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# Liquor Store Theatre: Ethnography and Contemporary Art in Detroit

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## Abstract [Translate](#)

Liquor Store Theatre is a study of the struggle for the city in contemporary Detroit. An ethnography completed over several years in an east side Detroit neighborhood called McDougall Hunt, the project exists in a variety of registers, working across contemporary art, performance, urban anthropology, critical geography, visual studies, film and new media, African American studies, and urban studies. The visual work of Liquor Store Theatre includes a four-volume, twenty-plus video episode meditation on city life included in the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial 2017. The works were produced as I staged and documented dance performances and conversations on city life in the streets and sidewalks surrounding liquor stores in the neighborhood where I also lived. In addition to the publicly known moving and still image works associated with the project, Liquor Store Theatre was a classical neighborhood ethnography. From the liquor store performances and conversations as points of departure, I orbited with my willing neighbors into their lives up and down our blocks. I ended up in their breakfast nooks, at their cocktail parties, in their backyards and public gardens, together on the sidewalks of Heidelberg Project, and at neighborhood meetings, hanging out and tracing daily living in the zone. Despite the racist/capitalist economic system and regionalist/post-industrial economic decline evident in Detroit broadly and in the zone, people found ways of making the city move. Over my fieldwork, I found that residents used the forces of art, labor, and movement to shape and interpret city life. Understanding McDougall Hunt required fresh thinking due to its seemingly bizarre contradictions—a gorgeous geography, near the river, with complex and intelligent long-time residents, artists galore, eight liquor stores in 0.39 of a square mile, and a median income of \$13,000 USD at 2010 Census. I was searching for a new way of thinking about old questions of power and struggle for the city. In this search, I located an analytic I called the paradox of place. With paradox of place, I prioritized both the affect and desire of the day-to-day, and the abstract, philosophical possibilities of space, along with attention to the historical materialist, empirical realities that shaped political economy of space and place. From the quiet art and writing of neighbors, to alternative modes of labor keeping the block going, to movement of capital, people, water, and development, the project that started with a dancery prompt landed squarely in the everyday; touching the affect and desire of the mundane, the paradox of place, and documenting visually and ethnographically the rich complexities in the present moment. (contemporary art, cultural anthropology, ethnography, performance studies, dance studies, critical geography, urban studies, new media, visual studies, film studies, gender studies, African American studies)

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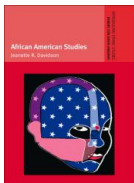
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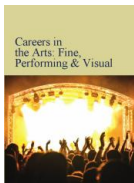
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