was a voyeuristic exercise in observing the 'happy natives' waving from their decrepit yet picturesque porches, a description one might encounter in a colonial travel narrative. This was even more enhanced by the obvious racial and physical divisions between the cyclists and residents. Not to mention that for Detroiters who might need to get around using any other means available in the absence of public transportation, the decision to do a thirty-mile bike ride for entertainment purposes might seem completely absurd and luxurious."³⁴ The race and class divisions between the predominantly white, compara-

³² Nataša Kovačević, *Le Tour*, September 2012.

³³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 416.

³⁴ Kovačević, *Le Tour*.

tively wealthy, mostly non-resident bicyclists and those watching us from the porches, cars, and sidewalks they inhabit everyday seemed stark. Yet, for her, a well-traveled immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, these dynamics are only part of the story. Instead, she explains,

I was impressed that people came out to greet us so early on a Saturday morning. An elderly Mexican couple, decorously draped in formal bathrobes (presumably donned over pajamas), and holding hands, comes to mind. It is not that I expected distance, or hostility, or indifference. It's just that the cordial laughter and greetings that were exchanged counted for some, even fleeting, even insignificant in the long run, intimacy that wasn't there before. While I resent the fact that the bike route put these neighborhoods 'on the map,' 'rescuing' them from daily hegemonic invisibility, I was perhaps put on the map too – maybe I was the 'happy native' riding by, alternately admired and pitied.³⁵

Thus, for her residents' greetings provided meaningful welcome. From her vantage point near the front of the procession, the people who stepped out to greet her and other bicyclists were engaged with the spectacle the group provided. I rode near the rear of the procession and noticed fewer people on porches, fewer greetings, and more tired faces staring back at the final segment of the large group that had shut down the streets for over thirty minutes. These stares seemed to be a form of resistance that transformed us into "happy natives" behaving curiously.

Benjamin describes the streets as "the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their four walls."³⁶ The collective is also, as geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift note, "imperfectly unified and never unitary."³⁷ Bystander responses to the mass of people moving through Detroit on a Saturday morning demonstrate this complexity. Together we formed a collective that learned and felt simultaneously even if the learning and feeling was quite different. Kovačević's feeling of intimacy with those watching us ride by and my sense of alienation from bystanders I encountered were part of the affective flow. As bicyclers streamed into the city, the collective experience shifted to accommodate additional bodies and the feelings that accompanied them.

Different feelings in response to the same event are part of the complexity of public encounters. We all feel concurrently, but what we feel might be radically

³⁵ Kovačević.

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 423.

³⁷ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xiii.

different. Critical theorist Sara Ahmed explains that “we may walk into the room and ‘feel the atmosphere,’ but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point.”³⁸ Different people—organizers, participants, bystanders, and different people within each group—experienced the Tour de Troit differently. Feelings might also change over the course of the event. For example, it may be entertaining to watch a bunch of out-of-towners bike by your house while you’re having breakfast, but it might be frustrating an hour later when the street you want to travel down is occupied by the same group of people.

I began the ride excited to see Detroit differently than I could from my car, but felt voyeuristic and even obstructionist at different points. I particularly remember riding through Mexicantown, an area named for Mexican immigrants and their descendants who began settling in the area in the 1940s, and seeing a man and a woman who I read as a heterosexual Latino/a couple, likely in their 60s, watching us from their porch. At first I was struck by how few people we’d seen, but then was suddenly overcome with shame. The sense of freedom I felt riding through the streets suddenly shifted to anxiety about my motivations for riding and the effects of the tour on locals.

Near the end of the ride, we entered a section of town where traffic couldn’t be stopped completely. Instead, police officers were letting bikers ride through three or four stoplights before allowing the accumulated traffic flow through the intersection of Grand Boulevard and Lafayette Street. As I stopped near the front of group of halted riders, I saw a group of seven people, mostly black women of various ages, waiting at a bus stop and watching us with various levels of boredom and resentment in their faces. Their body language was rigid, communicating that we were obstructing their movement. These women’s responses were one aspect of the atmosphere in this more densely inhabited section of the city. There were more cars; we were (somewhat) subject to traffic signals; the people watching us were no longer on their porches but were instead in vehicles or waiting for buses. Our claims to the space met other claims. Soon we rode on, through the edges of the financial center of town. The feeling of freedom I experienced riding through the streets was more robust after the brief stop and encounters with people for whom our presence was not simply entertainment. The tension provided a distinct counterpoint.

My sense that people were resentful, curious, or bored is obviously filtered through my perceptions and experiences. People’s faces and body language sometimes communicate very clearly, sometimes not. This is particularly acute in public spaces where, as Koppers explains, the “performance situation on the

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 37.

street means that everything is communicated quickly.³⁹ Additionally, as Ahmed points out, we feel an atmosphere from our particular vantage point, complete with feelings, experiences, and histories. She writes: "Situations are affective given the gap between the impressions we have of others, and the impressions we make on others, all of which are lively."⁴⁰ While spaces are generally dominated by particular groups of people and particular feelings, people still encounter each other, bringing feelings and expectations to these meetings. Spaces then shift as a result. As the Tour de Troit demonstrates, streets cannot be completely blocked off. The city's liveliness, its live-ness, prevents complete segregation of people or any unity of experience.

In the next section I explore the 2012 Detroit SlutWalk. Despite quite different reasons for being in the city and a distinct mode of engagement with non-participants, this protest against sexual violence and victim-blaming also provided a way for outsiders to encounter the city and its inhabitants that demonstrates not only the complex relationships between visitors and Detroit, but also how urban encounters exceed simple experiential or affective trajectories.

SlutWalk Detroit

The first SlutWalk occurred in April 2011 in Toronto in response to an incident that January. Two Toronto police officers were invited to speak to a group of law students at York University. One officer, Michael Sanguinetti, proclaimed that "women should avoid dressing like sluts to avoid being victimized."⁴¹ The student newspaper reported the comment, which quickly spread via print and electronic forums. Two local women, Heather Jarvis and Sonya J.F. Barnett, began organizing along with two York University students, Alyssa Teekah and Erica Jane Scholtz, and three months later hosted the first SlutWalk.⁴² Soon activists organized similar events in cities worldwide.

A group of young women began planning a Detroit SlutWalk in 2011. Dates were proposed on a Facebook page, but interest dissipated after the city refused to grant organizers a march permit. In 2012 a group of organizers from Ypsilanti, a small city forty miles west of Detroit (which is also my home), took up the charge and organized a march via Facebook. The lead organizer, a white woman

³⁹ Koppers, "Moving in the Cityscape: Performance and the Embodied Experience of the Flanuer," 61.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 37.

⁴¹ Tram Nguyen, "From SlutWalks to SuicideGirls: Feminist Resistance in the Third Wave and Postfeminist Era," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2013): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.2013.0102>.

⁴² SlutWalk Toronto, "What," SlutWalk Toronto, accessed August 1, 2011, <http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/about/what>.

in her late twenties and her mixed gender, white-dominated friendship group planned and led the march of approximately 200 people. Their anarchist and socialist leanings were clear in the style and tone of the march, which was decidedly less campy than the 2012 Toronto event that I write about elsewhere.⁴³

We gathered at two o'clock in the afternoon on June 16, 2012 on the west side of Grand Circus Park in downtown Detroit, a park bisected by the main North/South artery, Woodward Blvd. that was the centerpiece of Augustus Brevort Woodward's early 19th century urban plan. In his never fully implemented plan, the park was to be the confluence of twelve avenues that extended throughout the city.⁴⁴ In the early twentieth century the park served as a gathering place for people attending events at nearby theaters, including the still operating Fox Theater and Detroit Opera House.⁴⁵ Poet Naomi Long Madgett describes a less well-to-do set of inhabitants and a less pristine space at the turn of the 21st century. To her, the sun is "dubious," and the once lush trees are "dying." Park inhabitants are "old men... grizzled and bleary-eyed as memories."⁴⁶ Such older, generally black men still inhabit the park, along with a smaller number of black women. Polly, one of the people I interviewed about the SlutWalk describes the park as "really difficult because, [there are] a lot of people without homes who, because they're without homes for a long time are having very psychological problems or live there and hang out there." Thus, the origin and end point for the march was not a neutral space. Like many city parks, it serves as a home for those who need it.

In contrast to the Tour de Troit's leisurely biking pace, SlutWalk participants marched through the city. Participants did not have wheels or locked doors to maintain distance between themselves and bystanders. Instead, they relied on their presentation as activists to create a border between themselves and non-participants. The spatial organization of a march with leaders carrying a banner and marchers following behind, all joined in more or less simultaneous chanting of slogans, created a porous boundary between participants and bystanders. While people could join and exit the procession, participants' behavior and presentation marked them as separate from people in the city for other rea-

⁴³ See chapter 3 of *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts, and Concerned Mothers*.

⁴⁴ Perry L. Norton, "Woodward's Vision for Detroit," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25, no. 2 (1986): 160.

⁴⁵ Pamela Harrison, "Grand Circus Park," Literary Map of Detroit, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.marygrove.edu/academics/institutes/institute-for-detroit-studies/literary-map-of-detroit/item/14-grand-circus-park.html>.

⁴⁶ Naomi Long Madgett, "Grand Circus Park," in *Abandon Automobile: Detroit City Poetry*, ed. Melba Joyce Boyd and M.L. Liebler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 228.

sons. As performance theorist Diana Taylor emphasizes, “A protest is not just any walk down a public street.”⁴⁷

Like most protests, organizers worked to transform the individuals assembled into a unified group. As a way to cultivate collective, feminist outrage they encouraged us to gather in a grassy section of the park to listen to speakers. A few people who seemed to be daily inhabitants of the park, all black and middle-aged, either joined us or watched from the sidelines. The first speaker, the lead organizer, framed the event in terms of endemic sexual violence and victim-blaming and then two young, white women each described their experiences with sexual violence. A middle-aged black woman approached from the periphery and began speaking at the microphone. Her sentences blurred into each other and it was difficult to ascertain her point. An older white woman carrying a sign demanding respect for women approached and lovingly led her away. After listening to harrowing tales of physical and emotional trauma and holding space for a park inhabitant who appeared to have psychological differences, organizers requested that we assemble in order to begin marching south down Woodward, toward the riverfront.

In the tradition of anarchist-oriented protests, this march did not have a permit to use city spaces. No police officers accompanied or prevented the movement of marchers along streets and sidewalks. Automobile traffic was light enough that participants easily claimed the streets during most of the march. The white- and women-dominated group first moved through the small business district, which was nearly empty on this Saturday afternoon. We then marched through the city’s entertainment district, which was quiet aside from post-baseball game revelers in an area called Greektown, where many Greek immigrants lived at the turn of the 20th century. The city’s specific history was less central to the event’s goals than it was to the Tour de Troit. Rather than exploring Detroit, participants focused on something endemic throughout the U.S. and the world: sexual violence that primarily affects women and the blaming of survivors for the violence they experience.

Flaneurs we weren’t. This was not leisure activity; instead, we assertively claimed space. Rather than viewing the city, we used its streets, sidewalks, and parks to demonstrate our explicitly politicized investments in ending victim-blaming and celebrating women’s sexual autonomy. During most of the march, there were few spectators. People in cars drove by us or waited for us to move through intersections before driving on. Most watched with little obvious reaction. Detroit became a minimally inhabited cityscape for marchers to inhabit temporarily, a nearly empty stage for asserting 21st century feminist outrage that

⁴⁷ Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 17.

combined anger at social norms and sexual violence with an investment in women's sexual agency.

Once we entered Greektown, we garnered more responses. As we walked past people eating and drinking on outdoor patios, we were chanting "V-A-G-I-N-A. Can't say it? Don't legislate it" in response to an incident in the Michigan State House a few months earlier when a woman senator was barred from the State House floor for using the word "vagina."⁴⁸ Responses to our chant varied. A few older white women were offended, explaining loudly to each other that if "they" wanted to act like sluts then "we'll see what happens to them." By distancing themselves from marchers, they upheld norms of feminine respectability. In contrast, a few young white men appeared a little too excited that we were chanting about vaginas. The critique of dominant sexual norms seemed lost in the titillation of publicly discussing women's body parts. On the other hand, a group of four women and one man, who appeared to be dressed for work, cheered and expressed a desire to join us. Then, suddenly, an entire patio of people, stood up and clapped. Some of the women from this predominantly-white group joined our chant. For a short time, we had an audience that engaged us on multiple levels.

Despite these engagements, longstanding cultural assumptions about black men's supposedly uncontrollable sexual urges, associations that have justified enslavement, lynching, and mass incarceration, made the presence of a white- and women-dominated group of protesters in a city associated with blackness symbolically complicated.⁴⁹ Using these streets as a site to express our outrage about sexual violence and victim-blaming wasn't intended to connect sexual violence, poverty, and blackness. Yet, since these dynamics are so often linked in the dominant cultural imagination, it risked reifying them. SlutWalks have received considerable criticism from feminists of color who argue that reclaiming the image of a slut is only fully available to white women.⁵⁰ Our presence in De-

⁴⁸ Eyder Peralta, "Michigan State Rep Barred From Speaking After 'Vagina' Comments," *NPR.Org*, June 14, 2012, online edition, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/06/14/155059849/michigan-state-rep-barred-from-speaking-after-vagina-comments>.

⁴⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁰ Destiny Birdsong et al., "SlutWalk from the Margins," *The Feminist Wire* (blog), October 31, 2011, <http://thefeministwire.com/2011/10/slutwalk-from-the-margins/>; Black Women's Blueprint, "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk," *Black Women's Blueprint* (blog), September 23, 2011, <http://www.blackwomensblueprint.org/2011/09/23/an-open-letter-from-black-women-to-the-slutwalk/>; Crunktastic, "SlutWalks v. Ho Strolls," *The Crunk Feminist Collective* (blog), May 23, 2011, <http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/2011/05/23/slutwalks-v-ho-strolls/>.

troit added an additional layer, one sometimes raised about Take Back the Night marches: that we marched in Detroit, where few of us live could have been interpreted as making the city's predominantly black inhabitants scapegoats for our outrage about issues that occur throughout the state and the world.⁵¹

SlutWalk Detroit played on associations among public, urban spaces and sexual violence. While researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that most sexual violence occurs in private spaces and is perpetuated by people known by the victims, the cultural imagination of sexual predators remains anonymous, often "dark" men preying on women in public spaces.⁵² SlutWalks protest associations between women and domestic spaces, as well as images of women who enter public spaces—especially at night or unaccompanied at any time of day—as "public women" of questionable morality who in some way encourage sexual violence. Thus, participating in such public performances can enable feelings of freedom that women seldom enjoy. The question remains: why did we travel to Detroit to do this?

In some ways the answer to this question is simple: Detroit is the largest city in the state and region. While protests routinely happen in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, including an Ann Arbor SlutWalk in 2011, the possibility of drawing people from Detroit, its suburbs, and nearby cities likely influenced organizer's interest in convening there.⁵³ Protests are generally imagined as urban events. Small cities associated primarily with university life are frequently seen as provincial and the suburbs are often viewed as apolitical and stagnant. Detroit, as a city, however sparsely populated, provided a better stage and more opportunity for the "swirls, vortexes of activities, people in self-expressive dress or undress" that performance theorist Richard Schechner identifies as characterizing the direct theater of public demonstration.⁵⁴

By claiming Detroit as our own, however temporarily, we claimed an affect-laden urban site; however, it is not clear that the space was ours to claim, or that this claiming would extend into our everyday lives or into those of the people we encountered. While the choice of location seemed convenient rather than ideological, the cultural importance of Detroit as a post-industrial, black-dominated space affected our experiences and observers' impressions. It was also easy. There was little risk of pushback given the small number of people on the

⁵¹ Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, "Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism," *Feminist Review*, no. 80 (2005): 90.

⁵² Angela Y. Davis, "Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist," in *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 172–201.

⁵³ Carolin, Lisa, "SlutWalk participants march through Ann Arbor," *The Ann Arbor News*, October 22, 2011.

⁵⁴ Richard Schechner, "The Street is the Stage," in *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 88.

streets. We placed ourselves into a supposedly empty space in order to address violence that happens everywhere.

That the people who responded most to us, the post-game revelers in Greektown, were also not from the city center and likely not from the city at all, further demonstrates my point. Like us, they had entered the city for a purpose that had little to do with inhabitants. Detroit was treated as a site for what we wanted to do: protest social norms or enjoy the supposedly quintessential American pastime, baseball. Unlike the suburbanites discussed by Kenyon, we got out of our cars and put our feet on the city's sidewalks and streets. White-dominated SlutWalk Detroit participants and baseball fans didn't shield themselves from the city using car windows and doors, nor did we rely on the speed enabled by bicycling. Yet, in all these circumstances, distance was maintained between those who had the privilege of attending a game, riding in the tour, or traveling to the city for an afternoon protest, and those who lived in the city but didn't have the interest or means to engage in leisure or protest activities.

Closing the Distance

Encounters between participants and bystanders can occur and, potentially, shift how people experience urban spaces. The liminal period after a temporary event such as a protest or a bicycle tour ends, can provide opportunities for direct engagement. Re, a white, disabled, genderqueer participant in his late twenties who lives in Ann Arbor explained what for him was patriarchy reasserting itself after most participants had dispersed: "we were hanging around our ending place and there were some people around who then felt comfortable enough to come up and do inappropriate things. There was this one man who... came up and very lingeringly touched this woman's shoulder... just very inappropriate contact. Since our numbers had dwindled it seems that the fear we have been conditioned to have, had reappeared." The woman was dressed in lingerie, masquerading as a stereotypical slut as part of claiming the streets and the park. This man was also claiming Grand Circus Park in the center of downtown Detroit, where he presumably spent considerable time. There were no car windows separating them and no wheels or quick march pace to maintain distance.

Re explicitly named the experiential change he experienced as fear reappearing after a period of time free from that often-stifling affective state. Despite this affective shift, Re responded, creating an opportunity for face-to-face dialogue. Ze explained:

I went up to this man and said, 'Excuse me. Did this woman say you could touch her?' What really struck me was how bewildered this man was, absolutely not used to be called out for something like this. And [then he] spouted something really ridiculous like, 'She should have told me if she wanted me not to touch her.' By that point it seemed like people were feeling more com-

fortable [and] I was able to say, 'No. That's never somebody else's responsibility. It's your responsibility to get consent for things like that.' It felt like a very empowering experience too. Then the woman was like, 'You got my back!' and sort of high-fived me and it opened up another little dialogue among us on how to address that more singly. And we had a lot of people saying, 'You look fine.' We'd say, 'that's not really the point.' And we'd explain why we were actually there.

Hir intervention established solidarity between march participants, allowing them to hold onto the physical and rhetorical space the march created for a little longer. Re explicitly named this as empowerment, a feeling contrasting with the fear that ze felt in response to the man's actions. Rather than retreat, Re engaged, putting hir embodied experiences into conversation with the other participants' and the man who approached them.

From a strictly gendered point of view, this was a successful intervention; however, if we also address other dynamics among these people, it's more complicated. Re never identified the man's race; however, when I've visited the park there have usually been middle-aged black men and, sometimes, a few women relaxing on cement benches and under trees. Thus, this space, like Detroit itself, is racially coded and the march shifted that coding temporarily. While his behavior represented some of the gender dynamics SlutWalks contest, if this park was a space he inhabited daily, then his actions could also be seen as reclaiming his space. As performance theorist Jan Cohen-Cruz explains, "Space is always controlled by *someone* and exists *somewhere*, so is inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessible to everyone."⁵⁵ Therefore, his apparent bewilderment may demonstrate more than investment in male-dominance. It may also reflect confusion regarding who the park belonged to at that moment.

Various affects animate these descriptions: anxiety, boredom, frustration, fear, joy, freedom, bewilderment, empowerment. The feelings shift and flow; they are reshaped or retrenched when they encounter each other. As Ahmed reminds us, we always feel from a specific angle or position. We each bring our specific experiences and histories to an encounter. Re's experience provides an example of such an encounter. Two very different ways of being in the same space encountered each other. Fear, misunderstanding, curiosity, and solidarity animated the exchange. This exchange brought two ways of experiencing the city together. People with different experiences of the city affected each other and thereby each other's experiences of the city.

That these encounters occurred in Detroit adds additional affective layers. The nation has feelings about Detroit. It serves as the prime example of any manner of enemies—industrialization, deindustrialization, union greed, Black

⁵⁵ Jan Cohen-Cruz, "General Introduction," in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.

incompetence, political corruption. People feel afraid of, sad about, angry about, confused about, and intrigued by Detroit. Intrigue motivated many Tour de Troit participants and refusal of fear motivated SlutWalk Detroit marchers. Thus, the affective register of these events, while tied to broader urban experience, was also specific to Detroit's history of white and middle-class flight and deindustrialization, and contemporary associations between the city and blackness. Participants were affected by the city before they encountered its streets, buildings, and inhabitants during these events. The feelings they brought with them affected their encounters with the city.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I return to a question I raised earlier: How can outsiders acknowledge our place within a historically entrenched power dynamic between local tourists and Detroit and Detroiters? This is not a simple question, nor am I the first to ask it. For example, in the afterword to the 2014 edition of *Detroit: A Biography*, journalist Scott Martelle writes: "it's an all too rare urban-suburban cooperation that needs to be nurtured. For Detroit to survive, let alone rebound, that wall of distrust must be breached."⁵⁶ The wall of distrust between the city and its metaphorical wrap around porch must become porous from all sides, not simply allowing suburbanites and inhabitants of other nearby cities to drop in and return to the comfort of their communities. Instead, what must be acknowledged is that Detroit is more than its ruined buildings, "ghost streets," and storied past. Detroit is not just an empty stage for outsiders' performances. People live and love in Detroit, some as part of families who have been there for generations, some who have moved there recently.

I recently attended a party in Detroit for a friend who was moving away. She had lived there for less than a decade but had made the city her home. As we approached the house where her apartment was located, we passed empty lots, yet the street was full of life. Yards were mowed. Flowers bloomed in well-tended gardens. People sat on their porches, some socializing with others, some in quiet solitude. As we approached her house four children, three black, one white, played on the porch, watched over by a young black man in overalls. My companion and I chatted with him and the youngest child for a few minutes before we headed upstairs where the 2nd floor apartment my friend shared with her partner was filled with people, most of whom also lived in Detroit, all part of overlapping activist communities (racial justice, urban gardening, queer organizing, foreclosure defense). The party was a slice of Detroit life—lots of locals, some who'd been raised there, many who hadn't, plus a fair number of visitors

⁵⁶ Martelle, *Detroit*, 264.

from nearby cities, all gathered together around a shared goal. In this case that goal was affective, saying goodbye to people we care about. Yet, this gathering can serve as a metaphor for transforming encounters into engagement. We were all invited because we'd previously demonstrated our investment in the people who invited us. The built environment of the city supported and shaped our experience, but the focus was on people we came to celebrate and those we met there. As at the best of parties, we met new people, discussed histories, and learned new things through conversation. Figuring out how to extend this kind of engagement beyond a friendship community is difficult. Yet, the dynamic is telling: it was reciprocal not voyeuristic, the result of mutual investment and care.

I use this example not to claim that the answer to my question about outsiders engaging Detroit is as simple as making friends with Detroiters. Friendship, as feminist theorist Clare Hemmings has argued, is not free from selfish intentions.⁵⁷ Instead, I want to emphasize that outsiders shouldn't simply stop going to Detroit, further isolating those who live there. We need to think critically about the dynamic of white flight and black containment as well as the voyeuristic process of viewing crumbling architecture and people who live in the city. A first step in that process is paying attention to our own motivations and our own feelings of comfort and discomfort when we are in the city. We also need to observe how Detroiters respond to our presence, to ways we are welcomed and resisted.

The answer is not as simple as only coming when we're invited, because invitations are unlikely to come unless we express interest. Many people living outside of Detroit intentionally avoid it and actively demean it. Thus, engaging Detroit means showing up, but getting out of our cars and off of our bicycles and being in the city with people who live there rather than simply observing the city and its inhabitants from a position of safety. Engaging Detroit requires risk—risk of encountering poverty and disenfranchisement, but also of having our preconceptions challenged in the process.

⁵⁷ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 202.

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