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Blackness in Post-Bankruptcy Detroit: Racial Politics and Public Discourse

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Abstract

Public discourse narrative positions Detroit's post-bankruptcy revitalization as a rapid process of business and investment descending upon the city. In spite of this narrative, Detroit today remains a city of intense poverty and inequality. Between 2009 and 2013, an estimated 39 percent of Detroit residents were living below the Federal Poverty Line. This figure renders Detroit as statistically the poorest city in the country. In addition to a mythical narrative of rapid-fire investment, popular media representations of Detroit are peppered with racialized references to white business investment. These references position whiteness as "saving" Detroit and center whiteness in the urban process. This racialized narrative is false and divisive in a city that is upwards of 83 percent African American. In this paper, we map the disparity between the racial politics of Detroit and the anti-black public discourse narrative currently surrounding the city. We demonstrate that the public discourse valorization of a profit-driven urban process results in an anti-black prioritization of whiteness in Detroit's post-bankruptcy redevelopment process. This narrative, if unchecked, will have serious consequences in the city's present and future. As such, we propose a re-centering of the blackness of the city and the racial politics of generations that have shaped current conditions, toward a more equitable recovery process.

Introduction

In this paper, we map the disparity between the racial politics of Detroit and what we consider an anti-black public discourse narrative currently surrounding the city. We demonstrate that the public discourse valorization of a profit-driven urban process results in an anti-black prioritization of "whiteness"¹ in Detroit's post-bankruptcy² redevelopment process. This narrative, if unchecked, will have serious consequences in the city's present and future.

Background

Public discourse narrative positions Detroit's post-bankruptcy revitalization as a rapid process of business and investment descending upon the city. In spite of this narrative, Detroit in 2016 remains a city of intense poverty and inequality. Between 2009 and 2013, an estimated 39 percent of Detroit residents were living below the Federal Poverty Line. This figure renders Detroit as statistically the poorest city in the country. Only 13 percent of Detroit's residents have completed bachelor's degrees,

¹The term, "whiteness", has been employed by numerous writers, theorists, and scholars in multiple disciplines. Early whiteness scholarship was established by sociologist, historian, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois when he wrote in the text, *On Sociology and the Black Community*, that the most pressing problem of the twentieth century would be the issue of the color line (1901). Subsequently, novelist and poet James Baldwin wrote extensively about notions of whiteness and in a 1979 interview with the *New York Times* described whiteness as an imaginary. In this article, the term whiteness is employed to describe a set of assumptions and privileges associated with the category of persons deemed to be white. Rather than a reference to color of skin, we use the term whiteness to refer to the set of unearned economic, social, and political privileges inscribed upon those categorized as white.

²This article focuses on contemporary Detroit during the bankruptcy and post-bankruptcy periods up to present day. When we refer to Detroit, we're referring to Detroit from July 2013 when the city filed Chapter 9 bankruptcy, including the time period through November 7, 2014 in which Detroit emerged from bankruptcy, up to present day.

significantly lower than the percentage of residents with bachelor's degrees in Memphis, St. Louis, Baltimore, Washington D.C., and New Orleans. Detroit is, at present, approximately 83 percent African American. The majority of the Detroit poor are African American, long-time residents who have borne the brunt of decades of industrial decline, business and residential flight fueled by racist ideology, and institutionally discriminatory housing policies. Generational poverty has been constructed in Detroit at the seams of racist ideology and economic crisis. Contextualizing the historical, political, and sociocultural roots of poverty in Detroit in the critical text, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, historian Thomas Sugrue writes that,

Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality (2014:5).

In our work to re-center blackness in Detroit, we apply geographer Katherine McKittrick's theory of black geographies to our analysis of public discourse and Detroit's spatial politics. McKittrick synthesizes geographies with contextualized political and historical analysis toward a critique of systems of oppression. McKittrick does so by connecting the politics of everyday life with the consequences of history. In the critically important text, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick writes that,

Black writers and black artists are replacing that which was/is too subhuman, or too irrelevant, or too terrible, to be formally geographic or charted in any way (2006:33-4).

The term "geographies", as deployed by McKittrick is broad in its application, yet specific in its priority of resituating blackness as historical and political – of showing how inequality is socially constructed and enacted in spaces and places. In this article, McKittrick's geographies are a lens on sites of mass reproduction (Hill 1995) – in this case the popular newspaper media – where racist public discourse shapes ideology (Van Dijk 2005). Post-bankruptcy Detroit blackness is depicted as ungeographic, a-historical, and a-political through racist public discourse. The racialized economic inequality that Sugrue highlights is mirrored by inequality in public discourse representation. As such, the engaged presence of blackness in post-bankruptcy Detroit is rendered silent by popular news media. Geographer Loretta Lees writes in "Urban geography: discourse analysis and urban research" that,

The impact of the discursive turn on urban research (both political economic and cultural political urban research) is growing as more and more researchers seek to integrate the study of language and culture into urban geographical analysis (2004, p. 101).

Lees writes that critical discourse analysis within urban geography studies aids understanding ideology and transformation of cities. Lees, however, also problematizes critical discourse analysis as an endpoint in a research agenda, noting that,

In writing about social justice in the city we need to start with the discursive, but then we need to move away from it because talking about social justice is not enough – we need to create it! (2004, p. 105)

We agree with Lees that naming the problem of racist public discourse is the starting point and not an endpoint. As such, we offer this article as an important first step in destabilizing the anti-black public discourse narrative of post-bankruptcy Detroit.

Making Blackness Invisible: Detroit's Blank Slate

Detroit has been a majority black or African American city for a number of decades. Most recently the city's approximately 700,000 residents were 85% black citizens in the 2000 Census and 83% black in the 2010 Census. The laundry list of despair that makes up Detroit's narrative of decline is a list that Detroiters have been living through for decades without the label of bankruptcy. The business and real estate speculators have situated themselves as saviors among deeply rooted Detroiters who have been relegated to roles of survivors or absent actors.

The media mecca brought on by the "Assignment Detroit" effort in 2009, a project from CNN, Time, and Fortune hoped to dispel the myths of Detroit, yet only perpetuated them. "Assignment Detroit" asserted the narrative that Detroit is an empty landscape (Safransky 2014) based upon epic pictures of dilapidated buildings; while the city has a fair amount of vacant properties and empty buildings, the city is hardly empty or devoid of people. Perhaps this misrepresentation of Detroit as a "blank slate" or "blank canvas" becomes most acute when artists and journalists are reminded that the people Detroit is not devoid of are black.

In many ways the well-worn narrative of Detroit as a blank slate has mirrored the metaphor that asserts the false notion that "Detroit is Empty" which follows a narrative of power and privilege symbolized in "white flight."³ The white population is said to have abandoned Detroit and therefore the city is considered an empty place or at least a place devoid of the dominant narrative. Detroit's issue with population loss is now "black flight" with 25% of the city population leaving the city between 2000 and 2010, largely due to sub-prime mortgage lending by the country's major banks, which in some cases specifically targeted black homeowners. The myth of Detroit as empty cannot exist without the accompanying idea that black people don't matter. The "blank slate" myth wipes black people out of the history of the city as well as the present efforts to revitalize neighborhoods.

We aren't a non-profit so no one wants to fund our community projects. We all know that the Caucasians run the foundations. They won't be coming here. We get passed up by everyone. (Focus group conducted by Alex B. Hill, Detroit Council District 6, July 2014)

The above quote comes from a community listening session on food access that turned into a list of grievances about multiple community issues not being addressed over the course of many years. There have been small efforts to fund block clubs, community groups, and entrepreneurs in Detroit's neighborhoods, but these efforts come off as an afterthought with significantly less funding dedicated to making any real impact. The blank slate or blank canvas metaphor is most commonly a reference to the arts and creative sectors, but also applies to funding from foundations and nonprofits. A myriad number of urbanists have lauded the growth of the "creative class"⁴ in America's decaying cities. Detroit has been no different except for the pervasive idea of emptiness that draws so many young artists and entrepreneurs to come try their hand at "saving" Detroit.

⁴Urban studies theorist Richard Florida, in the text, "The Rise of the Creative Class—Revised and Expanded", defines the creative class to include workers engaged in creating new concepts and works that are consumable by publics. According to Florida, the creative class includes what he calls the "super creative", including professionals such as scientists, university professors, entertainers, and architects, as well as what he calls "creative professionals" who work across a variety of industries but overall bring knowledge and problem-solving skills as their main products in the workplace.

³In metro Detroit, white flight was represented by the migration of the city's white population to nearby suburbs due to the significant manufacturing job losses in the 1950s, racist housing covenants represented by block busting, and accelerated after the conflict of the 1967 rebellion. For more see Sugrue 1996, Sugrue 2014.

[...] unsure what I wanted to do with my life, and Detroit seemed like this land of opportunity and open space. Because I grew up in the suburbs and was mystified by the allure of being a part of the revitalization of Detroit. (*Huffington Post Detroit*, Simon 2012)

The referenced quote highlights how the media and Detroit's boosters have built up a false facade for Detroit that lacks black people, but rather is ripe with pioneering opportunity. The Heidelberg Project an outdoor art environment on Detroit's east side, created by artist Tyree Guyton over 30 years ago, is a homegrown example of art revitalizing a neighborhood. However, the majority of artistic and creative ventures funded by the city's creative business incubator, Detroit Creative Corridor Center (DC3) are not black (70% of projects funded are the projects of white artists), nor are they homegrown projects from Detroit's neighborhoods. Even DC3's list of mentors includes only five people of color of 47 profiled mentors at the time of this writing. The acclaimed Detroit Design Festival brings a weeklong series of creative "happenings" to the city. However, these events are clustered and focused in Detroit's midtown and downtown areas making artistic expression and creativity decidedly not inclusive to black residents. Many black artists have spoken about seeking funding and fellowships to continue their work in Detroit only to talk of being passed over for young white artists from distant states or countries. In a stark reminder of access, Detroit residents who work in cultural industries (museums, art, design firms, studios, etc.) are concentrated in Detroit's neighborhoods while the city's cultural attractions cluster in Downtown and Midtown (Miller Dickinson Blais 2012).

The business sector reflects these disparities in access as well. The Michigan Black Chamber of Commerce has been pushing for equity and recognition for a number of years. The Black Chamber represents 32,000 black-owned businesses in Detroit and argues that black-owned businesses are being systematically overlooked in the city's redevelopment. Reverend D. Alexander Bullock writes about the failure of bankruptcy to account for historical segregation and discrimination that has led to 80,000 black entrepreneurs being denied access to capital to grow their businesses in Detroit (*Detroit News*, 2014).

Walking down almost any street in Detroit, blackness is visible: people, art, and businesses. In Midtown, the sprawling N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art cuts a striking footprint of sustainable architecture, historic materials, and postmodern style. Included within the N'Namdi Center's campus are boutiques and a popular vegetarian restaurant and wine bar, Seva. Next to the N'Namdi campus are the Garfield Lofts, a mixed residential and artisan building featuring shops, a cafe, and office spaces. George N'Namdi, the visionary behind the project, has been doing business in Detroit for over 35 years. His projects have played a significant role in the revitalization of Midtown. Even so, there is a clear shift in who symbolically owns the Midtown area. The following interview with a long-time African American resident demonstrates the impact of public discourse on how residents experience the urban process.

1: [To black resident] What do you call this area?

2: "They [white people] call it Midtown"

1: And what do you call it?

2: "Doesn't matter, they call it Midtown"

(Resident interview at Second Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., August 2015)

No matter how many black innovators come forward, the narrative of the savior is invoked to refer overwhelmingly to white men who have newly invested in Detroit. A handful of black men have received short-lived media mentions such as Tyree Guyton of the Heidelberg Project, Mark Covington of the Georgia Street Community Collective, and Olayami Dabls of the MBAD African Bead Museum. The striking difference in these savior narratives is that white men are mentioned in regards to "saving"

the city as a whole, whereas black men are mentioned in media as only “preserving” or “revitalizing” their respective corners of Detroit. Most recently Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) was mentioned, “Malik Yakini Might Save Detroit with Bok Choy and Baby Kale.” The reference to Yakini, however, separates the actor from the action — the saving from the savior — and is an anomaly in the media’s fixation on “white saviors” in Detroit. Where other saviors have been given funding, media accolades, and foundation support, Yakini hasn’t held his breath for the city or foundations to help.

“This is about a community organization addressing problems within our own community. We’re not waiting on the government. We’re not waiting on foundations. It’s about taking destiny into our own hands, which is larger and broader than simply who is buying the produce we’re growing.” (Leschin-Hoar 2013)

Another aspect of the invisibility of blackness in Detroit is highlighted in what urban planners and city advocates like to label the “creative class.” The reference point for “creative class” is typically a new young, white population engaged in the creative, educational, and medical industries. By default this definition excludes blackness and at the same time removes existing creative individuals from the narrative of America’s changing urban centers. The new white population becomes a kind of collective “savior” for the downtrodden city. Yakini, in an op-ed for the Michigan Citizen on November 22, 2014 noted this divide and how he was not considered part of Detroit’s new “creative class:”

For the past 40 years I have been part of a cultural/creative/revolutionary Black community in Detroit. [...] It has been a community of Kujichgulia-type, under-resourced, boot-strappin’ sort of Black people. We use our creativity to make things more beautiful and beneficial. We use our creativity to challenge the domination of our craniums by Western Europe and her children. We use our creativity to challenge systems of oppression. We use our creativity to survive in an often-hostile environment. [...] We refuse to be negated! We refuse to be discounted! We refuse to be made invisible!

Black applicants to the Kresge Arts Fellowship⁵ can tell you their multi-year horror stories of being passed up for young, white artists, newly residing in Detroit from out-of-state. The Knight Foundation has similarly dedicated itself to creative industries and innovation, however in its 2015 Knight Cities Challenge competition three of Detroit’s most prominent corporations were awarded almost \$250,000 to build “innovative” websites to spur talent, opportunity, and engagement (Stovall and Hill 2015). The anti-black public discourse and action in Detroit asserted in newspaper media translates into funding decisions and disparities in everyday life. Reviewing the presence of the white savior narrative in Detroit demonstrates the power of public discourse in shaping ideology and action.

The White Savior in Popular Media

In “White fear: analyzing public objection to Toronto’s Afrocentric school” Cynthia Levine-Rasky illustrates that whiteness is not a simple concept of skin color, racial inscription, or ethnic identity. Rather, whiteness is a set of structural privileges and an ideology of power, that includes and structures

⁵The Kresge Arts Fellowship is a fine and performing arts fellowship, established in Detroit in 2009 by the Kresge Foundation. The fellowship provides a stipend, resources, promotion, and support to selected artists. Since 2009, selected artists have been 30 percent black in spite of the fellowship being based in the majority 83 percent black city of Detroit (2009–2015 Kresge Arts in Detroit, kresgeartsindetroit.org).

wealthy elites and by default excludes all others. Exclusion through whiteness is displayed through Detroit's white-centered public discourse. Levine-Rasky writes that,

"Whiteness defines itself against otherness in an exclusionary discourse of nation, religion, race, gender, and sexuality" (Levine-Rasky 2014:208)

The whiteness public discourse of Detroit's urban process excludes the majority of the city, as well as the allies and working class people who have for decades been working toward revitalization in the politics of everyday life. Toward presenting a counter narrative of the white-centered redevelopment myth we analyze public discourse in popular media for instances of the terms, "savior" and "missionary" directed toward entrepreneurs, real estate speculators, community activists, and property developers. In reviewing whether the terms are used to refer to white and/or non-white actors we analyze the anti-black claims to Detroit's urban process. This whiteness narrative of post-bankruptcy Detroit is damaging to the majority of Detroit's residents.

We observe that the terms "savior", "missionary", and "prince of the city", are repeatedly deployed by popular media to describe the arrival of wealthy white newcomers to Detroit regardless of whether the practices and investments of the newcomers will benefit the majority of Detroiters (Aguilar 2014; Alberta 2014; Ryzik 2010). This white savior narrative marginalizes black, low-income, people of color, and long-time Detroiters through its relationship with newly arrived white wealth. The idea of the "white savior" can be traced back to Rudyard Kipling's poem entitled "The White Man's Burden" as an affront to U.S. imperialism and colonization. Underscoring the historical significance of the savior in relationships between dominant and subordinate social groups, in the critical text "From Savage to Negro", anthropologist and historian Lee D. Baker writes that,

The antecedents of contemporary notions of race are found not in the science of race but in the theology of heathenism, the saved, and the damned. Although many attempts were made by early North American colonists to "save" the souls of indigenous people, the ensuing conflicts quickly changed the image of Native Americans from noble to ignoble savages. (1998:12).

In "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit", historian Thomas J. Sugrue writes that much of the disastrous situation in which Detroit found itself is attributable to the cascading consequences of racial inequality and legalized segregation (2014). Similarly, John Hartigan delves into "whiteness" in Detroit through the lens of three historically white neighborhoods in his book, "Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit."

Whiteness stands as a concept that reveals and explains the racial interests of white people linking them collectively to a position of social dominance. As a subject of academic and political scrutiny, whiteness has two primary characteristics: first, its operations are assumed to be fairly uniform, establishing the normativity of white mores and behaviors, along with the social homogeneity valued by this collective; whiteness manifests a certain logic in its political, esthetic, and historical sensibilities- that blackness is its symbolic other (1999:16)

We recruit the ideas of Baker, Sugrue and Hartigan's arguments to follow, observing and documenting whiteness-centered public discourse in post-bankruptcy Detroit.

Narrative of Whiteness

Blackness has played a constant, historical role in Detroit's revitalization, but a false portrayal of whiteness as being central to Detroit's "salvation" creates a false narrative that excludes blacks

from the discourse and from resources available during the economic recovery process. Although Detroit has historically embodied polarizing, oversimplified narratives of black and white binaries, the contemporary public discourse narrative of Detroit's "white saviors" was kicked off by the *New York Times* October 19, 2010 feature article on Phil Cooley (Ryzik 2010). This *New York Times* article is a vivid example of a-historical, a-political, anti-black writing that decontextualizes Detroit's urban process.

The article characterizes Cooley, a white businessman from a wealthy suburban Detroit family as a primary catalyst for Detroit's contemporary revitalization. The article asserts that Cooley has made Detroit "acceptable" for investment, real estate speculation, and exploration, writing that,

Before Slows was built, generally speaking people came into the city for hockey games, ball games and to see the "Sesame Street Spectacular," said Toby Barlow, Detroit's other de facto spokesman. Mr. Cooley, he said, has "validated the idea that people will come into the city." (Ryzik 2010)

In spite of the broad generalities that Barlow uses to describe the subjects of his discussion ("people"), it is implicit that the people Barlow refers to are wealthy and white. Indeed, Detroit has continued to persist as a city with "people". The city has maintained upwards of 700,000 residents even during the worst of its population decline. The majority African American residents are not the "people" to which Barlow refers. Barlow asserts white ownership through his application of "people" to refer to the people who he thinks matter.

Referring to the same *New York Times* article, the details of Cooley's Detroit intervention details exactly what sort of people are even able to intervene in Detroit's speculative real estate market:

Rent is cheap here, but spaces in good condition are hard to find. So are investors, which is why entrepreneurs often double as carpenters. With his parents as co-signers on the leases for two buildings totaling \$159,000, and the chef and sous-chef as sweat-equity partners, Mr. Cooley opened Slows using an advance on his inheritance, helping to refurbish the space himself. (Ryzik 2010)

The fact that the *New York Times* here asserts that a white businessman with an inheritance was necessary in order to "validate" Detroit a destination for "people" advances the idea of wealthy whiteness as necessary for Detroit's revitalization. The centrality of blackness to the city of Detroit, and even to Slows Bar-B-Q's culinary offerings is ignored in this article. Despite the fact that Slows Bar-B-Q is selling food based on the African American cultural fare called Soul Food, the existing, strong black presence in Detroit's Soul Food restaurant scene is not acknowledged in the article. Unfortunately, the true beneficiaries of Cooley's business success are not mentioned. The article states that,

In its first year, Slows did \$1.8 million in sales, triple what the owners expected, Mr. Cooley said. And now they are eager to spread their wealth. (Ryzik 2010)

Cooley's plans to build a skate-park and to create a green space in front of Corktown's iconic tourist destination abandoned train station across the street from Slows Bar-B-Q is not a philanthropic action. These developments are planned to attract media attention and diners to Slows Bar-B-Q and will financially enrich Cooley and his family. It is counterproductive for popular media to assert wealthy entrepreneurs as philanthropic "saviors" of the city, when business interests and support of their own particular communities are the goal.

Though he is occasionally called the Prince of Detroit, Mr. Cooley still describes things as "fancy pants," dresses in torn T-shirts, and is quick to rail against chain stores, mass development and other symbols of late-stage gentrification.

(Ryzik 2010)

With the New York Times' whiteness narrative of Detroit's revitalization, Cooley's Detroit business success inscribes him "prince" or "savior". His actions tell a different story. As Cooley sells Soul Food, cultural African American cuisine, to majority white people in a majority black city, unfortunately he fails to mention the African American roots of the food Slows is serving. If Cooley was the first white man of the 21st century to be labeled Detroit's "savior"; Gilbert is likely the second, and his billions of dollars of capital and real estate holdings have made his reach much deeper than Cooley's.

In 2010, Dan Gilbert, a suburban Detroit white businessman involved in sports, gaming, real estate speculation, and finance, who has an estimated net worth of \$4.3 billion (*Forbes* 2014),⁶ moved his mortgage company from a nearby suburb of Detroit to downtown Detroit proper. This was the beginning of Gilbert's outsized consolidation of power in downtown Detroit. Gilbert's family of companies also began amassing millions of square footage of downtown Detroit property, and branding acquired lots and buildings with slick black-and-white accented banners reading the Quicken Loans family of companies' mantra, "Opportunity Detroit" in a woefully artsy urban font. Indeed, David Segal of *The New York Times* reported that:

Opportunity Detroit, as Mr. Gilbert has branded it, is both a rescue mission and a business venture that, if successful, will yield him a fortune. When he started buying in 2011, the city was having what he has described as a "skyscraper sale." (Segal 2013)

The *New York Times* article from which the above quotation is taken is entitled, "A Missionary's Quest to Remake Motor City" (Segal 2013). To many minds, the idea of a missionary who owns extensive companies and possesses a net worth of \$4.3 billion is a stretch. The idea of a white missionary in a black city brings to mind centuries of colonization of the global south by the global north. The term missionary brings to mind the taking of lands from indigenous peoples. It brings to mind the use of religion as a tool to extract land and exterminate populations of indigenous people. Is capitalism the new religion? Images of a white man saving the savage people of color cannot be cast away with the use of this loaded historic term in reference to Detroit. The term "missionary" as applied to Gilbert illustrates the displacement of blackness in social space. The position with which Gilbert is endowed is not just situated within his current role as an owner of billions of dollars of premium, downtown Detroit real estate; rather, it is situated in the historical context of the white missionary saving the black savages, by employment of this historically loaded term, missionary. McKittrick's theory provides a lens through which the term, missionary, may be analyzed. The term is a-historically applied in an article that a-historically addresses the context of the city and Gilbert's role in it. In the broad reality of Detroit, Gilbert's positioning of savior or missionary is unrealistic. Detroit is a 139 square mile city; Dan Gilbert's efforts within two square miles represents approximately 1 percent of the city's total land area. The same *New York Times* article quoted above reports that Gilbert

...wants to revive two square miles that were once the thrumming heart of this city. To do so, he has already spent roughly \$1 billion acquiring nearly three million square feet of real estate, and is ready to close another deal, for the Greektown Casino-Hotel and nearby parking lots, that will add one million more square feet to his holdings. (Segal 2013)

⁶Forbes 400 profile, Dan Gilbert. <http://www.forbes.com/profile/daniel-gilbert/>

As of November 2014, *The Detroit Free Press* reported that Gilbert acquired the Compuware Building, a massive downtown office building situated across from the Downtown park, Campus Martius, that forms the heart of the business district. Even with the monumental downtown real estate acquisitions that Gilbert and his family of companies are spearheading, the impact of these acquisitions on the city's overall condition is minimal. The population of downtown Detroit, at 5,287 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), is <1 percent of Detroit's total. More accurate is the notion of a shrewd businessman who is following the traditional "buy low and sell high" mantra of landowner speculation. The *New York Times'* journalist Segal alludes to this possibility, acknowledging that Gilbert has "a nearly obsessive quest to create enterprises and earn profits" and that "If this (downtown) area turns around, no one will profit quite like Mr. Gilbert, but the risk looks as great as the potential reward" (Segal 2013). Gilbert as speculative businessman is more accurate and journalistic than Gilbert as missionary.

Gilbert is making a calculated, strategic bet that downtown Detroit will increase occupancy rates and value in coming years. This is calibrated business risk. Gilbert is not running a charity, and he's certainly not saving Detroit. In many ways, Dan Gilbert and Quicken Loans have contributed to the destruction of Detroit as it currently stands. The Detroit News found that 52 percent of all Quicken Loans mortgages giving in Detroit are now considered blight and in need of removal (MacDonald and Kurth 2015). While Gilbert's investment in Detroit is limited to two square miles, his claims to Detroit include the entire city. In the popular media article, "Is Dan Gilbert Detroit's New Superhero?", journalist Tim Alberta outlines the magnitude of Dan Gilbert's financial domination of downtown Detroit. Alberta writes that,

He's the catalyst for this city's economic restoration, and some citizens are hailing him as the savior of Detroit. And no, he's not the new mayor. Dan Gilbert doesn't need a political title; elected office could hardly augment his financial influence over Detroit. The founder and chairman of Rock Ventures, an umbrella entity that includes Quicken Loans and scores of other properties, Gilbert has consolidated power in the region in an astonishingly short time. (Alberta 2014)

Readers are guided to equate wealth with the religious notion of salvation and self-sacrifice. Public discourse portrayals of Cooley, Gilbert, and other wealthy white businessmen as "missionaries" of Detroit reflect a fictitious notion of white wealth as the lynchpin in Detroit's recovery. Referring back to the opening of this article, it is the ongoing efforts of African American citizens, entrepreneurs, artists, professionals, and everyday working people of all backgrounds who have built Detroit's cultural capital and sustained its survival. Now, the world is recognizing Detroit's cultural capital. Referencing McKittrick, the blackness of this source cultural capital and its social, cultural, and spatial geographies must be re-centered as we move forward.

Conclusion

In this article, we demonstrated the role of public discourse in centering whiteness in post-bankruptcy Detroit. This anti-black narrative is problematic in the reality of contemporary Detroit. Through public discourse analysis centered by McKittrick's theory of black geographies, we revealed a disturbing trend. This trend prioritizes wealthy, white claims to Detroit's contemporary gentrification process in particular and to the future of Detroit in general.

Anti-black public discourse represents an a-politicizing of Detroit's past, present, and future. To move forward with increased equity, the racial politics of Detroit's past and present

must be acknowledged and addressed. This use of public discourse represents an invitation for wealthy business interests and speculators to participate in Detroit's revitalization. An invitation for a selected few must come with the exclusion of the majority. Blackness has played a constant, historical role in Detroit's revitalization. The portrayal of whiteness as being central to Detroit's "salvation" has created a narrative that excludes blacks and additional marginalized populations from the discourse and from resources available during the post-bankruptcy recovery process. While whites overall benefit more from the opportunities presented by increased global interest and real estate speculation in Detroit, blacks and other people of color, as well as others from lower socioeconomic classes have been working together to maintain and to revitalize Detroit for decades. In order to build a successful, peaceful, and inclusive post-bankruptcy process in Detroit, there must be a re-centering of blackness that includes equal access to resources and privileges of the recovery process.

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