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The Detroitists

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Reflections of Detroit Ethnographers at the Anniversary of the 1967 Rebellion

> "The case of Detroit confirms that redevelopment had strong negative repercussions for racial minorities, here represented by African Americans, but offers additional insight into the way racial prejudice and conflict impeded efforts to stop city decline." June Thomas, 2013

> "Northern blacks lived as second-class citizens, unencumbered by the most blatant of southern-style Jim Crow laws but still trapped in an economic, political, and legal regime that seldom recognized them as equals." Thomas Sugrue, 2014

It was summer in Detroit, Michigan. It was hot and the city was steaming with tension. Citizens of Detroit openly carried weapons on the charged streets.

Was it 1967?

It was 1833, during the Blackburn Rebellion. Ruth and Thornton Blackburn from Kentucky sought refuge from slavery in Detroit, but they were followed by slave hunters fueled by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. In 1833, black citizens and their allies resisted, ultimately securing the Blackburns' escape to Canada and a life as free citizens and taxpayers (**Katzman 1975**). The struggle did not end there. Coursing through moments, months, and decades, racially charged rebellions and civil disturbances punctuated the ever-present inequality of the city—in 1863 white vigilantes attacked blacks based on false accusations, in 1925 Dr. Ossian Sweet's family was violently mobbed for integrating a white neighborhood, and 1943 saw widespread white violence against blacks in the city's streets.

In the tiny hours of the morning on July 23, 1967, a crush of people were partying and seeking relief from a Detroit-summer heatwave in an after-hours club on 12th Street and Clairmount. Police

officers descended to the scene and began a vice-squad raid. When **a lone bottle thrown at police missed and shattered against the sidewalk**, all hell broke loose.

> ***We call ourselves Detroitists because we demand complicated, nuanced discussions of that city and of cities the world over.***

Over the five days that followed, the "**largest disturbance of twentieth century America**" unfolded as fires, looting, and property damage coursed through the city. It took the US Army, the Michigan National Guard, the Michigan State Police, and Detroit police and fire departments to stop the chain of events. Over 1,700 fires were tallied, 43 people died with hundreds injured, and over **7,000 people were arrested**.

Detroit's 1967 Rebellion continues in the city (**Stovall and Hill 2016**). We reaffirm this as contemporary Detroit ethnographers, self-described "Detroitists" because we take an historical-materialist, hyper-local, contemporary approach to our study of Detroit and other cities where we work. Our work follows the historical trajectory of the 1967 Rebellion in a city where concerns of place, groceries, ownership, and belonging still define the pressing conversations of the day. As a way of remembering and searching out new thinking, we reflect on our work in the city at this moment of the 1967 Rebellion's fiftieth anniversary.

Maya

I grew up in Detroit's Woodbridge neighborhood among the art scene and cultural center intelligentsia in the 1990s. As an artist and ethnographer in contemporary Detroit's McDougall-Hunt neighborhood, "fatal couplings" of race, gender, power, and culture (**Gilmore 2002**) spun from the city to the pages of my notebooks. I noticed the politics of space and place that had the liquor store as the most assertive business in the neighborhood. The liquor stores were ambiguous locations that sang to me as both contact zone and pure space (**Pine 2012**, **Deleuze and Guattari 1988**). The spaces around the stores were at once liberatory and bounded. Moved by this, in 2014, I started a meditation called ***Liquor Store Theatre***, where I staged and documented dance performances. Conversations on city life followed in the streets and sidewalks surrounding the eight liquor stores in the zone.

In four years of ***Liquor Store Theatre***, there was one fatal shooting at Motor City Liquor in the zone; it happened days after I filmed a video at the store: ***Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 4, no. 6**. As I reflected on the fiftieth year since the 1967 Rebellion and four years of Liquor Store Theatre, I mused the

charged terrain. Usually, people shared news, socialized, and occupied space in sidewalks surrounding the stores. Occasionally devastating violence roared. Violence seemed to spike everywhere, especially in zones fraught with inequality. Connecting to 1967, the Rebellion was, "the culmination of decades of institutional racism and entrenched segregation."

From 1967 to 2017, the vectors of sidewalk and body grabbed me.

Figure 1: Detroit rebellion 1967: 12th street on the first day of rioting.
Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

The surreal connections between looted retail stores, sidewalks, and ***Liquor Store Theatre*** kept hitting me square on. People were holding court—processional, assembled. Both images of the Detroit Rebellion (Figure 1) and ***Liquor Store Theatre*** (Figure 2) consolidated the sidewalk as a vector of commerce and capital, access and power. On the sidewalks liminal and post-liminal urban commons and private ownerships intersected. In Figure 1, the rebellion's vast military response looms before the person. People teetered in between sidewalk and storefront, observing.

In Figure 2, again, body and sidewalk made the scene. A woman and three girls standing in the parking lot and a man driving by in an old Grand Am, paused to view ***Liquor Store Theatre*** performances unfolding outside of Palms Liquor. The performers' arms were outstretched.

Figure 2: Maya Stovall: Liquor Store Theatre, vol. 1, no. 3, 2014. Digital video production still. Maya Stovall, Todd Stovall, and Eric Johnston.

As a Detroitist, I searched out contentious histories and how they landed in the contemporary by putting my body on the line and letting the sidewalks dance through me. In both photos, someone was putting on a show. In Figure 1, the militarized police force machined a theatre. This theatre danced a tight rope between protection and discipline and the person who gestured. In Figure 2, it was a group of performers melted into a theatre that was already there on a sidewalk surrounding the store.

Alex

Grocery stores are staples in all areas of a city for all walks of life. Yet in 1967 and 2017, issues with food cost, quality, and customer service persist. Since 2011, my efforts coordinating the **Detroit Food Map** initiative have explored the access and **economics of food availability and pricing** while also critically engaging Detroiters in assessing their own perceptions and foodways. From working with high schoolers in after-school programs, meeting with church leaders, and participating in food justice activities I became acutely aware of the compounding burdens of diet-related disease, food insecurity, and lack of economic opportunity in Detroit.

The 1967 Rebellion highlighted the juxtapositions of food, power, and race in a notably black area of the city along 12th street. The following maps from 1971 and 2014 implicate food, race, and place within black geographies (**McKittrick 2006**, **Thomas 2013**).

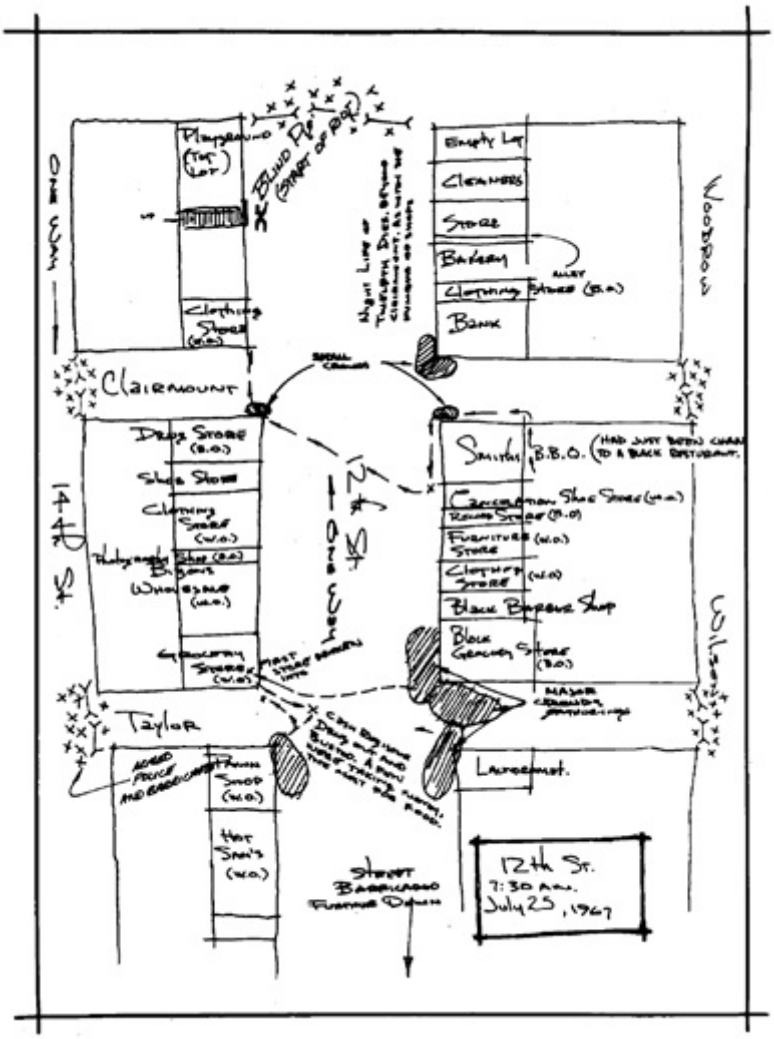

Figure 3: "The Death of 12th Street." Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute's Field Notes III, hand drawn by eye-witness, Robert Ward, Jr. (1971)

Figures 3 and 4 position Detroit as a ***city*** characterized by capital flows and persistent economic inequality. In Figure 3, Robert Ward, Jr. recalls that the first looted business was a white-owned grocery store, while the black-owned grocery store across the street remained untouched:

> Inner-city grocery stores were among the most prominent targets of young looters. White-owned and -operated stores were the most prominent businesses in Detroit's African American neighborhoods and the most convenient symbol of the systematic exclusion of blacks from whole sectors of the city's economy. (Sugrue 2014)

In 1968, a local non-profit, Focus:HOPE, released a report tying the primary cause of the rioting to racism in food stores. Detroit's Urban League and the Detroit ***Free Press*** found that after the riots 54 percent of Detroiters identified grocery stores as places where they were treated badly.

In 2014, food retail locations were no longer predominantly white-owned yet there were no black-owned stores. Figure 4 demonstrates the ongoing racial discrimination black residents face in food retail establishments. In acknowledging complexity, it was notable that not all residents in all areas of the city had negative interactions and perceptions of stores or store owners.

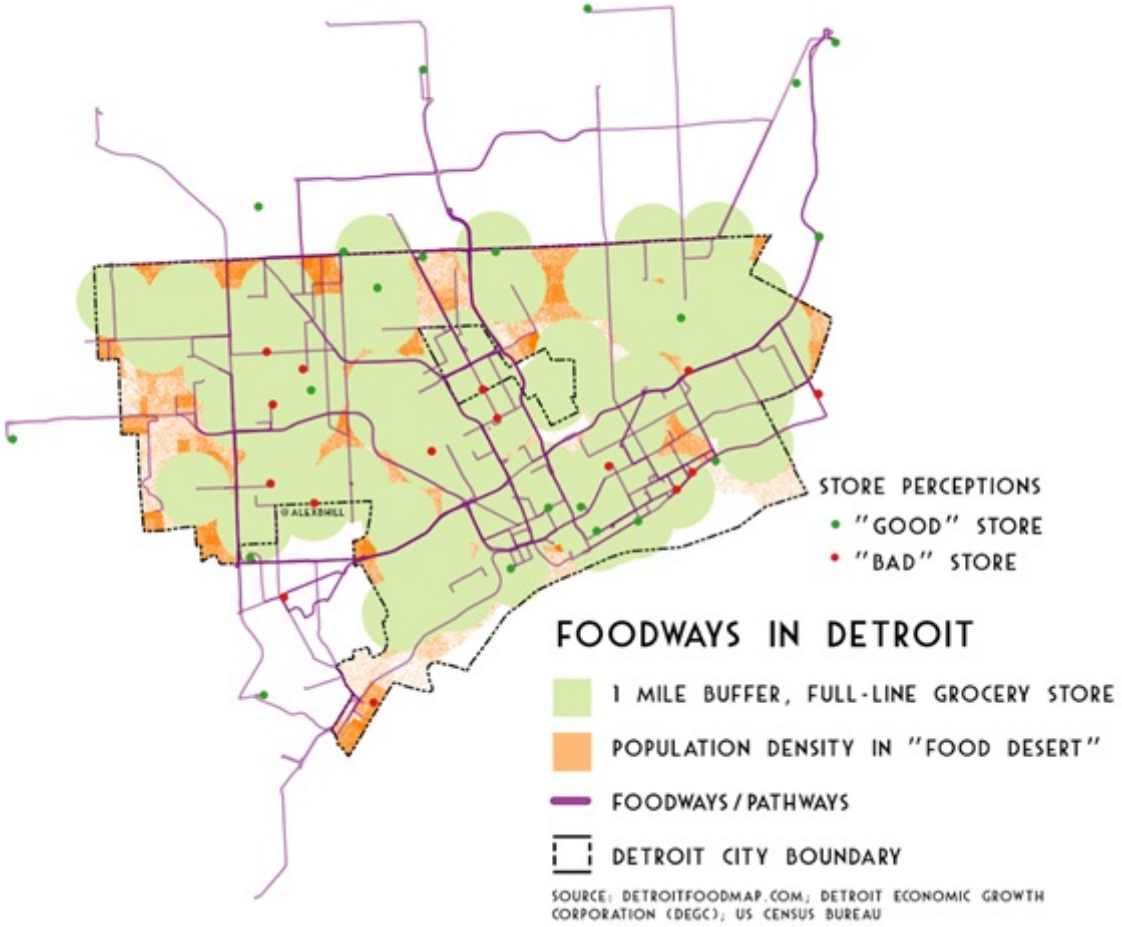

Figure 4: Map of residents "good" and "bad" perceptions of various food retail locations from ethnographic interactions during 2014. Alex B. Hill (2016)

"Bad" stores were widespread in the way that black Detroiters in 1967 found widespread racial discrimination at retail establishments. Yet again, the 1967 power dynamics of food and race landed in contemporary Detroit. Not much had changed: "Small neighborhood grocery and convenience stores also hired few blacks… Few blacks worked where they shopped. Fewer felt any loyalty to neighborhood stores" (Sugrue 2014).

As a Detroitist I have to ask, why are there no black-owned grocery stores in contemporary Detroit? Why has racial job discrimination in the food industry remained prominent (ROC United, 2013)? I cannot help but consider the absence of progress in economic opportunity and continued

discrimination in grocery stores. The consumption and procurement of food continues to be a vital point of interaction for social change in Detroit.

Conclusion

We call ourselves Detroitists because we start with the historical but we don't stop there—we get out into the streets and sidewalks as we do our related work of studying pathways, space, performance, and place in the city. We call ourselves Detroitists because we demand complicated, nuanced discussions of that city and of cities the world over. We call ourselves Detroitists because we believe the people of the city who make it happen there every day were the experts, and we ethnographers were lucky to be able to listen and learn.

At the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 Rebellion, we were searching out new ways of thinking, new ways of working, and new ways of living that resonated with the people's pulsating complexities, subtleties, and nuance. Sidewalk and body; food and liquor—these vectors engage the swirling and twisting political–economic realities around us. Until access to quality education, decent housing, clean and affordable water, and economic opportunity is extended to all citizens of Detroit, the positionings of sidewalk and body are as precarious now as they were in 1967.

Alex B. Hill is medical geographer and anthropologist focused on race, place, and food. His research on Multidimensional Foodways in Detroit will be included as a chapter in the forthcoming book, ***Foodscapes: Food, Space, and Place in a Global Society***.

Maya Stovall is an artist and ethnographer whose work centers on performance and place. Her ***Liquor Store Theatre*** dissertation work was included in the **Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial 2017**.

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