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Motor City Blues: Voices from the Great Migration ("The Polio Story")

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While we may not be able to choose our families, we can choose to learn more about our family's histories, and the narratives that might emerge if traced and interrogated. It may also be said that some families have a plethora of stories reaching, inevitably, back dozens, and for some, hundreds of years. Because a handful of people took the time to preserve a family record, old photographs, remembered snatches of narrative passed down generationally, it is easier for an interested descendent to foster a deeper understanding of where they come from.

But in the African American community these connections tend to be paradoxical right from the outset, tenuous at best. Whatever oral histories exist – within our respective families – are passed down in whispers, half-remembered diatribes, a narrative that is very difficult to see holistically; rather, it is a snapshot in time, a puzzle organized into a thousand differently-shaped pieces, the assembly of which brings the picture sharply into focus. My family falls under this rubric, as what I know about my maternal side stretches only decades – indeed, it would seem that my family's history starts with the Second Great Migration (1940-1970).[1] As for my father's family, I never knew much about them because

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[1] Richard W. Thomas's influential book *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* lays the groundwork of the First Great Migration, while setting the stage for the Second Great Migration.

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I lived with my mother. This created a schism for me, where I never really felt whole, there was this other side of the world that I could not access.

All of this created a problematic to be explored when I entered graduate school as a PhD student in American Culture Studies. The more questions I asked, the more I wrestled with the larger story of Blacks in America and some of the ways my family bumped up against this macro narrative. It was clear that the Black middle class, the effects and veritable impact of the Great Migration – financially, socially, psychically – helped to define my experience as a recipient of that history. Couple that with the city of Detroit, an autoethnographic method, and an ABR (Arts Based Research) methodology, and the backbone of my project started to form. "Autoethnography," Christopher Poulos writes, "is an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings)."[2] These "strong images, memories, or feelings" was what I wanted to engage with contextually and meaningfully, as I explored the writing process. In order to bring parts of my narrative to life beyond the restrictions of the page, I quickly concluded that this project would necessarily lean multi-modal.

There are, as we understand it, plenty of things—call it the mundane, the quotidian, the "ordinary stuff"—that resists the drama inherent in a good story. Real life, invariably, fails to fit within the confines of a three-act structure. Still, if you listen, you might catch a glimpse of a sprawling story arc. It may not have the rich contextual foundations of a Russian novel, but the stories resonate, illuminate, and elucidate. Capturing this in audio form, realigns the project from prose-centric to oral-centric – the space where Black narrative originated.

When researching the stories of Black Americans in America, the researcher is faced with many gaps in the record, an incomplete – or obscured – history. For my part, I wanted to write a dissertation that would not merely be a complex research project, but a deeply personal journey of discovery. More importantly, I wanted the work to be useful outside the academy, whether that would be public archives or field recordings, ephemera, it all seemed to align with the spirit of my project. As sociologist Patricia Leavy asserts, public scholarship is "scholarship that circulates outside of the academy in accessible formats and is useful to relevant stakeholders (who may or may not directly participate in shaping research

[2] Christopher N. Poulos, *Essentials of Autoethnography*. American Psychological Association, 2021, 5.

agendas)." The public-facing aspect of my project employs the digital so that it democratizes "the processes of knowledge production and dissemination,"[3] and encourages a set of guiding questions: What would I discover from these conversations? How would it change my perception(s)? Where might I situate these findings in the sprawling scholarship surrounding Detroit and the Great Migration? Where did I fit in as a scholar, a curious journalist, and just as relevantly, a deeply engaged ethnographer?

Embodying My(self) Within the Dissertation

It is my own "two-ness," to borrow a phrase from Du Bois, that emerges from this epistemological inquiry. My performance background starts with jazz trumpet and later moves to music composition—I played music (starting in middle school) long before I had ambitions to become a writer. In many ways, I have been waiting for the right moment (or, more accurately, the right project) that would allow me to blend my writing and music, as they have always seemed inextricably linked to me. To the outside world, my musical and writing sides have been kept in separate boxes, rarely meeting in the public square. That is, until, I started my dissertation.

My dissertation argues for the importance of "smaller histories," those whose lives intersected with the larger narrative of the Second Great Migration and how it impacted Detroit. Historical accounts tend to find forward driving narratives, where historians, journalists and other chroniclers of human life, focus on those "outstanding" instances of disruption. *Out-standing*, meaning, in this case, visible, accessible, often irrefutable. The history of Detroit, of the Second Great Migration, might not have in its bibliography (or index) the surname Fortune (maternal side) or McTyre (paternal side), but my dissertation's bibliography would contain such information. Every family's narrative shapes the culture around it, or is shaped by the culture it inhabits. For example, when Detroiters fondly remember Detroit's Dot & Etta's Shrimp, a black-owned business started in the 1950s, they naturally think of the delicious shrimp, but I would wager that the logo brings nostalgia as well. It features two "dueling" shrimp with matching monarchical crowns, and it sprung originally from the artistic hand of my paternal grandfather. Dot & Etta's closed its last restaurant location in 2010, but as of this writing, the family has brought the restaurant back as a pop-up venture, meaning generations

[3] Patricia Leavy. "Introducing Research Methods and Practices for Popularizing Research." *Popularizing Scholarly Research: Research Methods and Practices*, 2021, 3-4.

both new and old can once again enjoy this savory, deep fried, battered shrimp. And with its reemergence, my paternal grandfather, a commercial artist who struggled to find work as a Black artist in Detroit, lives on through that logo and the collective memories of Detroiters who enthusiastically support the venture.

When scholars and journalists such as Herb Boyd talk about the history of Detroit, he references Dr. Norman McRae, a historian whose papers are housed at Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. When scholars talk about Coleman A. Young and his administration, they don't usually mention Dr. James Weathers, Jr., his executive assistant, but he is from the Fortune bloodline. When they talk about sports writing in Detroit, they might mention hall of famer, Russ Cowans, who, like McRae, is a relative through marriage, but whose bloodline intermingled with McTyre blood – same as Dr. McRae. Or, how my own father, a journalist, interviewed Young for the *Michigan Chronicle* shortly after the mayor had published his autobiography, *Hard Stuff* (1994). Sitting across from him, it might not have been lost on my father that years earlier his own mother, Barbara McTyre, had worked in Young's office, specifically as a clerical secretary for the Department of Information. And finally, when scholars write about golf and Black women in the sport, my relatives show up in the articles and footnotes of my research – their names are Thelma (McTyre) Cowans and her sisters, Theresa and Dorcas McTyre. In short, these connections were instrumental in helping me to position the value of this study.

No one in my family, as far as I know, at the time of this writing, has undertaken this exact approach to assembling two parallel tracks of family histories into a book-length work. As a second generation journalist who worked for the Black press (the *Michigan Chronicle* newspaper), I enter the narrative before Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's second term in 2005. Kilpatrick's tenure ended in disgrace in 2008 – following this, under another mayor, Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013. My dissertation tells some of the stories of our family in the postwar era during the twilight of the Second Great Migration, past the 1967 rebellion, Coleman Young's inaugural in 1974, and up to the early 1980s. We then fast-forward to the present time to see how Generation X (my generation) and the Millennials are faring as "children of the Great Migration."

Significantly, my dissertation argues that the Second Great Migration was successful for my family in providing opportunities they otherwise would not have had, if they simply stayed in Mississippi or Georgia. It also interrogates the idea that "success" does not always mean academic or economic success, but rather, success can be owning (or renting) a modest home, passing along one's history,

and instilling the drive in one's children to do better than the previous generation. Some individuals, like my mother, chose a simpler life, one where she never officially became a schoolteacher, but nevertheless persisted in volunteering within educational spaces. She completed an associate's degree for a sense of accomplishment, rather than continue on to a bachelor's or teaching certificate – this was enough for a single-parent mother. My father earned two PhDs and recently earned a second master's degree. His wife (my stepmother) has a PhD and my father's sister is a licensed social worker. As a child, she sat on her porch during the 1967 rebellion when the streets of Detroit went up in flames. These oral histories, fragments of moments lived, is important to the archival record as events that shaped history. As I see it, minutia is its own revolution, refracting and crystallizing the larger story. As a writer, journalist, and emergent scholar in American Culture Studies I felt a duty, an innate drive, if you will, to record what I could, as simply as possible – to make sense of the historical record by asking those around me about the "lives they lived." Whether uneventful, or not, is for others to decide, but culture is shaped just as importantly by those quieter moments occurring offstage. It is not, I should hope, an exercise in solipsism, navel gazing, or prideful analysis. Rather, the work of listening to these stories and then verifying them against the public record, available scholarly publications, and harmonizing them when possible, helped me to better understand not only those times, but my own identity as a child of the Great Migration.

My project visits the past through the voices of those living in the present and seeks to record voices lost as primary sources. It excavates some notable parts of my maternal and paternal family's narratives, placing them on a parallel track and examining their place against the archives of the Second Great Migration, especially as it relates to Detroit. Through hours of recordings, the use of newspaper clippings, records culled from Ancestry.com, the project examines the Black middle class, its relation to the Great Migration itself, and uncovers whether or not the migration had a mostly positive or negative impact on our family. It uses Detroit as the geographical center of project, wherein I uncovered a variety of unknown facts about my family history. I have no doubt that my family has in small (and larger, unseen ways) contributed to the history of Detroit. Some of this is evident in the back of books via indexes and footnotes – others are subtle, seemingly marginal stories where the microcosmic gives way to the macrocosmic. That is, where the historical record speaks of the importance of Black women during

the Great Migration,[4] I was able to speak to some of the Black women who had lived through this history for insight and context into the voluminous scholarship on this very subject. The value of the project is that it introduces little-known freedom fighters and even one family member who served on Coleman A. Young's (the first Black mayor of Detroit) administration. It reveals Blacks in golfing in the 1940s and 1950s, and that the Black women in my family who won championships[5] went on to later become entrepreneurs, contributing in their way, to Detroit history. While several of my family members have attempted to trace the family tree, to preserve obituaries, awards, birth certificates and the like, the narrative of the Fortune family itself has not been written down in this way, or recorded. At a time when journalists such as Charles Blow encourages Blacks to move back from the North to the South (a "reverse migration"), family members express gratitude for having left the South. Some stayed and continued to prosper by keeping the family's land intact, starting new businesses, building communities, raising families.

What is new about the oral histories I have collected is that even if you set aside the "urban crisis" as Thomas J. Sugrue famously called it,[6] which included post World War II Detroit, white flight to the suburbs, and housing disparities, Black resilience defined my family. The hours of interviews helped me to understand the stakes of history in a different fashion – that many of the "small" events described over the years by my grandmother and others complemented and often ran directly parallel to the events I studied by various scholars in Detroit history, urban studies, and geography. Names such as Sugrue, Tiya Miles, Rebecca J. Kinney, Sara Safransky, Alesia Montgomery, Richard W. Thomas, and others too numerous to list, became not only a part of my expanding bibliography, but impacted how I viewed Detroit. That's always been, generally speaking, as a Detroiter and journalist, but now it includes thinking of Detroit from a scholarly perspective, as a city to be studied in the wider context of urban studies, Black studies, and popular culture, serving as a constant reminder that I will never know enough about Detroit – that Detroit is *always Detroit*, but always evolving, on the verge of some grand apotheosis, both imminent, and strangely, immanent if you

[4] See Victoria Wolcott's *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. UNC Press Books, 2013.
[5] See Lane Demas' *Game of Privilege: An African American History of Golf*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
[6] Thomas J. Sugrue: *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

ever called Detroit home. This inspired how I might, as a cultural theorist, literary scholar, and musician, look at Detroit – and these stories – from a different lens.

This submission engenders *Liminalities'* mission statement by "creating a space for the publication of multimedia texts and projects that are difficult or impossible to publish in traditional print venues." Indeed, the choice to not merely use prose as the main delivery system of the dissertation, but to utilize the recorded voice, made this feature an important part of the project; one aspect informs the other. As far as I understood it, these particular voices had never been assembled in a single work with the express purpose of building a thematic family narrative. Although some family members have served as archivists in their own right, keeping stacks of obituaries, wedding invitations, photographs, and other ephemera safely preserved, most of the stories – the lore, as it were – were passed down orally from one generation to the next. Understandably, some stories are simply lost to time because those individuals are no longer with us. This project is also, to borrow a phrase from fellow Detroiter and scholar, Michael Eric Dyson, about performing blackness,[7] and *Liminalities* is a journal about performance. Performing blackness is often, as early Black leaders such as Du Bois and his contemporaries understood it, performing excellence: this, too, is part of the American songbook. Whatever the genre or medium, blackness makes its way into our culture, however subtlety.

Going into this project shortly after defending my dissertation prospectus in January 2023, I was unaware that my maternal side had many members of the family who had not only gone to college but had earned advanced degrees (masters and PhDs), and many served as educators. Their children (my generation and younger) have continued this trend to great effect, from the acquiring of J.D. degrees to serving in the Biden Administration, many members of my family have lived up to – and have even exceeded – the generational dream of the Great Migration: that the souls of Black folk would endure and flourish, despite adversity and the challenges of the American experiment.

As its own experiment, I envision the realized project to be a two-part full-length podcast (about 30-45 minutes), which will assemble the "best of" the interviews I have collected since embarking upon my dissertation research. To me it was a natural and obvious relationship between the oral and the musical, prose, poetry, and sound—they would, in the main, inspire, push, and inform each other

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[7] See Michael Eric Dyson. *Entertaining Race: Performing Blackness in America*. St. Martin's Press, 2021.

at nearly every turn. I wanted my dissertation to be more than simply the culminating project of my program, to embody the complexities of *me*, as a Black man gathering pieces of his identity to pass down his daughter, so that she would always know where she came from.

This excerpt from my audio project in progress, "Motor City Blues: Voices from the Great Migration," focuses specifically on the polio epidemic in Detroit during the 1950s. I came to this history by way of a story my grandmother frequently told about my mother's polio affliction, which occurred right after she started walking. The recording purposely ends with my grandmother saying, "the polio was an epidemic down there," leaving the listener to linger on those words, while the music slowly fades out. What's occluded in the audio version here is that after months of treatment, my grandmother intuitively decided to remove her daughter's leg braces because it seemed to be, as she put it, "holding her back." She equates this to a miracle of the highest order, and when listening to the audio, you hear the joy in her voice. Unfortunately, the audio itself is not very clear, due to background noise (the air conditioner running during the record hot summer of 2023). However, this methodological approach repeatedly taught me that trying to record history, even history that might be captured on a device, or carefully written out in transcript form, is always subject to the environment: the frame of mind of the individual responding and the subjective experience of the interviewer, guides it along, influencing the final product. You – the listener – are, for better or for worse, always joining the narrative in medias res, as you interpret, fight against the static, a loud fan humming in the distance, the occasional interruption of a phone call – or a food delivery.

Capturing what's left, that is, what's discernable and true, is the goal. It serves as a reminder that oral histories in their truest form, delivered in real time, are likely more reliable than those recorded on digital devices or mobile phones because it is the purest distillation of the spoken word, passed irrevocably from memory to ear. The voice itself is the mediator, capturing the timbre, tone, pitch, and modulation unique to each person. My intervention through writing, recording, and musically interpreting these sounds, is how my own voice and perspective is added to this family history.

Music, Technology, and Methodology

Using the program Audacity to import audio recorded using a transcription app (Otter.ai), I was able to upload the file, edit parts of the audio, and later, add the

music track. Having written a script, I read through it several times, and once the recording seemed "close enough," listened closely for where the music might fit. There were, of course, failed attempts, some due to volume issues (speaking too softly or loudly into my MacBook Air's built-in microphone) to the gratingly external (the family dog going into a barking frenzy so that, alas, a near perfect take had to be deleted).

I have always been a performer, but never really took the time to learn the intricacies of the engineering of my recordings – therefore, I perform every note, every overdub, live in real-time. If my finger slips on a key and the wrong note causes undesired dissonance, I start over. This time, I also used a timer to help stay within the parameters I had set for the length of the track. The bass line for the first part of the recording drove the overall cadence of the introduction, while the second part required a more relaxed approach. Ending, finally, with a single note – a *blue note* – that echoes off into the distance.

The title of my dissertation, "Motor City Blues: Migratory Movement(s), Relative Time and Space in the Postindustrial Detroit Imaginary," is a play on the "Motor City Blues," meaning the blue collar side of my family from Detroit, along with the "Blues feeling," or as Clyde Woods called it, the *blues epistemology*, which originated in the Mississippi Delta, where my paternal side originated from. Woods asserts that "The blues epistemology is a longstanding African American tradition of explaining reality and change … The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it … the blues epistemology is embedded, necessary and reflective."[8]

I was able to further develop this idea during a recent fellowship in public humanities. The parameters started to peel away and what emerged was a stronger sense of the project's possibilities and reach—a move toward transdisciplinarity. As Valerie J. Janesick asserts: "In order to go beyond transcripts of interviews, transdisciplinarity offers us much to work with in terms of research design, analysis and interpretations."[9] My hope is to take this recording and others I create to develop a sound collage of sorts with contextual grounding, much like this essay.

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[8] Clyde Woods. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso Books, 2017, 25.

[9] Valerie J. Janesick. "Oral History Interviewing: Issues and Possibilities." *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2014, 313.

Gathering the "Voices of the Great Migration" has been a fulfilling, yet challenging experience. It has reminded me of the vibrancy of the oral medium to evoke images, emotion, historical context, and cultural analysis, furthering my understanding of Black narrative and its many iterations.

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