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Reckoning: Detroit's Literary Crisis of Conscience

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Reckoning:
Detroit's Literary Crisis of Conscience
Danielle Elizabeth Jean Cope

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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Dedication

For Argus.

Abstract

Once the industrial heavy-weight of the twentieth century, the city of Detroit is now plagued by a narrative of decay that is made obvious by its abandoned and neglected buildings and neighborhoods. In sensational reporting about Detroit's misfortunes, a reductive brush is frequently applied to paint the city into a "before" and "after" picture of "success" and "failure," fetishizing its decay while often ignoring the countless ways that socio-economic forces contributed to its decline. Addressing the unresolved wounds of class discrimination and structural racism, authors Angela Flournoy and Michael Zadoorian have provided a literary space in which fictional Detroiters reckon with an often inconvenient and painful past. In doing so, the authors suggest that an integral component of the city's survival is through active dialogue with the past. This thesis provides an engagement with that history, first by reviewing the institutional use of the American Dream as tool of hegemonic formation in Detroit's factories, followed by a discussion of the novel *The Turner House* (2016) as a textual example of the inadequacies and legacy of such a model, and concluding with a reassertion of identity as provided by the short story "Spelunkers" (2009). It is only by reckoning with these specters of history that the past becomes, as Flournoy and Zadoorian suggest, not a death sentence, but a living resource for imagining Detroit's future.

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Introduction

In 1996, the artist and sociologist Camilo José Vergara published his highly controversial vision for the future of Detroit's decaying architecture, proposing that "100 troubled buildings" downtown be turned into "a grand national historic park of play and wonder, an urban monument valley," to be named an "American Acropolis" (22). The term "Acropolis" summons a vision of the famous Athenian ruins associated with the Hellenistic Period, and so too Vergara discusses the modern metropolis of Detroit in terms of a former civilization. His first paragraph alone contains the words "derelict," "empty," "semi-abandoned," "no man's land," "down and out," "not worth anything," and "decaying" (1). Referring to the buildings of Detroit's deteriorating skyline as "icons of a dead civilization," Vergara several times pronounces Detroit lifeless, calling it a "throwaway" city (23) and a "[city] of the dead" (21). Only spectral figures pass through the author's periphery: "the elderly, the homeless, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, [and] the insane" give the city a post-apocalyptic atmosphere (5). It is the site of incomprehensible cataclysm, and with the adamantine finality of an epitaph, Vergara writes, "A world ended in Detroit" (37).

While Detroit's civil administrators proved both unwilling and unable to seriously imagine Vergara's vision of a "ruins park," other authors have eagerly applied this graveyard motif when referring to the city's decline (36). Journalist Frank Owen wrote, "It's a throwaway city for a throwaway society, a place where the American Dream came to die" in his controversial 2004 *Playboy* article, "Detroit, Death City" (60). *New York Times* contributor Bob Herbert called Detroit a "ghost town... a scene of devastation and disintegration that stuns the mind, a major American city that still is home to 900,000

people but which looks at times like a cross between postwar Berlin and the ruin of an ancient civilization” in his 2009 editorial, “An American Catastrophe” (A.19). Even native son Charlie LeDuff entitled his 2013 memoir *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, detailing the chain of events that rendered the city a victim of violent, premeditated murder, to take up the theme. Death and its otherworldliness evinces a sense of irrevocability, perversity, obsolescence, deterioration and, among the more sensitive examples, grief. As a rhetorical device, it provides a lens for processing the immensity of Detroit’s decline. By referring to Detroit as a “dead civilization,” a “ghost town,” and a “throwaway city,” these authors have distilled the public’s anxieties, derision, and predictions into a neat metaphor for what has been a long and complicated process of deindustrialization, disinvestment, and depreciation. The very public deterioration of Detroit’s buildings and the large-scale depopulation of the city, as referenced by Vergara and Herbert, have also been widely photographed, affixing in the minds of the public a ghostly image of a once grand city.

It is precisely because Detroit’s early and mid-century achievements were so great that their loss is now so keenly felt. An industrial heavyweight and leader in technological innovation, Detroit was once promisingly called the “City of Tomorrow.” The automotive industry generated not only fabulous wealth for its top industrialists, but also provided the foundation for the city’s civic institutions. With generous wages, factory workers joined the middle class in home ownership and spent their leisure time in Detroit’s many ornate cultural palaces. A rural immigrant class became acculturated to urban living, and many gained access to the American Dream. As Detroit’s factories converted to the “Arsenal of Democracy” during World War II, military spending

translated into bigger and better facilities in the suburbs as well as the housing that materialized around them. Detroit was a worker's paradise: unemployment was minimal, factory wages were the highest in the nation, and powerful unions protected the little guy. Home ownership, consumerism, job security, and social mobility were the cornerstones of this society, but the foundations proved unstable. Detroit has always been reliant on the "Big Three" automotive companies—General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford—and therefore beholden to corporate interest. Highly-publicized foreign recruitment policies resulted in a crowded city that had neither the resources nor a desire to support its population. Discriminatory hiring practices ensured racial stratification of the city, and suburban development often had "whites-only" housing covenants. The resulting "ghettoization" of the city's black population led to the uprisings of 1943 and 1967, triggering a wave of white flight and with it the depletion of the city's tax base. At the same time, factories moved out of the Steel Belt to the Sun Belt where labor was cheaper and unions weaker. Unemployment led to poverty and crime, and the arrival of crack cocaine in the 1980s decimated residential neighborhoods. Due to plummeting property values, many homes are either burned for the insurance money or abandoned to vandals. National trends such as the subprime mortgage crisis and recent financial crisis, as well as the bankruptcy and restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler, only exacerbated Detroit's situation and its corresponding image of decay. Considering the spectacular nature of its twentieth century boom-to-bust trajectory, the city's past success shadows present-day Detroit, its traces appearing in every depopulated photograph and crumbling façade. So too the city is dogged by the specter of racism, evident by the fact that an

impoverished, and predominately black, urban core is surrounded by some of the nation's wealthiest—and whitest—enclaves.

In sensational reporting about Detroit's misfortunes, the graveyard metaphor reductively paints the city into a "before" and "after" picture of "success" and "failure," fetishizing its decay while often ignoring the countless ways in which socio-economic forces contributed to its decline. When used critically, however, the motif limns the occluded violence of corporate interests, corruption and racism. Detroit *is* indeed haunted by its history of insincerity and inequality. For example, assembly work provided a decent wage but mechanized the human laborer in the process. Americanization campaigns, such as led by Ford Motor Company, required immigrants to forfeit their cultural heritage. The American Dream was granted only conditionally, and was systematically denied to those who did not adhere to a hegemonic standard of whiteness. Constant production resulted in a middle class dedicated to consuming the very commodities it made. And finally, home ownership remained elusive to much of Detroit's black population and later became a dead weight for those who achieved it. By tracing these problems back to the ruling interest of privatized companies, the argument is made that the needs of the factory have historically preceded those of the individual, the erasure of whom provided justification for class and racial discrimination. Considered this way, the effacement of first the labor force, and later the unemployed and "down and out[s]," may be metaphorically termed as murder. Those individuals sacrificed to the hegemonic consolidation of a middle class, as well as the ones who never gained access, continue to haunt Detroit and their sacrifice demands to be recognized if the city is to truly recover.

Sensitive to this legacy of erasure, Detroit's authors have responded to the pronouncement of their city's demise as the continued denial to self-determination. While a useful conceit for measuring damage, the application of the graveyard motif nonetheless silences Detroit in a tomb of cultural irrelevancy. The people who remain are, like their predecessors, relegated to a spectral status, their presence a weird anomaly in a city of death. In his polemical essay entitled "We Love Detroit, Even If You Don't," Detroit native Aaron Foley writes, "[a] headline like 'Detroit is Bankrupt' underneath a photo, *another fucking photo*, of a rundown house in the shadow of the city skyline tells half the story" (15). The author's anger at "*another fucking photo*" describes how many Detroiters have reacted to coverage of their city's many crises. Foley goes on to tell the reader what cannot be seen in these photos, the other half of the story:

I see little old ladies tending to their annuals, kids—black and white—playing football in the street (even though they can be annoying because they block the street sometimes). I see a bunch of regular-ass people doing regular-ass shit because Detroit is a regular-ass city with regular-ass problems just like everyone else. (15)

Foley denounces the image of death by reminding us that life continues in his city. It is precisely because these ongoing narratives are so ordinary, so *relatable*, that we must pay attention to them: The story of Detroit is the story of America.

Jeffrey Eugenides provides an apt demonstration of this narrative strategy in his epic novel of Detroit, *Middlesex* (2002). Driving through an increasingly blighted downtown in 1975, Cal Stephanides observes the abandoned skyscrapers—"great shells

of commerce [that] were put in cold storage”—and thinks, not of decay, but of the “many lives” being lived throughout the city:

Out in these streets people were embroiled in a thousand matters, money problems, love problems, school problems. People were falling in love, getting married, going to drug rehab, learning how to ice-skate, getting bifocals, studying for exams, trying on clothes, getting their hair cut, and getting born. And in some houses people were getting old and sick and were dying, leaving others to grieve. It was happening all the time, unnoticed, and it was the thing that really mattered. (517-9)

What really matters, according to Cal, is the persistence of the ordinary, the very mundaneness of which offers a radical response to any perception of irrelevancy. By focusing our literary analysis on these narratives of the “regular-ass” variety, to borrow Foley’s colorful phrase, we take up the dialogue of resistance begun by Detroit’s authors. Aided by the voices of well-known Detroiters such as Eugenides and Philip Levine, and supplemented by the contributions collected in *A Detroit Anthology* (2014), I offer primary analysis of Angela Flournoy’s novel *The Turner House* (2016) and Michael Zadoorian’s short story “Spelunkers” (2009) to elucidate the way that the city continues to inspire acts of creation. Raised in Los Angeles, Flournoy has turned to her father’s city of Detroit to explore the lives of “regular people trying to get by” in a city to which they are inextricably “tied” (Gleaves 15). Her response to the glut of “fiction about crime” in a “gritty” Detroit, Flournoy’s novel explores a son’s troubled relationship to his father’s legacy of both hope and disappointment (15). Zadoorian, a life-long Detroit, provides a short account of a young man exploring his cultural origins and getting far more than he

bargained for in the process. In relating these very human experiences, the authors present a more nuanced rendering of Detroit, at once relatable and complicated by their characters' relationships to their city.

To be in dialogue with the past first requires recognition of history's intrusion upon the present. In both texts, the narrative of history influences the lives of fictional Detroiters just as it does their real-life counterparts. The ghosts of Detroit's unresolved past haunt these fictions, both literally (as in *The Turner House*) and figuratively (as in "Spelunkers"), as a means of balancing the weight of history with the persistence of life. These narratives suggest that an integral component of the city's survival is its acknowledgment and reckoning with an often inconvenient and painful past. What follows is an engagement with that history, first by reviewing the institutional use of the American Dream as tool of hegemonic formation in Detroit's factories, and followed by a discussion of *The Turner House* as a textual example of the inadequacies and legacy of such a model, concluding with a reassertion of identity as provided by "Spelunkers." By acknowledging and reckoning with the specters of history, as these authors suggest, the past becomes not a death sentence, but a living resource for imagining Detroit's—and by extension, America's—future.

Chapter I

“These Lines of Desire”

Take me to water and the vast inland sea. Ottawa. Huron. Pottawatomi. Slice across corners, curve through the block. Get me to the store. Find me a rock. Lead me and connect me, to spite building and grid. As we always have, as we ever did. The path I follow another has made. Started by one for barter and trade. Some became Gratiot and Grand River, these lines of desire. Pat down from footfall, then wagon wheel, and tire. Expanded with lanes, wood, brick, and stone. Came so far, and so fast, and so wide, and emptied us out from the inside.

—Michael Eugene Burdick and Francis Grunow “Desire Lines” (37)

Mighty and mythical, Detroit is described by its native poets as the “birthplace of smiles. / Breaker of hearts” (“Motown Atlantis” Chantay Leonard 209) and the “City of God” (“Rain Downriver” Philip Levine 225). It is the quintessential “Steel Belt” city, and perhaps the most visible example of the rise and decline of American manufacturing. Detroit biographer Scott Martelle writes that the city was “the result of a planned birth,” created solely for the purpose of commerce (1). Near the close of the seventeenth century, Antoine Laumet de la Mothe, sieur de Cadillac, the French commander charged with providing security to fur traders operating in the lower Great Lakes region, decided that the best way to ensure good trading relations with local Native American tribes was to build secure trading villages located around the safety of Fort du Detroit (1-2). It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, however, that the discovery of large deposits of iron ore and copper in the Upper Peninsula encouraged the United States government to engineer shipping solutions to connect the Great Lakes to each other and to the Atlantic coast (54). After the opening of the Erie Canal and the building of the “Soo Locks” in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan’s industrial output progressed rapidly. In the 1860s, an enterprising Great Lakes captain named E.B. Ward introduced the Bessemer process of steel

production to Detroit (Teaford 53). Ward soon established his “steel mills” throughout the namesake region. Work in mills and foundries drew laborers from the South, Appalachia, and particularly southern and eastern Europe. In 1840, Detroit’s population was just 9,102 (3), but, by the turn of the century, the metropolis would be home to 285,704 (103).

Access to water and timber would determine Detroit’s future role as the world leader in automobile production. As the largest coastal city situated between Lakes Erie and Huron, Detroit was home to shipbuilding, and was a leader in the production of gasoline-powered internal combustion engines for motor-launched ships. Furthermore, the abundance of cheap Michigan lumber supplied Detroit’s many carriage and wagon works. In *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest*, Jon Teaford explains, “the first automobiles were basically engines mounted on buggies,” and factories already suited to vehicle manufacturing quickly transitioned into auto manufacturing, making Detroit the natural birthplace of automotive innovation (104). Martelle writes, “the creative and entrepreneurial vibe in Detroit was contagious,” drawing machinists and tinkerers such as Henry Leland, William Durant, Ransom E. Olds, and the Packard, Dodge and Fisher brothers (Martelle 70; Teaford 105). But Henry Ford, a local farm boy-turned-engineer, emerged from the pack as arguably the most innovative industrialist of them all, a man who, according to historian Douglas Brinkley, “seemed to carry [the future] around in his pocket” (200).

In 1903 Henry Ford formed the Ford Motor Company, whose early models evolved from racing cars to a more affordable and utilitarian automobile, the Model T. One of only three vehicle models produced by the Ford Motor Company from 1908 to

1927, fifteen million Model Ts were produced in its nearly twenty-year run, making the black car ubiquitous on America's developing roads (Ingrassia 17). It is difficult to fully articulate the impact that the durable, black, "everyman car" had on American culture. The first car that many people had ever purchased—or even ridden in—the Model T granted its new owners both geographical and "social freedom" (Brinkley 273). In "Three Ages of the Automobile," David Gartman praises it as the "instrument of democracy, bringing automobility to the masses" (174). Before the Model T, automobiles had been a conspicuous consumer item reserved for the wealthy, used primarily for leisurely purposes such as "touring, racing and parading" (171). Promising to "build a motor car for the great multitude," Henry Ford helped many Americans realize their dreams of becoming mobile (and lifelong Ford customers), as evidenced by the company's first ad campaign "Even You Can Afford a Ford" (Brinkley 113-115). The Model T was deliberately marketed toward female drivers; a pamphlet advertising the car to progressive women reads: "It is a real weapon in the changing order. More than any other—the Ford's is a woman's car" (118). It was also the first car that many black Americans were able to afford, and many of those new automobile owners became loyal to the Ford brand for life (171). For families inhabiting the vast Midwest, the car "provided unprecedented mobility, easing the isolation of farm life and ending rural peasantry in America" (Ingrassia xii). For urbanites, it was an "escape valve... for the stresses of modern society" that allowed them to tour the countryside, thereby "shrink[ing] the size of a continent on whose vastness and inexhaustibleness explorers had commented since the 16th century" (Berger xviii-xix). Described by composer F.S. Converse as "the indomitable spirit of America," the Model T embodied the shared

American values of hard work, democracy, progress, autonomy, individualism, mobility, expansion and discovery, self-reliance and responsibility (Brinkley 273).

By the time Ford began operating at the Highland Park industrial complex in 1910, demand for the Model T translated into 2,000 cars sold every day (Teaford 105). Desperately needing to grow and stabilize a workforce to match the accelerated rate of production, Ford introduced the Five Dollar Day in 1914, effectively doubling the average industry wage of \$2.34 (Ingrassia 12). The high wages paid by Ford—which he again increased during the Great Depression to a minimum of seven dollars for a day’s work (Brinkley 379)—drew to Detroit immigrants from southern Europe, Slavic countries, and the Middle East, resulting in the formation of neighborhoods such as Poletown and Greektown. African Americans fleeing the post-emancipation South also found a new home in Detroit; most of these “Negro immigrants” settled in Black Bottom, Detroit’s segregated community which confined a third of the city’s black population to sixty square blocks (Martelle 89; Sugrue 23, 36). Isabel Wilkerson points out that between 1910 and 1920 Detroit’s black population increased by 600 percent (Wilkerson 41). At the Ford Motor Company, which employed 56,000 of the 140,000 autoworkers in metro Detroit by 1920, twelve percent were black Americans and nearly 40,000 were foreign-born (Brinkley 159, 384; Kunstler 191; Sugrue 25). This factory trend mirrored the emerging demographic of the city of Detroit: Only twenty-one percent of the population were “whites born in the United States to American-born parents,” truly making Detroit a culturally-diverse metropolis (Teaford 59).

The enormous number of workers required to maintain large-scale production forced a still-young automotive industry to radically adapt existing factory labor

practices. The use of unskilled labor kept overhead low, but poor communication and performance, workplace accidents, work-related illness and substance abuse posed significant problems for those companies that employed workers in the thousands. Ford had the insight to realize that managers would need to convince laborers to be optimal producers by offering both material and ideological incentives. While not the first to use paternalistic methods to manage employees, Ford was an early proponent of *institutionalizing* a comprehensive benefits program which provided factory-site aid to meet the physical, mental and spiritual needs of an immense workforce. Promising to “provide a fair day’s work, just pay, good working conditions, security of work, and a chance for every man to secure individual and personal consideration,” Ford nonetheless ensured that the worker remain dependent upon the factory for all his or her needs, beholden to standards of living that prioritized the company’s success (*Ford Facts* 55). Henry Ford’s vision for his company, however, did not end with simply engineering a new type of worker whose behavior could be manipulated to best suit the needs of management. Rather, the masterful industrialist understood that large-scale production would need an ever-expanding loyal client base. He accomplished this by offering his employees not only a living wage, but also a lifestyle that afforded them modestly-priced consumer goods, such as the everyman’s car, the Model T. Even his entrepreneurial missteps influenced the way Americans would relate to their vehicles, as Ford Motor Company’s missed opportunities became innovative goldmines for General Motors and the Chrysler Group, thus cementing the national influence of the ‘Big Three.’ This conflation between worker and consumer is largely responsible for the creation of the middle class in America. Ford managed his invention by capitalizing on American values

such as patriotism, democracy and meritocracy, and by promoting white ethnocentric ideals. Ford is thus credited with creating the planned industrial economy, where, according to Antonio Gramsci, “the whole life of the nation [would] revolve around production” (285). In summation, Ford exerted total control over the vertical integration of his automotive empire which turned raw materials—including people—into finished, functioning products, on a scale never before seen. This closed-system style of corporate management would come to be known as Fordism and would forever alter the American industrial, physical, political, economic, and social landscape.

In 1914, the Commission on Industrial Relations reported that 35,000 workers had been killed in industrial accidents and another 700,000 were injured on the job in U.S. factories in the previous year alone (Brinkley 161). In his examination of America’s “new factory system,” entitled *Managers and Workers*, Daniel Nelson writes that, prior to the radical reconsideration of labor practices ushered in by the Progressive Era, exhaustion was the leading cause of bodily harm in machine and assembly shops, where fatigued workers performing piece-work labored at their stations in shifts lasting ten to twelve hours (27-30). Furthermore, few nineteenth-century factories had adequate restrooms and ventilation, and most failed to provide access to meals or water (29). In those facilities that did provide a “communal water bucket,” typhoid fever commonly afflicted the workers (26-7). Many machinists sought refreshment at bars clustered near factory sites, which stimulated chronic alcoholism and further reinforced the commonly-held belief that factory workers “must be coarse and brutal” in order to withstand the strenuous demands of their work (27-8). Exacerbating this mischaracterization were the scores of young, unattached men migrating to a rapidly industrializing Midwest with its

concentration in traditionally male-dominated trades such as metal and woodworking, meatpacking and brewing (Teaford 65). Added to this demographic was a largely foreign-born labor force, many of whom hailed from agricultural regions, bringing with them few industrial skills (Brinkley 157). Similarly, most black Americans flooding into Detroit had been sharecroppers and were unaccustomed to city life; Wilkerson notes that, within a generation, “a rural people had become urban” (49). Unskilled, communally insulated, and often unable to speak English, workers of various ethnic backgrounds frequently clashed. This caused disruption on the factory floor and made job training difficult, naturally increasing the likelihood of workplace accidents (Brinkley 157). With the goal of increased productivity ever in mind, Ford reimagined his workers as machines in which to invest, the improvement of their working and living conditions a happy byproduct of exerting a paternalistic influence over his workers’ lives.

In a promotional pamphlet entitled *Ford Facts* published by the Ford Motor Company in 1920, the corporate authors write, “Believing that men who are overworked, underpaid, sacrificed to bad shop conditions, uncertain of their job, and shut off from personal contact or appeal to their employer are not getting a fair chance, Mr. Ford undertook to reverse these conditions” (*Ford Facts* 55). To do this, the industrialist envisioned a centralized space where all the workers’ social and physical needs could be met with the goal of reducing interruption of production. A massive factory complex located on the periphery of Detroit, the Highland Park Plant, opened in 1910. Citing it as one of the “ten buildings that changed America,” authors Dan Protes and Geoffrey Baer describe this “Crystal Palace,” nicknamed for its glass ceiling and enormous windows, as a “daylight factory” with state-of-the-art facilities (Protes and Baer 69; Brinkley 138).

Unusual for his time, Ford prohibited smoking at Highland Park and even employed a ventilation system that replenished air in the factory five times every hour (Brinkley 188). Largely powered by electricity, the plant, Nelson writes, was “one of the best organized” and “most modern factories in the country” (23; 149). The plant’s “vast interrupted space” was specially designed to house the moving assembly line (Protess and Baer 72), a new method of production inspired in part by the brutal efficiency with which hog butchers in Chicago’s slaughterhouses disassembled animal carcasses (Brinkley 152).

According to Nicola Pizzolato, author of “The Making and Unmaking of Fordism,” Henry Ford perfected his assembly line according to Frederick W. Taylor’s theory of time-based “scientific management,” in which any operation of labor could be “divided into distinct tasks, each of which could be optimally performed by a single worker through repetition” (19). This style of labor, where each stationary worker performs just one part of the entire assembly process, is relentlessly managed by a mechanized conveyance system, and therefore relies upon the exactitude and economy of the laborer’s movements (19). The line, Brinkley writes, “bound” people without a common culture together, replacing their mother tongues with “this new language of movement” (155; 278). “Make no mistake,” Philip Levine writes, “the place has a language”—the place in his poem “Coming Close” being the factory floor (“Coming Close” 5). Craftsmen were replaced by unskilled laborers made fluent by the universal language of the line, “advancing at the same incessant speed for each of them, whomever they were” (Brinkley 278).

Once the moving line was introduced at Highland Park, complete assembly of the Model T went from twelve hours to just ninety minutes, and overall productivity

increased by 100 percent (Brinkley 182-6). With surging sales, the “sheer systematic toil” ramped up in three shifts operating six days a week (154; 280). Many workers felt that the line was a “violation of the workingman’s integrity,” and accidents were frequent when a task was divided, for example, “so that instead of one man being responsible for a good bearing job, four men were responsible” (153-4). In addition to these dangerous conditions, the repetitive and isolated nature of mechanized labor led to a deteriorated mental condition among many workers. Ford himself admitted that the assembly line was “a terrifying concept to a certain kind of mind... It is terrifying to me” (159). Unlike the older tradition of craftsmanship, large-scale assembly renders the producer, in Marxist terms, “alien” to the “product of his labor” (Marx 134). Elaborating on the concept of alienation, Marx explains the powerlessness that mechanized labor produces in the workforce is twofold: First, the product the worker labors at is external to himself; the material good “is labor embodied” and is therefore objectively viewed by the worker as “power independent” of himself (133). Second, “the worker becomes a slave to his object” because it is the “means of [his] subsistence” (135). Marx describes the poor physical and mental consequences of alienation, writing, “the better shaped his product, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbaric the worker; the more powerful the work, the more powerless the worker; the more intelligent the work, the more witless the worker” (135). Keenly understanding the feeling of isolation work in the automotive factory brought, Levine articulates the loss of self in “Every Blessed Day”:

Even before he looks he knows
the faces on the bus, some

going to work and some coming back,
but each sealed in its hunger
for a different life, a lost life.
Where he's going or who he is
he doesn't ask himself, he
doesn't know and doesn't know
it matters. (8)

Not knowing “who he is” and “doesn't know it matters” succinctly describes the deteriorated inner life of the laborer whose subsistence relies on a job that seals him in spiritual hunger, the bitterness of this realization captured by the title of the poem.

Exhaustion of the mind and body combined with an average industry wage of \$2.34 per day resulted in high employee turnover in assembly factories (Ingrassia 12). Because the scientific management method rendered, in Antonio Gramsci's words, the “human complex (the collective worker)” as nothing more than a “machine” (303), employees needed to be retained for longer periods in order to offset the cost of constantly replenishing the workforce (Martelle 74). Taylor's solution to this obstacle was the incentive wage, a performance-based system that “induced factory workers to increase their output in return for additional pay” (Nelson 52; 59). However, Nelson asserts that the conveyor belt set the pace in the Highland Park Plant, not workers, and therefore an incentive wage alone would not be enough to win loyalty but rather a holistic approach was necessary for long-term success (150). Ford's vital contribution to the new style of labor management was in convincing laborers to willingly, if not enthusiastically, perform their work on the line. Consequently, Ford found it necessary to engineer a

collective working body (and society) that would be able to meet the new demands of factory life, and even internalize the new standard of living as normal.

Realizing that his shop-floors could serve as the site for social experimentation, Henry Ford embraced his role as innovator, declaring, “we want to make men in this factory as well as automobiles” (Loizides 21). With this in mind, Ford envisioned the Highland Park Plant as a city in microcosm complete with athletic parks (*Ford Facts* 41), classrooms (32), libraries (39), medical and dental clinics (43; 65), grocery and general stores (51), and employee housing (67). Although many of the plans for Highland Park would be abandoned and resurrected just a few years later at the River Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Ford’s overall vision ensured that employees need never to leave the shadow of the factory to obtain education, recreation, and basic social services. Furthermore, it was at Highland Park that, in Douglas Brinkley’s words, the industrialist “plant[ed] the seeds for the growth of America’s middle class” by introducing the “Five Dollar Day” consisting of no more than eight work hours (135).

The revolutionary Five Dollar Day is actually credited to James Couzens, Ford’s vice president and general manager, who imagined the wage as a profit-sharing plan by which the company’s most qualified workers would claim a share of the company’s profits, thus encouraging loyalty to a company in which they felt personally invested (Brinkley 166-167). Qualified workers were given “Ford Investment Certificates” which paid out an interest rate ranging between six and eighteen percent (280). Couzens would later expand his vision of company welfare when he was elected mayor of Detroit (and later senator), when Brinkley notes that his “work relief program” for Michigan’s unemployed “became a model for the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal initiatives”

(166). Yet Ford, the visionary who was already known as “the best friend the working man ever had,” was publicly credited with this stroke of generosity (164). Nelson points out, however, that the move was not purely altruistic, writing that the Five Dollar Day “was purely a recruitment measure,” as most workers did not qualify for the wage increase (150). Women and men under twenty-two, as well as those who did not support families, were excluded from the raise, but, as Nicola Pizzolato points out, “the middle-class prosperity that it promised lured enough workers to solve the problem of absenteeism that afflicted labor management” (20). Upon the institution of the Five Dollar Day, factory productivity grew between fifteen to twenty percent practically overnight, the daily absenteeism rate fell from ten percent to just half a percent, and employee turnover went from 53,000 new hires in 1913 to just 2,000 over the next two years (Brinkley 174). The Five Dollar Day would also force Ford’s competitors to follow suit, and eventually, through the agitation of labor unions, the automotive industry would pay some of the nation’s highest wages for factory work (McClelland 6).

Obtaining the promised wage increase, however, came with conditions enforced by Ford’s notorious “Sociological Department” which operated at Highland Park from 1914 to 1921. According to Georgios Loizides, those family men who qualified for the Five Dollar Day wage guarantee were subject to investigation by company agents to ensure they adhered to “middle class values” determined by Ford himself (19). These values centered around frugality, stability, sobriety, and cleanliness (Brinkley 172; 276). Reverend Samuel Marquis, the chair of Ford’s Sociological Department, wrote, “The welfare of the factory... depends upon the home. We therefore keep a close watch on the home” (Loizides 20). “A close watch” included unannounced visits by investigators who

looked for a clean home, free from alcohol, gambling, boarders and potential union activity (Loizides 23; Brinkley 173). Employees' bank accounts were monitored to ensure the "virtue of frugality," and homes were expected to be furnished with middle-class appliances, thus encouraging workers to also be good consumers (Loizides 21-2). Henry Ford also believed that married family men brought stability to the workforce, and therefore monogamy, heteronormativity and traditional gender roles were also enforced by the company (23). This corporate oversight describes a form of social policing known as cultural hegemony, which Gramsci, writing from a prison in Turin (home of Fiat) in 1929, identified as Ford's most powerful managerial strategy (285).

Hegemony is the social control that the dominant culture exercises throughout society. Gramsci explains that the functional element of hegemony is "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Gramsci 12). Social pressure is exercised on the individual to conform to the whole; this often happens subconsciously and the individual believes that adherence to social standards is natural, rather than artificially applied, hence the importance of "'spontaneous' consent." Religion, hygiene, sexual mores, racial hierarchy, and political beliefs are all areas of life subject to hegemonic control, and nonconformity to the dominant group's standards of 'decency' can result in social ostracism and even lead to violent repercussions. Gramsci explains that there are "organiser[s] of society" that regulate "the general system of relationships," enforcing hegemony among the population, and thereby maintaining systems of power in which the working classes are subservient to the upper (5-6). Nowhere is that power more visible than in Progressive Era factory systems such as those operated by the Ford Motor

Company where adherence to the dominant culture translated into actual profits for workers. Hence, Gramsci explains, “hegemony is born in the factory,” meaning that corporate infrastructures capable of sustaining entire families, such as the Highland Park Plant, supplanted traditional ideological institutions such as churches as the mediating influence in social relations (285). Workers’ absolute reliance on Ford and his factories explain the sardonic replacement of Christianity with Fordism as the state religion in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

However invasive his methods were, Ford’s interest in his immigrant workers provided an undeniable lifeline for many. For those “undergoing adjustment to life in the city, life in America, life without family ties,” the Sociological Department acted as a legal adviser, helped foreign workers with the naturalization process, and provided financial planning and retirement advice (Brinkley 276-7). Knowing that his well-paid employees—particularly the foreign ones—were being hoodwinked by unscrupulous shop owners who marked up prices, he established eleven commissary shops at Highland Park which predated the one-stop value shopping centers later popularized by supermarkets (179). The Ford English School was also established to provide lessons in the English language, attendance of which was compulsory for all immigrant workers (Meyer 76). While operating at Highland Park the school produced 16,000 graduates enrolled in courses that instructed students in the English language as it pertained to domestic, commercial, and industrial aspects of life (74). According to the objectives of the Sociological Department, the program was designed to adapt workers to industrial and urban American life, and lessons were heavily influenced by a “Victorian morality” that emphasized learning the language of thrift, etiquette, and cleanliness (71).

Participation in the English School required workers to become “Americanized,” a hegemonic movement made popular during World War I when many Americans were fearful “that the isolation and autonomy of immigrant communities generated alien and radical social philosophies” such as Bolshevism, anarchism and unionism (69, 77). The Ford Motor Company’s “Americanization Campaign” was lauded by the public and served as the model for similar programs initiated by public schools, the Y.M.C.A., the American Legion, and the Americanism Committee of the Motion Picture Industry (78).

For practical reasons, having one common language on the work floor promoted safety and increased productivity, but it also served to homogenize the workforce through a policy George Fredrickson identifies as “one-way assimilation” whereby immigrants jettison their various cultural values to adopt the cultural identity of their new compatriots (568). Fredrickson explains that, while many twentieth century proponents of assimilation may have had altruistic intentions by recommending the policy as a survival strategy for minority groups, the offering of safety and equality via assimilation could only be reached “on terms that presume the superiority, purity, and unchanging character of the dominant culture” (568). The underwriters of the campaign for immigrants to become Americanized were simultaneously making the tacitly racist argument that “there is a single and stable American culture of European, and especially English, origin” that is unquestionably preferable to belonging to any distinct ethnic group (568). The literal interpretation of assimilation is evidenced by public ceremonies in which immigrant graduates of Ford’s English School would present themselves on a stage in their native national costumes and climb into a stage-prop cauldron labeled the “American Melting Pot,” only to emerge identically dressed in American-style clothing and singing the “Star-

Spangled Banner” (Colombo, et al. 494). Authors of the Henry Ford Museum’s website (published in 2011) write that in this ceremony students symbolically underwent “a spiritual smelting process where the impurities of foreignness were burnt off as slag to be tossed away leaving a new 100% American” (“Ford Motor Company”). The website’s bizarre use of early twentieth century rhetoric certainly recounts the hegemonic pressure that immigrant employees were under. The language of the “smelting process where... impurities... burnt off as slag” is intentionally evocative of the steel refining process. The likening of foreign identities to “slag,” or the discarded waste material that often accumulates in odious heaps outside of foundries, and the suggestion of purity in one who is newly minted as “100% American,” reminds the reader that Ford was, above all, an inventor, taking raw materials and producing something wholly new. Indistinguishable in their matching clothes and parroting the national anthem, Ford had achieved his goal of mass producing workers alongside his Model Ts.

In his mission to engineer the “new type of man,” Ford also created a society of patriotic workers dedicated to the pursuit of the American Dream. Introduced in the depths of the Great Depression, historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase “American Dream,” solidifying a nebulous conception of what it *meant* to be American (Samuel 13). Expanding upon principles originally set forth by the Declaration of Independence, chiefly “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” Adams wrote that the dream or “vision” of America is a society where each individual has the “*Opportunity*” to “rise in the economic scale,” and is granted a “chance to develop [his] capacities to the full, unhampered by unjust restriction

of caste or custom” (13, 35). Adams’ use of the words “chance” and “opportunity” emphasizes belief in a democratic system where everyone begins their lives with no more advantages than anyone else, but may experience success based on individual merit. Over time, Lawrence Samuel writes in *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, Americans have come to understand the Dream as guaranteed equal access to education (68), “the ability to support oneself and one’s family” (29), ownership of the “single-unit family home” (41), and the future prospect of “unlimited growth and prosperity” (92).

While the foundational principles of the Dream are democracy and meritocracy—that is, that anyone who works hard enough may attain it—this system of reward is only possible if a governing body serves as guarantor or adjudicator of it. In the first half of the twentieth century, Ford’s interference in his workers’ lives was a rare example of how an organization could work to guarantee a certain quality of life for a very large body of people—that is, for those who ascribed to Ford’s version of American middle class decency. The programs conducted by the Ford Motor Company and its Sociological Department presaged many of the civil institutions we enjoy today. The Five Dollar Day introduced incentives for home owners and families that would later be formally drafted into U.S. tax law (Brinkley 174). During the Roosevelt Administration, the promise of welfare in one’s old age was guaranteed by the Social Security Act of 1935. Through agitation of labor unions, the promise of leisure time and the anticipation of improved “physical conditions of living” was ensured by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Samuel 13). The right to purchase private property led to the establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1965 and the passing of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which sought to eliminate discriminatory housing practices in an

expanding Detroit (Fishman 95). Regardless of Americans' stalwart belief in the power of individual agency (or the concept of "rugged individualism"), the American Dream is now closely guarded by our civil institutions, largely in response to the growing power held by twentieth-century industrialists over their massive labor forces.

Operating in a day and age that predated civil protection of the Dream, Ford, the consummate salesman, offered the working class the opportunity to achieve a piece of the American Dream in return for their loyalty to his company, both on the line and in the home. McClelland credits the industrialist with creating the American middle class, which he calls Ford's greatest "social invention" (McClelland 6). Indeed, when the U.S. Department of Labor conducted a study of the "Detroit-area labor force" in 1930, it found that two thirds of Ford Motor Company employees owned their own single-unit family homes and nearly half owned cars (Brinkley 387). John Lee, an early executive at the Ford Motor Company and member of the Sociological Department, reported that Henry Ford wished for "every family working for him a comfortable home; a bath-tub in it, and a yard with a little garden, and ultimately, he wanted to see every employee of his owning an automobile" (Loizides 22). It must be noted that this pretty tableau of middle class life is peppered with the presence consumer goods: the bathtub and automobile, anchored by the single-unit family home with a yard, garden, and presumably a white-picket fence. Because the invention of the American Dream and its accompanying middle class lifestyle must be understood within the industrial society that produced it, one must recognize the importance of mass consumption in the supposed achievement of the Dream.

Fordism required workers to collaborate with their employer by consuming the very goods they produced, thus avoiding any potential incompatibility between supply rates and demand. Highly paid Ford employees received not only a living wage, but enough extra spending money at the end of each paycheck to transform them into “mass consumers who stimulated industrial expansion through their own demand” (Pizzolato 20). Ford made consumerism even easier with the implementation of the “installment plan” which was used by 59 percent of Ford families to purchase automobiles as well as home goods (Brinkley 387). The Ford Motor Company had been so successful at marketing its product to the middle class it had helped to create that Brinkley notes the Model T began to have something “in common with the recently introduced vacuum cleaner and electric washing machine” (274).

At this time, Gartman writes, “the American working class was beginning to construct with their higher wages a separate realm of consumption in the home, where they could find respite from and compensation for the realm of work,” the obvious irony being that workers often handed over their paychecks for the very things they produced (Gartman 177). This exchange describes the next step in the dialectical process of capitalism whereby a worker is not only “a slave to [the] object” he has produced because it is the “means of [his] subsistence” as previously described by Marx, but also is further enslaved to the commodity the object has become due to a process of fetishization. Fully prepared to exploit an emerging consumer psychology in which goods are collected for the purpose of legitimizing the class that owns them, Ford recognized the power “a stable home life centered around major consumer durables” could have over workers that made them in turn “dependent on their high-paying jobs” (177). Fordism thus encouraged

limited aspirational growth by offering consumerism as a means of achieving an American Dream that had been modified for the working masses. Marxist critics have long understood that mindless consumerism pacifies the working classes, and that competitive consumerism furthermore inspires class imitation. This ensures that members of the middle class will continue to compete with each other rather than make investments that might precipitate further social and economic mobility, thus allowing the upper class to maintain control through consumerism. Like the promise of the Five Dollar Day, the actualization of achieving the status of *petite bourgeoisie* is deferred in lieu of a process of class imitation that discouraged any further economic growth which might compete with the needs of the company. Explaining this further, Loizides asserts that “Ford was not cultivating a class of ‘entrepreneurs,’ but a working-class of producers and consumers, aspiring to ‘American middle-class’ values” (Loizides 22). This form of control is evidenced by the prevailing belief among social reformers at the time that new automobile owners would gain a sense of pride in becoming “property owners,” thus easing class resentment (and therefore agitation) by “giving them a stake in capitalism” (Gartman 177).

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer note that industrial capitalism follows a formula that renders workers/consumers as “objects,” easily manipulated by the supposed “freedom of choice” and beguiled by the “charm of novelty” (Adorno and Horkheimer 58). Mass production, of course, is defined by its output of unchanging products, such as the Model T. Therefore, consumers needed to be convinced that their newly-gained buying power gave them discretionary power as well, effectively obscuring the fact that the “mass-production process levels [any] real qualitative differences between things as

well as people” (Gartman 181). A prime example of this kind of corporate manipulation is the innovative move made by General Motors that eventually led to the obsolescence of the Model T.

Knowing that his car had affectionately made its way into the hearts of his down-market consumers, Ford was unwilling to make changes to the Model T. While production methods constantly evolved at Highland Park, the style of the Model T barely changed for twenty years, causing the industrialist to quip that customers could “have any color they want, as long as it’s black” (Ingrassia 11). Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors for 33 years, realized that Ford’s resistance to changing the Model T gave his company the opportunity to offer increasingly sophisticated consumers a variety of makes and models based on annual model changes. This gave the appearance of progress while “the mass-produced mechanical parts stayed the same for years” (Gartman 179). Harley Earl, Sloan’s prized industrial designer, paired the annual model changes with what Gartman calls an “ingenious scheme” of “trickle-down styling” in which a style was introduced first on a Cadillac, the most prestigious and expensive car offered by GM; the same style was then transferred the next year to the second most expensive make offered by GM, all the way down to the cheapest make, the Chevrolet, the Model T’s only serious competitor (179). Gartman writes that this styling scheme was a “superficial substitute... devised to deliver symbolic progress,” thus satiating a desire of the working classes who were alienated by the sameness of the things they mass produced and consumed (179). Thus the consumption of automobiles became fetishized, mollifying those on the lowest end of the economic spectrum. As Gartman puts it, “consumers of the lower makes thus were persuaded that their cars were getting better because they looked

more like Cadillacs and, thus, that their lives were getting better as well” (179). This “circle of manipulation,” as Adorno and Horkheimer identify it, legitimizes what is essentially an unfulfilled promise to the lower classes that happiness can be achieved through a process of constant consumerism (37). “The diner,” they write, “must be satisfied with the menu” (50).

This system of commodity fetishization came to a halt during the Great Depression, at which point, Brinkley notes, Detroit “was never quite the same again, having toppled from the summit of a ride to an even greater extent than any other city” (Brinkley 382). Henry Ford had made a charade of announcing that his company would pay a minimum of seven dollars for a day’s work in 1930, only to lay off between 50,000 to 60,000 workers over the next two years (381, 391). Ford’s initially optimistic outlook had the effect of drawing thousands of desperate economic migrants to a company’s gates that could not admit them and to a city that did not have the resources to support them. During this time Ford became increasingly reclusive, paranoid, and fearful of unionism, as evidenced by his hiring of Harry Bennett, a violent ex-military member who ran the innocuously named “Ford Service Department,” which was in reality a private police force of 3,000 men (383). In the previous decade, Ford had started the process of moving the company’s administrative offices to his new River Rouge complex in Dearborn, liquidating entire departments at Highland Park in the process (288). The anxious mood created at Highland Park combined with mass layoffs and a powerful police presence that purportedly “marched through the factory, displaying their guns, sticks, and other weapons” transformed the company “from an organization in which people were proud to work to a place where they just tried each and every day not to be fired” (288, 383). One

of those men to be fired from Ford was Walter Reuther, whose efforts to hold Ford accountable to the welfare of his employees would eventually lead to the unionization of the company by the United Auto Workers in June of 1941 (432). Organized labor in Detroit would become responsible for advocating for workers' rights, negotiating contracts, and establishing the pension system, all in response to laborers' growing need for a powerful resource removed from the influence of their employers.

In a move that presaged the eventual decline of metro Detroit, Henry Ford, the man who had lifted a generation of factory workers out of rural poverty and urban brutality and into middle class respectability, decided he no longer wanted "to rely on Detroit," announcing "[The city] pins me in. I want to breathe. I want to get out" (Brinkley 283). After the Depression, operations at the Highland Park Plant had ceased and the Ford Motor Company's headquarters had permanently moved to the River Rouge complex in the nearby satellite city of Dearborn, where it remains today. The building of "the Rouge" in 1917 laid the foundations for a pattern of movement away from the heart of Detroit followed by Chrysler and General Motors, as well as many of the countless machine shops and factories all over the Steel Belt's industrial cities. The result of a military contract during World War I to build allied watercraft, the U.S. government "unwittingly launched the River Rouge plant" by giving Ford 3.5 million dollars to build a factory dedicated to the task (215). According to Robert Fishman in "Detroit: Linear City," the production of military *materièl* would eventually drive the industrial decentralization of Detroit as "massive plants sought correspondingly large sites, which were necessarily outside the developed factory zone" (Fishman 89). Responsible for nearly forty percent of the world's manufacturing capacity by 1943, the automobile

industry had both converted its existing facilities to the production of war *matèriel* and built newly dedicated spaces to the war effort, effectively earning Detroit its designation as America's "Arsenal of Democracy" (Hyde 202). Moving in a linear fashion north of Detroit, Hudson Motors, Chrysler, and Ford each established military plants (Fishman 89). After the war, affordable housing (largely available only to white Detroiters due to restrictive "race-specific [housing] covenants") was built along these lines by the Federal Housing Administration which offered "small-tract houses designed to be mass-produced" according to a "standardized, automobile-oriented subdivision design," thus establishing the model for future suburban design (Fishman 92; Sugrue 45).

Weary of "twenty-five straight years of virtually nonstop Depression and war," Ingrassia writes that "Americans were ready to let loose" in the 1950s when consumerism resumed in earnest (Ingrassia xiii). The prosperity many white Americans experienced during the post-war years, McClelland writes, "meant not only meant bigger cars and bigger houses, but *two* cars and *two* houses" (25). Of course, this kind of conflated producer/consumer culture is antithetical to an economy based on competition and a demand for cheaper consumables. The bitter irony is that the same system that once granted prosperity for so many has triggered a series of events that have only served to dismantle it, stripping any potential prosperity from those who inherited it. The automobile, that "instrument of democracy" and source of fabulous wealth for the city of Detroit, was responsible for passage of the 1956 Interstate Highway Act which, automobile historian Michael Berger asserts, "abetted the flight of the middle class from the cities to the suburbs, thereby seriously diminishing the tax base of the former and contributing to economic problems with which the United States is still wrestling" (xxiv).

The consumer culture that Fordism encouraged now spells long-term trouble for a struggling middle class drowning in credit card debt and mortgages. The emphasis that Ford placed on home ownership, which once gave the working class a shot at the American Dream, is now for many Detroiters, mostly black, the dead weight that keeps them trapped in poverty. Once a sign of conspicuous consumerism, “Detroiters,” John G. Rodwan Jr. writes in his essay “Carlessness,” “often prefer to park their cars in their driveways. If nothing else, in a city with a sad surplus of vacant structures, the practice lends houses the appearance of occupancy” (101). Arson plagues Detroit, where homes that have no value are either burned for the insurance money or abandoned to vandals. It is the logical conclusion of a process of consumption that inevitably consumes itself, as poetically described by authors Burdick and Grunow who write, “These lines of desire. Pat down from footfall, then wagon wheel, and tire. Expanded with lanes, wood, brick, and stone. Came so far, and so fast, and so wide, and emptied us out from the inside” (37). The same success Ford had in making “the whole life of the nation revolve around production” is now the source of economic crisis in a region that has lost many of its hubs of production to outsourcing.

Shortly after Henry Ford’s passing in 1947 Detroit hit its peak population of 1,849,568, but by 1980 the city was in full decline, losing thirty-five percent of its population (Teaford 212). In “Greektown 1983” author John Counts describes conditions in the city:

By 1983, it had become a city of sharp edges, the antithesis of the overstuffed throw pillows of suburbs that ended up surrounding it, where all the Greeks would move and where I would later grow up. It became the immigrant American Dream

stripped and pecked to its bones. The deepest racial conflict and the darkest side of capitalism, when manufacturing had its way and moved on to someplace cheaper. It became a theory come to life. A what-if city. Armageddon city. Murder city. It had transformed into symbol. (50)

This “city of sharp edges” that Counts describes stands in stark contrast to “the overstuffed throw pillows of suburbs that ended up surrounding it,” as indicated by the vast disparity of wealth between, for example, Detroit, where the poverty rate stands near forty percent, and Grosse Pointe Park, which is considered to be one of America’s wealthiest (and whitest) enclaves (Semuels 3-4). Counts’ dark and dramatic description of 1983 Detroit as “Armageddon city. Murder City” is tempered by the fact that the 714 homicides committed in 1974 that once earned Detroit its designation as “Murder City” has dropped dramatically to 302 in 2016 (Williams). Even so, in a city of 713,777 (in 2010—the most recent census date) the median household income in Detroit is a mere half the national average (U.S.C.B.).

When Henry Ford died, the Ford Motor Company had fallen behind both General Motors and Chrysler, claiming only a twenty-three percent share of the car market in the United States (Brinkley 502). Although the company no longer sold the car that had once mobilized a nation, its legacy lives on in what many Americans believe to be their civic identity. Social mobility, diversity, economic growth through innovation and industry, collective responsibility, middle class values, patriotic love of country, and a belief in the American Dream make up the core components of what it *means* to be American, and many of these things were first dreamed up on factory floors. Due to policies first established by Ford, Americans have come to expect good working conditions, a decent

living wage, respect for those who do hard work and a helping hand when without it—even if we do not always get it. The quasi-open-door policy that had once made Highland Park a “Michigan-annex Ellis Island” introduced to the Midwest a cultural diversity that is still evident in our festivals, food, and names (158). Values imposed by the Sociological Department shaped the identity of the middle class, and the mass-produced commodities consumed by it established the way it would measure its success. Fully realizing his goal to “make men in this factory as well as automobiles,” Ford’s standards of living for his workers and customers have been thoroughly internalized by the American people. Ford helped to make the United States a nation of producers, which is why the loss of industry in Detroit is so bitter. The assembly line once omnipresent in factory workers’ lives eventually gave way to another kind of line, one of unemployment, as described by Maisha Hyman Sumbry’s 2014 recollection of waiting in the unemployment line with her father after 1980 closings of the Lynch Road and Dodge Main plants. In “The Line” the author writes:

The line snakes around the building—only once today. There are times when it has wrapped twice, a double-belt of unemployed auto workers... Every last one of them, men and women alike, carries the same expression: an undeniable willingness to work, and a confusion as to why they have to fight for the right to support their families. (104)

After nearly a century of work and progress, many Detroiters are alienated from their cultural legacy as the nation’s producers. The wounds wrought by poverty, unemployment, racism, and unfulfilled promise are compounded by the critical loss of identity that accompanies it. While these wounds publicly fester in Detroit’s blighted

neighborhoods, a subtler form of fracturing has occurred in the souls of Detroit's people. Twenty-first century authors with roots in Detroit, such as Angela Flournoy and Michael Zadoorian, take on the consequences of problems made in the twentieth century, revealing in their writing the great anxieties—but also the aspirations—of a culture in crisis. These texts, therefore provide valuable insight about a city determined to survive.

Chapter II

“An Almost Impossible Place”

Detroit—an almost impossible place. An American place from which Americans cast away their eyes. But giants cast long shadows.

—Danny Wilcox Frazier “Evidence Detroit” (287)

Detroit’s many Progressive Era achievements, as discussed in Chapter I, exacted a great toll on migrants who came to the city seeking a better future. The democratic promise of reward for individual merit—in the form of the American Dream—was offered only conditionally to those who fit within a prescribed cultural paradigm, and furthermore required the sacrifice of individual and ethnic identities. The military and automotive industry’s highly-publicized recruiting techniques resulted in a crowded and segregated city that did not have the resources to support its population. Finally, a vaunted community of homeowners belied discriminatory housing practices that excluded many minorities from securing their piece of the Dream. Illustrating the hegemonic model promoted by Fordism, Thomas Sugrue, author of *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, argues that the ideals of freedom and individualism constituting “Americanism” are strictly associated with “whiteness,” their opposite being bondage and anonymity, which are associated with the enslavement of African Americans (9). Consequently, the historian bluntly states, “To be fully American was to be white” (9). This assessment necessarily means that black Americans, and indeed all those who are not white, are excluded from participating in the American Dream, and nowhere did this become more apparent than in mid-twentieth century Detroit.

Reaching its peak population of 1.8 million in 1950—sixteen percent of whom were black—the city’s housing crisis laid bare the incoherency of the Dream, which offered home ownership to white Detroiters while restricting its black citizens to rental slums (*Origins* 9, 23; Teaford 212). A discriminatory housing market, legitimized by a municipal rating system governing neighborhood quality, ensured that racism “assumed a spatial definition,” making escape from poverty nearly impossible (*Origins* 9, 43). The resulting “ghettoization” of Detroit’s black citizens inflamed racist perceptions that “blacks would ruin any white neighborhood they moved into” (36). When confinement was no longer viable due to 1948 federal rulings such as *Shelley v. Kraemer* and *Sipes v. McGhee*, city planners used the neglected neighborhoods as reason to declare these areas blighted, clearing them for civic projects with little resistance from their disenfranchised inhabitants (36). The ghettoization and displacement of Detroit’s black population fit into a larger cultural narrative that sustains the mythology of the American Dream: A dogmatic belief in equality and individual agency made it possible for many whites to point to their black counterparts’ poor living standards as proof they did not cherish the dream of middle class home ownership, while blinding them to the many institutional apparatuses that maintained their power. Because the “American Dream stipulates that one is not judged by the past,” Arthur Redding writes, maintaining such an ideology demands that we collectively “conspire to ignore” the racist conditions that have historically denied black Americans full enfranchisement (42-3). Being only a few generations removed from slavery or fleeing the terror of life in the South, in many white Americans’ minds, did not exclude one from the dictate to ‘pick oneself up by the bootstraps,’ and yet, as more than 145,000 African Americans migrated to Detroit

between 1940 and 1950, less than a tenth of new housing units built were available to them (*Origins* 43). Achieving the Dream through home ownership—and thereby participating fully in “Americanism”—was systematically, cruelly, denied to blacks in this manner, and the illusory promise of a better life in the urban north stalked alongside the realities of life in Detroit, making it a truly “what-if city,” to recall the words of Jon Counts (50). America, Redding writes, “is deeply, doubly haunted, by what it might have been, by alternate pasts and potential presents, by the radical openness of the future and future beings” (37). This haunting describes Langston Hughes’ “dream deferred” in the poem “Harlem”; the infinite deferral of full enfranchisement is a ghostly presence that continues to haunt Detroit with its once-shiny promise of a progressive future that, for many, proved corroded.

The troubled history of race relations in Detroit can be traced to the incoherency of its own myth-making, a condition shared by white America at large. Even as the race riots of 1943 and the uprising of 1967 revealed the extent to which structural racism worked to maintain white superiority, the result was not desperately-needed repair, but a collective negligence as those who could, left, taking the city’s tax-base with them. Doing so created the conditions for the possibility of Detroit’s late-century decline, a similar fate delivered by the automobile. As such, Detroit remains more segregated today than at mid-century, separated into those who felt displaced by circumstances and those who were confined by them. A preoccupation with history (and with one’s relation to it) continues to define Detroit even as it struggles to narrate its future. This persistent burden takes shape in Angela Flournoy’s novel, *The Turner House*, in the form of a haunting, an appropriate metaphor given Detroit’s reputation as a dying city. Weaving the story of a

father's struggles to make his way in the city in 1944 with his son's existential crisis half a century later, Flournoy demonstrates the relentless imposition of historical narrative, with its painful truths and stubbornly occluded facts, on the lives of Detroiters, suggesting that a kind of reckoning must first occur if the city is to find lasting peace.

An unlikely candidate for a modern haunting, Cha-Cha Turner— son of Francis Turner and eldest of the thirteen Turner siblings—is “a sixty-four-year-old black truck driver who saw ghosts” (Flournoy 24). Three decades into an impeccable service record with Chrysler, the appearance of this “haint” so near his impending retirement sends his well-ordered life into a tailspin. He is convinced that he has been visited by the same haint that had once caused an uproar in the Turner home during the summer of 1958, when “the form of a pale-hued young man... emit[ting] a blue, electric-looking light” wrestled with him in a “paranormal beat-down” (2-3). At the time, Francis Turner had intervened, authoritatively telling his children, “There ain't no haints in Detroit,” thereby distinguishing industrial post-war Detroit from his southern agrarian roots where such superstitious notions belonged (5). Consigning ghosts to the seemingly irrelevant past, Cha-Cha believes “he should be able to unthink this haint, mentally shoo it away, just as he had for all those years after the night in the big room,” but the haint continues to visit him throughout the novel with increasing clarity, its presence “a large and fathomless unknowing. A challenge. A taunt” (196, 209). Cha-Cha unwillingly accepts the haint's challenge by confronting his strained relationship with his deceased father. He discovers in the process that his father was likewise haunted by the vision of a different kind of life for himself, one he was forced to forfeit upon arrival in Detroit. By acknowledging the sacrifices made on his behalf, Cha-Cha must reevaluate his relationship to the past, a

lesson that provides valuable insight for addressing Detroit's unresolved history of inequality.

Punctuating the narrative of Cha-Cha's twenty-first century haunting are glimpses into Francis Turner's first sojourn to Detroit in 1944. These passages indicate the scope of Francis' struggles as a new migrant while also delivering a narrative example of the city's hypocritical "cruelty," thereby emphasizing the profundity of the Turner family's achievements under such adverse conditions (Flournoy 52). Tracing the haint's origins to the rural South is crucial to any understanding of Cha-Cha's haunting, as its lineage represents the hereditary hopes for each generation to lead a better life than the last as a path to full enfranchisement. Flournoy reveals to the reader that Cha-Cha's ghost, which he mistakenly believes is Francis, is actually the ghost of Francis' father, a sharecropper from Arkansas who "officially died in 1930 from a rusty-nail puncture to the bottom of his left foot" (53). However, the narrator notes, "it was pride that did him in" as he refused to be treated by a doctor "in the yard as if he were an animal," believing that "losing the little dignity he'd held on to as a black man in the South seemed a more concrete defeat than death" (54). As an only child, Francis grows up quasi-orphaned, separated from his mother who sent him to live with the Reverend Tufts with the hope that he gain an "apprenticeship in the Lord's work" (107). Each parent's absence in their son's life is a sacrifice: His mother worked as a domestic servant for white family so that he would be a respected minister; his father died as protest to the inhuman conditions under which blacks were treated, effectively conferring upon his son the great value of his life in a world that insisted on its inconsequence.

Honored by their sacrifice, the young Francis felt he was exceptional, chosen at an early age for “something greater” (Flournoy 324). Unlike Cha-Cha, “[a] boy like Francis,” Flournoy writes near the novel’s end, “had reason to see ghosts. A father in the ground so young from a poor man’s ailment. A mother away. Shortly after he lost them both, a haint visited him” (323). This ghostly apparition comes in the form of his father, a “hallowed guest” who not only comforts him but also affirms his “life[’s] purpose” to be a spiritual leader (112, 323). Likening his haint “to the angel Gabriel, counsel to David and comforter of Mary,” Francis believes himself to be chosen by God, and he structures his sense of identity around his special status: “[H]e *knew* his place was in the church, helping to shepherd their humble congregation however he could” (324; emphasis mine). At age twenty, with a new wife and baby to care for, Francis made the life-altering mistake “of making one’s dreams and desires too public” and found himself “exile[d]” to the “cold, flat, and distant place” that was Detroit (107).

The haint that Francis felt had been a “blessing” is a sign to Reverend Tufts of a “heathen and hysterical” streak in his young ward; Francis’ exceptional status, it seemed, was something to be excised through working in one of Detroit’s many “fabled places of industry” (Flournoy 52-3, 320, 324). It is under these soul-crushing conditions that Francis finds himself in Detroit, mourning the loss of his “call to something great—to preach, to lead, to be anything other than a man who worked too much and made too little” (324). Consider the passage in which Francis arrives at Michigan Central Station, as just one of the more than 146,000 black migrants who flooded the city during the 1940s (*Origins* 42):

Francis took in the high-domed roof, the glittering marble floors, and the multitude of corridors as he walked. One stepped into a place like this—a palace like the kinds that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, turned up in, he thought—and felt impossibly small. Just a dim light, easily blown out. Francis arrived at Michigan Central Station with a small bag, his only pair of shoes on his feet, \$15 in one pocket, and a letter for a pastor in the other... This was how it had been done since Henry Ford first took a paternal interest in Negro employment and the cheap labor it provided: manufacturers depended on Up North ministers to supply them with reliable workers, and those ministers reached out to their southern colleagues for help filling the positions. (Flournoy 52-3)

Describing Francis as feeling “impossibly small” and disposable, like a “dim light” that is easily expunged, Flournoy emphasizes the absolute reversal of his exceptionalism.

Francis is aware that he is considered “cheap labor,” an anonymous cog in the Fordist machine that recruited southern blacks by the thousands. Offended by this process of “impersonal” recruitment, Francis refuses to use Tufts’ letter, believing the rumors back home that “there were more jobs available in Detroit than in the entire state of Arkansas” (53).

During World War II, factories that converted to defense manufacturing experienced a simultaneous increase in production and labor shortage due to the amount of men enlisting. Job opportunities for black Americans were suddenly abundant, causing many like Francis to seek their livelihoods in Detroit. Many of these migrants found, however, not respected careers waiting for them, but positions as janitors, strike breakers, or as temporary laborers who lost their positions as white G.I.s returned (*Origins* 26).

Finding hiring practices in the industrialized North to be similarly segregated as in the agrarian South, those who found steady employment were forced to “accept the dirtiest and most grueling jobs...especially on plant janitorial and maintenance crews, or in hot, dangerous jobs in foundries or furnace rooms” (25). Even without his letter of introduction, Francis finds there is a quota for hiring blacks at Ford, that work in the foundries could ‘cook a man alive,’ that laboring in the salt mines made him feel like a “Hebrew slave,” and that a job chauffeuring white automotive executives was not much of an improvement from work found in the Jim Crow South (Flournoy 53, 109-111). What offends Francis most is the disingenuousness of Detroit; he finds it to be a place “where men were crooked but pretended to be magnanimous” and police were just as likely to kill you (as back South) but “would try harder to make it look like an accident” (65, 108). Sugrue writes that “the wartime rhetoric of pluralism, tolerance, and antiracism, forged in response to Nazi atrocities, promised a future free of racial conflict” that it rarely delivered (*Origins* 183). The country’s “Arsenal of Democracy,” it appeared, had not lived up to its name.

To illustrate the denial of equal opportunity for black migrants, a literary comparison may be made between Francis’ arrival in Detroit with a scene from Jeffrey Eugenides’ epic of Detroit, *Middlesex*, in which a Greek refugee arrives in the city during an earlier wave of immigration in the 1920s. Consider the following passage in which Lefty Stephanides disembarks at Michigan Central Station:

[The Station’s] base was a mammoth marble neoclassical museum, complete with Corinthian pillars and carved entablature. From this temple rose a thirteen-story office building. Lefty, who’d been observing all the ways Greece had been

handed down to America, arrived now at where the transmission stopped. In other words: the future. He stepped off to meet it. (Eugenides 83)

Rather than feeling “small” and “dim,” as Francis does, Lefty is enthralled by the majesty of his surrounds, ready to embrace “the future” with its obvious promises of wealth and tolerance. Making his way through the city, Lefty sees only the “skyscrapers [that] were going up everywhere” (Eugenides 88) whereas Francis sees the “crumbling” boardinghouses of Paradise Valley, the “ash-gray rotting wood,” and sagging porches “tasked with supporting more than a dozen Negroes at once” (Flournoy 56). These drastically different first impressions of the city’s structures emphasize not only the inequality of living and working conditions for black migrants and their European counterparts, but also the ways in which white privilege affects even one’s ability to hope (e.g., Francis calls the station a “palace,” exclusively accessed by the holy, whereas Lefty considers it to be a “museum” and “temple,” a meeting place of cultural and material abundance). Directing his reader’s attention to this disparity, Eugenides points out the things that Lefty *did not* see as he made his way east, specifically the Black Bottom, where Francis headed upon his arrival:

What they didn’t see were the workers sleeping on the streets because of the housing shortage, and the ghetto just to the east, a thirty-block area bounded by Leland, Macomb, Hastings, and Brush streets, teeming with the city’s African Americans, who weren’t allowed to live anywhere else. They didn’t see, in short, the seeds of the city’s destruction—its second destruction—because they were a part of it, too, all these people coming from everywhere to cash in on Henry Ford’s five-dollar-a-day promise. (88)

Black citizens, confined to Detroit's ghetto and shuttered away in "The Foundry...the deepest recess of the Rouge," are rendered invisible to Lefty (Eugenides 96), which is exactly the way Francis feels upon his arrival: Others, Flourney writes, "did not seem to see him" (Flourney 165). While Lefty certainly suffers alienation and erasure as he is cut down by Ford's homogenizing Sociological Department, for many like Francis, making a life in Detroit meant a systematic denial of their very existence.

Francis' invisibility in the city is compounded by the absence of his haint. "Starting his first evening in Detroit, and every night for the rest of his life," Flourney writes, "Francis saw nothing. Not hide nor hair of the haint that had helped give his life purpose," which leads him to conclude, "there ain't no haints in Detroit" (Flourney 324). As a sign of his chosen status, the ghost's presence had given him an identity in Arkansas, but "[h]e was no one in Detroit," not special or near to God, just another invisible "migrant in a city where so many stepped off trains and buses each day" (112). Free from any last illusions he may have held regarding his future up North, Francis concludes that Detroit "was a lonely, backbreaking city" (278). Here, the word "lonely" reveals the deeply personal way the city's injustices affect him. Wondering "[w]hat was it about himself that people in this city wanted to knock down?" Francis does not make the connection between his dismal circumstances and the corporate structuring of a city where industries operated more like fiefdoms, directly benefitting from the isolation and stratification of their subjects (165). Francis never discloses to anyone the true source of his "private unhappiness" that is the loss of himself; rather, he carries this burden alone (332). Arriving in Detroit without his haint, Francis begins what will be a life-long habit of drinking alone "as if," his son, Cha-Cha reflects, "to punish himself for some past

misdeed” (85). By coping with his pain in secret, Francis distances himself from his family and angers and alienates his oldest son (the only Turner child to know the extent of his alcoholism), which only isolates him further. As his children note, Francis had given them his “heartbeat” but not his “heart” (22, 74). Invisible, isolated and fractured, the haint no longer appeared to Francis because *he* had become a ghost himself.

Arthur Redding, author of *Haints: American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fictions*, argues that “all Americans—immigrants and natives, whose access to their own various pasts has been forcibly denied for most of the country’s history—are haunted” (30). Here, Redding refers to the forced forfeiture of individual identity as a part of a project of national consolidation, as exemplified by the mythos of the American Dream. Francis, cast out of his native Arkansas and unwelcome in Detroit, becomes a ghost condemned to the periphery. As mentioned, the racially-defined characteristics of Americanism— independence and individualism—effectively exclude people like Francis, rendering them invisible, “sacrificed to the march of progress and the consolidation of American literary and cultural traditions” (39). Detroit’s early twentieth-century immigrant success story of self-reliance, home ownership, and social mobility ignores the lived experiences of many of the city’s black inhabitants who battled harassment, undesirable and insecure employment, scarce and substandard housing, and “visible poverty,” disease and crime in the ghettos to which they were confined (*Origins* 25, 34, 37). Because these realities challenged Detroit’s reputation as the birthplace of the American Dream, a worker’s paradise and technological mecca, the plight of black Detroiters was often ignored, a marginalization made possible by the fact that they were segregated at work and at home, effectively

“banish[ed]” from white America’s sight (Redding 73). But such a glaringly obvious denial is impossible to maintain, as the outpouring of anger during the events of July, 1967 would prove. Millennial literary response to such conspiratorial erasure, Redding argues, abounds with such ghosts, who “[clamor] for an unveiling of what has been occluded or hidden over” (110). The project of novels that scrutinize the past, such as *The Turner House* and *Middlesex*, is an “unveiling” of these untold stories as the protagonists (and readers), the offspring of immigrants and migrants, examine the chain of events that make their lives possible.

There is yet another side to this narrative of hardship that is also ignored, and that is one of black achievement. Civil rights activism flourished in Detroit, where the city’s chapter of the NAACP remains the largest in the nation, with its stated “focus on housing” issues (“Branch History” 6, 9). By the 1950s, the branch had “quietly” forged an alliance with the UAW to challenge workplace and housing discrimination on behalf of its black members (*Origins* 193). With the legal support of such civil institutions, “black pioneers” began moving into segregated neighborhoods, braving the collective backlash of 192 home and property owner associations that “shared a common bond of whiteness and Americanness—a bond that they asserted forcefully at public meetings and in correspondence with public officials” (199, 212). In her recollection of being “the third colored family to move onto the 5100 block of Linsdale Avenue in Detroit,” author Kit Harrison describes black homeownership as a hard-won prize—its achievement akin to medaling in the Olympics—writing, “The Horton clan next door and Howard and Mattie Brogdon, across the street with their four children, had taken gold and silver honors a few months earlier [as my] parents gladly accepted the bronze” (31). Sugrue reports that those

who successfully managed to integrate with their white neighbors “had average incomes 73 percent greater than residents of majority-black tracts,” and, in the black enclaves of Conant Gardens and Grixdale Park, an elite professional class enjoyed more prosperity than their white neighbors (*Origins* 199-203). Furthermore, 1950s Detroit was home to “the largest number of independently owned black businesses of any city in the United States,” and black radio stations began to introduce Motown “to an increasingly interracial audience” (189). These achievements, however, must be understood within the context of the overwhelming hostility with which they were met. The anonymity and adversity—but modest success too—that Francis experienced living in the city was not unique to him alone, and, while his narrative is predicated upon a specific kind of loss—the loss of his haint, his sense of self—it represents a commonly-shared struggle that many black Americans experienced when they discovered that the urban North’s progressive agenda excluded people like them.

Drawing upon collective memory in *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates recalls his memory of visiting the homes of elderly black people in Chicago to hear their stories of struggle, survival and triumph “despite the city” (Coates 109). His assessment of these people, their homes “filled with the emblems of honorable life—citizenship awards, portraits of children in cap and gown,” is that they are “profound” (109). He writes:

And they had drawn these accolades by cleaning big houses and living in one-room Alabama shacks before moving to the city. And they had done this despite the city, which was supposed to be a respite, revealing itself simply to be a more intricate specimen of plunder. They had worked two and three jobs, put children

through high school and college, and become pillars of their community. I admired them, but I knew the whole time that I was merely encountering the survivors... In those homes I saw the best of us, but behind each of them I knew that there were so many millions gone. (109-110)

Throughout his text, Coates uses the term “plunder” to describe the relentless exploitation of black bodies for white gain. Here, it refers to the way that the Jim Crow rules of the South, which legitimized such plunder, existed also in the North, made especially cruel, in Flournoy’s words, for being “veiled beneath promises of progress” (52). The intricacies of such plunder manifested in new forms of old racism as many migrants discovered that discriminatory hiring practices, housing options, incarceration, and educational segregation were likewise structured to maintain white privilege in the city. Success was unlikely; Cha-Cha’s response to his therapist’s question as to whether any of his siblings were incarcerated (“Excuse me, miss, *no one* is in jail”) reveals such discriminatory ideology (26). The Turner family (and their neighbors, the McNairs and Gardenhires) proves representative of these real-life survivors of the urban north; Francis and Viola’s determination to carve a space for themselves on Detroit’s unforgiving landscape is a testament of their “profound” strength. Coates’ recognition of the “so many millions gone” is a reminder that this feat is exceptional, and reinforces Redding’s argument that America is haunted by their erasure.

As demonstrated with Francis, the cost of survival is enormous. Flournoy writes that Francis “pushed down what needed pushing down inside of him in order to make it through each shift” in Detroit’s salt mines, and later as a driver for Chrysler, to purchase their home on Detroit’s East Side (337). Francis accepts this fate so that his children

might have a better future than the South would have afforded them, even at the cost of their father's absence from their lives, which recalls Francis Sr.'s sacrifice on his son's behalf. Writing that Francis "would love the city just the same, even if he did not love who he had become within it," Flournoy encapsulates what Detroit demanded of him: The city that gave his family life required his own as payment (325). As such, the struggles of families such as the Turners, and the "survivors" in Chicago, may be read as evidence of a truer American Dream—one that is achieved through great personal sacrifice, without an institutional safety net, and despite overwhelming odds. Read this this way, Francis Turner's plight to forge a community in a city that afforded him little represents an independent and more authentic *Americanness* than anything his white neighbors may have achieved. As Coates puts it, "They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" (149).

While the Turner house on Yarrow Street is, to use Redding's words, a "certificate of the American Dream accomplished," Francis' greatest achievement, perhaps, is his courage to hope "For Better Things," as the novel's concluding chapter title suggests (30). Recalling that a central tenet of the American Dream is upward mobility across generations, we may fairly judge the success of Francis and Viola Turner by their children's comfortably middle class lives (with few exceptions). Cha-Cha, being the only Turner child not born in Detroit, was a motivating factor in Francis' decision to remain in the city, so the sacrifice of Francis' identity may be said to have been forfeited on his account. But the oldest Turner child, who was raised to believe in such conventional American virtues as meritocracy, individualism, and personal responsibility, is deeply wounded by what he perceives to be his father's failures as a parent, not

realizing to what extent his father's sacrifice helped to shape those convictions. As the novel opens with a forced period of reflection, Cha-Cha must evaluate a legacy of sacrifice made on his behalf. It is for this reason that Flournoy summons the ghosts of those whose lives and ambitions were erased, as represented by Francis, and his father, Francis Sr. The uncovering of this earlier and greater story of migratory ambition is precisely the "unveiling" to which Redding refers, and is necessary if Cha-Cha, suddenly finding himself aging into a world that he does not recognize, is to find satisfaction in his golden years. It is by "reckoning"—to use Lonnie Turner's oddly germane language—with the past that Cha-Cha may shed the doubts of 'what could have been' that have plagued him, focusing rather on how the past informs his present and future (Flournoy 200). In presenting her reader with a story of revelation, self-examination and acceptance, Flournoy weaves a parallel story of Detroit's 21st century crisis of conscience. As the effects of capitalism and racism manifest in deteriorating neighborhoods, such as the one in which the Turner home languishes abandoned, a reckoning must inevitably take place as Detroiters decide the fate of their city. The presence of Cha-Cha's haint suggests that it is only by acknowledging and taking responsibility for the injustices of the past that the city can lay new foundations.

Following in Francis' footsteps, Cha-Cha believes that working for Chrysler is "the closest thing to an inheritance that he received from his father"—a statement made early in the novel that will be contradicted several times over (Flournoy 5). Faithful service to the auto manufacturer has resulted in a comfortable middle-class life in the suburbs; his careful planning has ensured that his home "still stood, deep in the heart of a cul-de-sac and on its way to free and clear" even as "foreclosure and For Sale signs"

dotted his neighbors' lawns (32). Believing that "[n]obody *deserves* anything," Cha-Cha insists on living modestly and responsibly, never taking short cuts or hand-outs, even when they might be warranted, which causes his youngest brother to disparage him as the "integrity police" (76, 264). In short, Cha-Cha's life's accomplishments reflect a characteristically post-World War II, Midwestern adherence to a system of meritocracy in which hard work necessarily begets success (85).

It must be noted that Cha-Cha's worldview is shaped almost entirely by his position as the oldest sibling of a large family. Treated more often like a third parent than child, Cha-Cha was given far more responsibility than he felt capable of at such a young age, at one point admitting to his sister how unfair he finds the burden of "handl[ing] all the ugly stuff" for the family to be (83). Here he refers to his father's secret drinking habit, which he was tasked by Viola to shelter from his siblings by following Francis around the neighborhood to ensure he did not come home drunk. Over the years, Cha-Cha considers himself to be the protector of the family, growing admittedly "addicted" to his role as leader of the family, knowing that "his decision was the only one that would matter in the end" (38, 85). This insistence on doing everything himself—and taking pride in doing so—strains his personal relationships, and he concedes that "[t]he same quality that read as dependable and even-keeled in his youth had crusted over and become stubborn and pitiable" as he aged (234). Cumulatively considered, Cha-Cha's defining qualities—industriousness, self-reliance, caution, and a "bullheaded" insistence on taking responsibility—have an isolating effect, which is best summed up by his therapist's assessment that he is a person who commands "respect" at the cost of "true friendship" and "a sense of individuality" (241, 270). Even Cha-Cha's career driving

trucks is a solitary one, and it is later revealed that he “had no friends”; his duties to his family—both his immediate (his wife, Tina, and their children) and his larger family of siblings—consume his attention (196). Certainly, by nature of being the oldest, Cha-Cha was afforded little choice in his position as a leader in his family, but he also relishes the importance of the role, which can only be maintained by his unwillingness to rely on others. So, when the haint appears only to him, first at age fourteen and again at sixty-four, Cha-Cha feels both unfairly burdened and “elevated” by its exhibition to him alone, an ambivalent feeling that mirrors his attitude toward his family (4).

The reappearance of the haint in Cha-Cha’s life has a disordering effect, beginning with its dramatic mode of reentry. According to Cha-Cha’s version of events, the haint’s sudden appearance is responsible for causing his trucking accident and resulting hip injury, the breaking of which he considers an initiation into “old age” (Flournoy 6). Even after he has recovered enough to return to work, Cha-Cha continues to use his sick days to stay home, “compulsive[ly]” researching his haint (289). Armed with “logic,” Cha-Cha reminds himself that “ghost stories happened in the South,” not in “twenty-first century... Detroit,” but to no avail (137, 208-9). Made sleepless by the haint’s presence, Cha-Cha becomes “desperate,” sensing “the loss of control like a loss of basic reason” (136, 196, 313). Recalling his father’s assertion, “there ain’t no haints in Detroit,” the ghost’s presence signals to Cha-Cha that something *impossible* is happening, causing him to question the very things he believes to be true of himself. He worries that others find him “pitiable,” especially his wife, who begins treating him “as if he were a toddler” (234). Rather being satisfied after a career of hard work, he now sees himself as a “peon” at Chrysler, insignificant and unhappy (234, 331). Coupled with his

body's failure (e.g., the injury to his hip), the transition from self-reliance and capability to "helplessness" makes him feel like he has "failed" (271, 313). Crippled not only literally by the injury but also figuratively by self-doubt, Cha-Cha finds himself unable to make a decision in regards to his childhood home, which stands in an increasingly blighted and violent neighborhood, with a mortgage balance higher than its worth. Like the impossibility of the haint's presence, the condition of the house does not make sense to him. After years of guarding "the first thirteen plus two later generations of Turners," the home now stands vulnerable to forces beyond his control—repossession, arson, or vandalism (253). The home's deterioration challenges his belief in meritocracy, signaling a break-down of the governing principles of his life. The violability of his body, mind, convictions, and childhood home—all of which had seemed impossible to Cha-Cha—forces him to accept that his understanding of the world is limited if not delusory.

Confronted by this flawed understanding of circumstances, a memory that Cha-Cha has secretly borne surfaces, "one that seemed to fly in the face of the narrative of his father that his siblings cherished" (Flournoy 88). The events of this day in July, 1967 are still so impossible to Cha-Cha that he has told no one about them, not even his paid therapist. It is *the* formative moment in which the pattern of his life was laid, without which Cha-Cha might have been a different person. To emphasize its importance in his life, Flournoy unfolds the events against the backdrop of a watershed moment for the city of Detroit: the 1967 Riots. The week of rage that followed a police raid of an illegal bar on the city's West Side would accelerate the deterioration of Detroit, setting the tone for race relations in the city for half a century. The stubborn memory of this day chafes at Cha-Cha; it demands to be reckoned with just as the anguish that burned the city fifty

years ago remains unresolved today. The following account describes the lasting consequences of what has become known as the riot, uprising, or rebellion (even the labeling of events remains contentious) and provides historical context for a literary analysis of Cha-Cha's memories.

In an overcrowded corner of the city, people gathered at the "Club" to celebrate the return of local boys from the Vietnam War (Stone 139, 143). Located on Twelfth Street, the "blind pig" was an unlicensed, after-hours bar that catered to the neighborhood's black clientele, a common arrangement considering the difficulty black Detroiters had in obtaining the required liquor licenses (141). Twelfth Street was policed by the Tenth Precinct's Vice Squad, who routinely "busted" the numbers runners and prostitutes who conducted their business along the street (141). The police expected to conduct a typical raid on the bar during which a few drunks would be rounded up, ticketed and released, but they found instead a crowd of eighty-five who were reasonably angered by the poor welcome being shown to returning service members (144). Drawn by the disruption, nearly 3,000 civilians had gathered in a mere four hours, and simmering tensions over crowded living conditions and discriminatory policing escalated into launched bottles, bricks and pool balls ("Chronology" 120). As the police absconded with their mass arrestees, some neighborhood residents, angered by the damage done to the Club during the raid, retaliated by assaulting nearby business façades beginning a process of looting and arson that spread like wildfire (Stone 147). By the end of the day, Sunday, July 23rd, an entire city block had burned even as eight hundred of Michigan's 1,459 state troopers moved in to police the city ("Chronology" 123). A state of emergency was declared the next day, and by early Tuesday morning tanks belonging to the National

Guard had descended on Detroit's city streets amidst continued reports of civilian sniper activity (126, 131). By the end of the week, Sugrue reports, "Rioters damaged 2,509 buildings; \$36 million in insured property was lost...[and] 7,231 men and women were arrested on riot-related charges; forty-three people had died, most at the hands of the city's police force and the Michigan National Guard" ("Foreword" ix). Many of Detroit's worst-affected areas never recovered from the damage, and fire became a normal part of life in Detroit, where "[t]he smell of brick and clothes and small pets smoldering... became an olfactory norm akin to skunk spray" (Flournoy 89).

The government's militarized response to the rioting paved the way for increasingly brutal policing tactics as demonstrated by the implementation of STRESS, an undercover unit that relied on entrapment strategies and produced even higher numbers of civilian deaths at the hands of police (Boyd 172). Demonstrably shaken by the events of July 1967, Detroit's civilians militarized, too, as 13,145 new handguns were registered in the city in the first half of 1968 compared to the 10,416 registered over the entire course of the previous year (Winkel 266). White flight, which had begun with a move to the developing suburbs during the 1950s, drastically accelerated in the wake of these events (269). While the outpouring of anger demonstrated the extent to which Detroit suffered from economic and racial inequality, the reactionary abandonment of the city only intensified segregation. Rather than confronting matters, many of the people who had power to effect positive change simply left. The cry remains unanswered. While Cha-Cha's painful memories of the riots largely eschews the drama of events occurring on the West Side of the city, the fact that its injustice remains unaddressed forty-one

years later (during the novel's action in 2008) mirrors the pernicious festering of Detroit's wounds.

Yet unaware of the lasting impact of the events of that week, a young Cha-Cha was working as part of an assembly team of four men who bolted together the bodies of Dodge Chargers to their frames on the morning that "Detroiters began to realize the skirmish on Twelfth and Clairmount had morphed into something larger" (Flournoy 89). Amidst an atmosphere of anxiety and rumor, the workers had become careless and, as Cha-Cha's bench fell behind, Michael, the team's "relief man," jumped in to provide aid, managing instead to get his thumb caught between the frame and body as the pieces were bolted together (92). Not believing the gross injury he could see was about to occur, Michael simply said to the assembly team "You can't" as the two pieces met (94). Splattered with the man's blood, Cha-Cha leaves the factory disgusted and "determined to find another job" (89). "If he'd had no younger siblings to worry about," Flournoy writes—*if he had been a different person*—"he might have joined his own friends from the neighborhood in search of new shoes, lightweight appliances, anything with resale potential," but ever the responsible older brother, Cha-Cha returns to the house on Yarrow Street to "[make] sure nothing happened" to his family as the events on Detroit's West Side escalated into a riot (89). Finding everyone home but Francis, Cha-Cha is persuaded by his younger brothers to help them steal bricks from an abandoned house while the police were distracted (90). Knowing that "the fires, the looting, and any police beatings all qualified as reasons a Turner boy might get into trouble, or even die," Cha-Cha reasons that accompanying his brothers with his truck might at least afford them some safety (90). When they are spotted by a white police officer, the boys separate and

Cha-Cha seeks refuge under the porch of a house. Hidden from sight, he soon hears “footsteps crunching through the dry summer grass toward him” and recognizes his father’s boots (94). Realizing his father is drunk—for “only Francis Turner could find time to sneak away and drink during an uprising”—Cha-Cha is rendered immobile as his father urinates on the side of the porch, “an unforgivable amount splash[ing] on his forehead” (94-5). Recalling the words desperately uttered by Michael that morning, “Cha-Cha wanted to yell ‘You can’t’ from under the porch, but he didn’t. He merely closed his eyes” and waited for Francis to leave (95).

Earlier in the day, made uneasy from the accident and by his participation in his brothers’ scheme, Cha-Cha wonders, “What kind of adulthood was this?” (Flournoy 93). In the wake of his father’s actions, his question acquires new significance. What kind of adulthood indeed, where a grown man finds himself running from the police for such a minor infraction, hiding in a “hole” while his own father pissed on his head (94)? And furthermore, what kind of adulthood is Francis modeling, publicly drunk on a day when his children’s safety was at risk (89)? This line of questioning reveals the utter *wrongness* of the situation, and while Cha-Cha believes that a grave injustice has been done to himself, he, like most children, fails to interrogate the circumstances leading to his father’s sorry state. Having witnessed his father’s failure *as a parent* to both himself (“Cha-Cha was convinced that Francis had done it on purpose”) and his siblings (“[Francis] should have been at home protecting his family”), Cha-Cha, like Michael, is capable only of the thought “You can’t” as his brain struggles to connect what is happening to what he believes to be the logical relationship of father to son (95). Once this impossible thing has happened, Cha-Cha’s life is irrevocably altered. He is angered

by his father's lack of self-control, and by what he perceives as selfishness. Rather than acting as role model for his young son, Francis cannot be relied upon and should be avoided. Even worse, Cha-Cha interprets Francis' actions as "a special, premeditated disrespect" directed at himself, which he erroneously takes as a sign of being unloved (95). Furthermore, Cha-Cha is ashamed by his inability to assert his presence in the first place. This failure presages his later inability to take risks—passing up the opportunity to start his own trucking business in the 1980s, for example—causing him to reflect four decades later, "His entire life might have been different if he'd figured out a way to be braver, or at least brasher" (234). Finally, it is precisely because this experience is so wrong that Cha-Cha realizes the burden will be his alone to bear; his acceptance of this fact is ironically similar to the way Francis copes with his own personal failures (88). Cha-Cha's role as protector demands that he shelter his siblings from the hurtful truth, the very fact of which is an especially bitter revelation to him. His pride wounded, and rendered speechless and invisible under the porch, Cha-Cha reflects that it was "the wrong kind of day," filled with "too many realizations about the kind of life [he] felt destined to live" (95).

Riddled with resentment and regret, Cha-Cha discovers that he has always been haunted by the injustices of that day, only now realizing that it is far too late to confront his father with his feelings. Knowing that Cha-Cha is not in possession of key facts (his father drank to mitigate his anomie; Francis' love for his children meant that he could not always be present in their lives), Flournoy leaves the reader to consider all the ways Cha-Cha's life may have been altered if he had found the courage to speak. Certainly, Cha-Cha would no longer feel burdened by the secret knowledge of his father's failings. Had

he confronted his father for abandoning his family to drink, Francis might have had the opportunity to share with his son his own heavy burden, thereby alleviating the unrelenting loneliness he suffers. Having done so, Cha-Cha might have been able to empathize with his father, or his father with him. Perhaps the two loners could have found solace in each other or even friendship, bonded by their mutual role as leaders of their family. Or, barring an amicable outcome, a confrontation might have at least forced Francis to see the error of his ways. Redding's earlier words are equally applicable here: Hauntings are limned by possibilities, "by what... might have been, by alternate pasts and potential presents, by the radical openness of the future and future beings" (37). Forced by his haint to confront this painful memory, Cha-Cha discovers that the things he had thought to be true of himself and his father were entirely contingent upon his silence under the porch. Furthermore, his limited understanding of events causes him to seek more information from his mother, who informs him of his father's own haunting, how it "messed up his spirit" and was the cause of his life-long dissatisfaction (Flournoy 315). When he presses her as to why Francis had refuted his earlier claim to a visitation, she tells him that Francis insisted "there ain't no haints in Detroit" because he wanted to shield his son from the disappointment it had wrought upon his own life: "[He lied because] he wanted you to be satisfied. Your daddy tried to be satisfied his whole life... Your daddy loved everybody but himself. Never was content with his own self" (315). Confronted with this fact—*his father had not meant to hurt him; he had lied because he loved him!*—Cha-Cha is forced to consider that there may be other things about his father that he had misunderstood.

While this revelation allows Cha-Cha some resolution, its incompleteness indicates that much more remains to be uncovered. As mentioned, the reader is privy to the conditions that rendered Francis a ghost of himself, but they remain uninterrogated by the novel's conclusion. Rather, Flournoy places the onus on us to examine the ways that structural racism led Francis and Cha-Cha to be at the same house on that fateful day. Recall that the earlier assessment of Cha-Cha's question, "What kind of adulthood was this?" found resonance for both men. In a just world, Francis would not have been drunk; his lifetime of hard work would have yielded the success and satisfaction he deserved. Cha-Cha would not have had to stand guard over his brothers' youthful inclinations because Russell's assertion that "ain't nobody gonna shoot us over bricks" would have been true (90). In a just world, Cha-Cha would not have found himself hiding like a fugitive from the police and Francis would not have degraded himself or his son. In a truly just world, all Detroiters would have equal access to housing, good education, jobs and social welfare programs. The outpouring of rage that burned the city that July could have been avoided if Detroit had lived up to its promises of progressiveness. Had those with power not reacted with militarized zeal, forty-three people might not have died in the rioting. Had whites not fled the city, but taken responsibility for their part in sowing "the seeds of the city's destruction," a cooperative rebuilding might have occurred (Eugenides 88). However, as Francis quickly learned, Detroit proved an unjust place, a place of insincerity where the word "friend" uttered by a white police officer meant the opposite (164).

Detroit, poet Danny Wilcox Frazier writes, is "an almost impossible place. An American / place from which Americans cast their eyes" (287). It is a place haunted by

the ghosts of the past despite the belief “there ain’t no haints in Detroit.” Precisely because Detroit is the birthplace of the American Dream and middle-class, it is in Detroit that neglected middle-America values must be addressed. Cha-Cha’s inability to voice his protest “You can’t” is a lesson to be heeded lest we live embittered by the consequences. By providing her reader with Francis’ narrative, Flourney ensures that we cannot claim ignorance, but must rigorously examine the ways in which we are victimized or privileged by a system of inequality. This is the project undertaken by the protagonist in “Spelunkers,” whose protagonist Digger grapples, as does Cha-Cha, with the legacy of hate handed down by his parents, only inverted. Whereas the looming specter of inequality that haunts Detroit in *The Turner House* finds its reckoning in the uprising of July 1967 and its immediate aftermath, Michael Zadoorian’s “Spelunkers” explores the consequences of the accelerated flight of Detroit’s white population in the wake of the those events. Zadoorian directs our attention to the responsibility borne by the suburbs of the city in contributing to Detroit’s decline. Yet the impossibility of Detroit once more asserts itself as Detroit’s wasted buildings become the site of love, creation and reconciliation rather than merely the skeletons of a dead city.

Chapter III

“Fucked-Up Faberge Egg”

Throughout the metropolitan area, majestic ballrooms and buildings, emblems of its heyday, stand there, vacant, whispering their stories of how this city was once a contender. And amidst those echoes of the past, there is a gritty sort of vitality, a thrumming pulse.

—Pamela Sabaugh “Legally Blind in the Motor City” (93)

According to the most recent census data available (2010), Detroit’s population is comprised of only 713,777 residents, nearly eighty-three percent of whom are black.

These numbers are a stunning reversal of mid-century demographics, where in 1950, at the apex of its post-WWII economic success, Detroit’s population peaked at 1.8 million, roughly eighty-five percent of whom were white (Teaford 212; Winkel 268; U. S. C. B.).

The prospect of unlimited growth in mid-century resulted in an abundance of industrial development in the city’s suburbs, and housing opportunities for *white* Detroiters soon followed, effectively shutting out access to jobs for those confined to the city. Over the course of the early 1960s, the city lost an average of 22,000 people each year, but in the wake of the rioting, that number jumped dramatically to 80,000 in 1968 alone (Winkel 269). White flight from the city solidified into a form of white protectionism in the suburbs with 8 Mile Road acting as “a symbolic border between black and white,” an ideological “Berlin Wall,” to cite Edward McClelland (40). Resentment simmered amongst many of those who had lost their businesses and homes in the burning and violence of July 1967, as they blamed black Detroiters for ‘ruining’ their city—a sentiment that is viciously expressed by the protagonist’s parents in Michael Zadoorian’s “Spelunkers.” In his interviews with disillusioned Macomb County Democrats in the mid-1980s, Stanley Greenberg witnessed “a profound distaste for black Americans” as a

convenient scapegoat “for their vulnerability and for almost everything that had gone wrong in their lives” (39). Unwilling to see how racist policies had maintained inequality in Detroit, many of these white migrants to the suburbs had been surprised by the eruption of violence during the uprising. Rather than expressing a working-class sympathy for the ways in which enforced poverty had contributed to the outpouring of rage in 1967, Greenberg explains that these “refugees” view their problems strictly through the lens of race (26). Greenberg writes:

These suburban voters felt nothing in common with Detroit and its people and rejected out of hand the social-justice claims of black Americans. They denied that blacks suffer special disadvantages that would require special treatment by employers or the government. They had no historical memory of racism and no tolerance for present efforts to offset it. They felt no sense of personal or collective responsibility that would support government anti-discrimination and civil rights policies. (39)

Instead, these suburbanites used their political power to keep their new communities segregated by voting against busing measures, refusing federal Housing and Urban Development grants, and blocking efforts to build public transportation routes from Detroit (Greenberg 29; McClelland 42; Winkel 269). It is not surprising then that today, more than forty percent of the Detroit’s residents live below the poverty line, standing in stark contrast to the immense wealth of neighboring communities such as those found in Oakland and Macomb counties (Semuels 13). The resulting segregation describes how racism assumes a spatial dimension that, according to Detroit scholar Peter J. Hammer, leads to the creation of “opportunity deserts” that are surrounded by affluence (273). He

writes, “The zip code that a child is born into is more important in determining that child’s future education, occupational status, and life expectancy than individual aptitude. This is the complete inversion of the American Dream” (273). The undisguised injustice of spatial racism reveals the incoherency of the Dream’s promise of unfettered socio-economic mobility as the city’s poorest (who are, as the statistics above confirm, disproportionately black) are confined to such opportunity deserts.

In the wake of the mass exodus, Detroit languished, its dwindling population and decreasing opportunities for economic growth corresponding with an increase in unemployment and poverty as the tax base drained. Sixty-one percent of Detroit’s residents work primarily in low-skilled positions outside of the city, whereas, Hammer notes, the majority of the best-paying, corporate jobs downtown are held by suburban commuters (279). The suburbs, author Ingrid Norton writes in her essay “Letter from Detroit,” effectively “grew around the city like an ever-replicating tumor, killing its host” (44). The imagery of a malignant tumor is especially adept when considering the physical scarring of Detroit’s landscape. According to the findings of the 2014 federally-appointed Detroit Blight Removal Task Force, one third of the city’s structures (both residential and commercial) meet the definition of blight, and one third of the city’s lots remain vacant (D.B.R.T.F. 52; Norton 42).

A popular subject of what has been termed “Ruin Porn” (a highly contentious trend in photography in which deteriorating buildings are prized for their haunting aesthetic), Detroit’s monuments of success—such as the United Artists Theater and the Fine Arts Building—have now become public markers of misfortune. An inescapable reminder of Detroit’s glory days, these “immense palace[s] of ruin” haunt the city’s

skyline (Zadoorian 173). Recall how Michigan Central Station's grandiosity dwarfed Francis and awed Lefty, and compare that with Ingrid Norton's 2014 description of the Station as "the most renowned symbol of Detroit's ruination":

It stands eighteen stories tall, once magnificent and now in distress: all pocked window-frames and crumbling arches. You can see the sky clear through it. When people here give directions it's simply "the train station," from which no trains have departed since Ronald Reagan was president. That's the ghost city that runs parallel to present-day Detroit. (42)

Norton's use of the term "ghost city" recalls the graveyard motif that so many authors employ when illustrating Detroit's decline, but is tempered by its positioning in a parallel universe, a place that is lived alongside but not succumbed to. Pamela Sabaugh also describes this odd parallelism in which Detroit's grand abandoned structures "[whisper] their stories of how this city was once a contender" against "a gritty sort of vitality, a thrumming pulse" (93). Here, the imagery of decay is subverted, used as a referent to the drama of the city's continuing narrative. A "thrumming pulse" is the beat to which stories are told; the echoes of an aging "contender" reverberate through the city's newest iteration. These hulking structures, scarred by a legacy of exploitation and neglect, impose themselves on the city's narrative, representing the inevitability of the past and its demand to be acknowledged.

Responding to the city's whispered "echoes of the past," Zadoorian uses Detroit's most famous deteriorating buildings as the site through which his characters develop and reimagine their identities as they attempt to relate to a city in whose shadow they have been raised (Zadoorian 178). Introduced only as "Digger" (his real name is never

revealed), the protagonist of “Spelunkers” explores Detroit’s architectural skeletons, noting among the ruins the graffitied names of “[p]eople who wanted to be heard, to offer proof that they existed, [and] came to a deserted, broken place to do it” (177). Plagued by a legacy of racism, Digger explores the metropole that his parents raised him to fear as he searches for meaning amongst its abandoned icons. Digger’s relationship to these structures reflects the emptiness he feels inside, a gnawing guilt that, at times, seems easier to indulge than resist.

Overwhelmed by cultural alienation, it is not until he meets Jenna, a fellow former suburbanite, that Digger realizes genuine fulfillment, albeit of an unexpected kind. Jenna’s gentle insistence that he has “a full heart” forces Digger to confront the potentially destructive nature of clinging to a narrative of loss over active engagement (186). As Digger navigates an adulthood rife with pitfalls of self-indulgence and destructiveness, he ultimately faces a critical choice whether to fully embrace a life that moves unrelentingly forward, or to remain resistant to change. Within the context of suburban white flight and post-industrial abandonment, Digger’s attempts at meaning-making in “Spelunkers” represent the crisis Detroit faces as it makes critical choices about its post-industrial identity. “Spelunkers,” therefore, raises important questions for the future of the city in which Digger chooses to make a life: How can the city move forward and away from a prevailing narrative of loss while still honoring its past achievements? How will Detroit forge an identity that is separate from the fear, racism, loss, and self-destructive tendencies that have haunted it for so long? Using visuospatial motifs such as negative and positive space to investigate the psychological formation of identity, Zadoorian provides valuable insight into the fractured psyche of a culture in

crisis and furthermore suggests that the only way forward is through a courageous leap of faith.

The short story's title, "Spelunkers," refers to a popular subcultural activity that thrives in Rust Belt cities that are rich with man-made 'caves.' The author's use of the term "spelunker" highlights the way that his protagonist relates to the buildings he explores; his is an act of intrepid investigation of sites where entry is legally prohibited. Digger explains what it is that he does, "breaking into abandoned buildings to explore and take photos, then write about the experience" on his website (Zadoorian 169). He presents himself to the reader with the masculine swagger of what geopolitical scientists Carrie Mott and Susan Roberts describe as the "archetypal explorer," a prescribed identity that has found new resonance within the current urban exploration movement (235). Here, the authors refer to "a white, able-bodied, risk-taking man who, with 'stout boots and a stout heart', can go where more frail and less well equipped others dare not venture" (235). Using the argot of exploration, Digger explains what he sees as his role as documentarian, claiming, "Take only photographs, leave only footprints; we're down with that Sierra Club shit" (Zadoorian 187). Digger describes his subject material—"debris," "tatters" and "remnants" of "former grandeur" (177-8)—as "fucked-up shit" (170). Scoffing the law in an effort to impress her, Digger tells Jenna that spelunking is "pretty fucking illegal" (169), and he regales her with tales of running into "hostile hobo[s]" (170), gun-toting trespassers (170, 172), and "desperate-looking men" whom he assumes are "[c]rackheads rummaging for scrap metal" (181). In addition to this carefully-crafted image as intrepid explorer, however, Digger begins his narrative not by providing the reader with any autobiographical information, but rather by introducing his

“crew” comprised of Martin and Chip, whom we learn later, are just his close friends. The reader is thus warned in the opening salvo that this protagonist resists outside circumscription.

Digger’s descriptions of Martin and Chip validate them as real Detroiters: Martin is associated with hockey, “seminal eighties Detroit punk,” and carries a homemade weapon (Zadoorian 169). Chip “grew up in the old money Gross Pointes” but is legitimized by his unnamed grandmother, “a famous soul singer whom you’d recognize by the fact that she gets wider every year” (170). The need to authenticate his crew as belonging to Detroit becomes important as the reader later learns that Digger moved to Hamtramck as an adult after spending his childhood in Westland, a suburb thirty miles west of the city. To emphasize the uneasy process of identity formation in which Digger is engaged, Zadoorian juxtaposes soft, sophisticated language and observations with harsher, more assertive words and imagery. Describing Martin’s homemade blackjacks, Digger observes, “He’s a real craftsman. They’re quite lovely actually, almost objets d’art. Obviously, it’s no match for a Glock, but the sight of it quiets down a hostile hobo right fast” (170). Additionally, Digger seeks to establish a cool façade by essentially pretending not to care about his subject material. Describing Chip’s talents for web design, he casually explains, “I just take the pictures of the fucked-up shit, he’s the one who makes it look *uber*-urban, *echt*-industrial, proto-apocalyptic, rustbelt cool, or what the underground magazines who worship Detroit are calling us these days” (170). The feigned disinterest, exaggerated performance of masculinity, and quest for authenticity exhibited in the story’s first three paragraphs alone are all early indicators that Digger is engaged in a process of identity formation.

Digger performs the role of tough, hyper-masculine explorer when he first meets Jenna, a student at Wayne State University, whom Digger calls “a crazy bitch” in response to her request that he guide her through “an abandoned building to check out and photograph the [graffiti] tags for her thesis” (Zadoorian 170). Digger’s first impression of a “geeky-looking” Jenna is in stark contrast to the way he describes the cool-guy posturing of his crew, noting, “All she needed was braces and a ‘Kick Me’ sign taped on her back to complete the look” (171). It soon becomes apparent, however, that Jenna is just as tough as Digger believes himself to be; her frank honesty stands in contrast with Digger’s posturing. She calls him out for hiding behind the anonymity of the internet and for exhibiting a self-righteous attitude about his choice to live in Detroit (171, 173). He notices that Jenna walks with a limp, which far from being an affliction, gives her “a kind of swagger” of authenticity on par with Martin and Chip (174). Later, Digger is impressed by both Jenna’s physical indefatigability and by her willingness to be emotionally vulnerable in front of him, which signals a reversal of his own *modus operandi* (176-7).

It is evident in their first meeting that Jenna’s unequivocal self-assuredness is threatening to Digger. Consider Jenna’s unnerving counter-gaze as she penetrates Digger’s façade:

She smiled at me, looking straight into my eyes for a long moment, which kind of creeped me out. I could tell she was skulking around in there, seeing if she could find anything there besides broken glass, curled flakes of infant brain-curdling lead-based paint, weathered plywood, an old shoe, and maybe a steaming heap of hobo poop. (Zadoorian 172)

Knowing that Jenna senses his insecure sense of self, he thinks, “Truth was, I was hoping she would find something because now that she wasn’t acting so loopy, I liked what I saw” (172). Digger finds her acumen both alluring and irritating. While her confidence attracts him, her uncanny ability to pin him down chafes because *he* has no idea who he is.

Discomfited by her scrutiny, Digger responds with a revealing question: “Where did you grow up?” (Zadoorian 173). Providing the reader with the necessary context to identify the source of Digger’s insecurities, Zadoorian writes, “This is the question that defines everyone in Detroit. Where you grew up is pretty much who you are, whether you like it or not” (173). When he mocks Jenna for being from the wealthy suburb of Birmingham, Jenna responds by telling him that it is “just as bad” that he is from Westland, to which Digger is quick to respond, “No, it’s not. People actually *work* in Westland. They drive Fords instead of Mercedes and Hummers” (173). Because the Ford Motor Company is so integrally linked with Detroit’s identity, Digger’s invocation of the brand that built the city provides him with a tangible—if tenuous—connection to Detroit, even if he appears to be carless himself. Similarly, his emphasis on belonging to a working-class community belies an affinity with a cultural legacy of work that is at odds with his own work as a photographer of ruination.

Digger’s defensive responses contrast with Jenna’s tacit acceptance of his charge that she’s “slumming it” in Detroit (Zadoorian 173). Jenna is at ease with herself, and is furthermore dismissive of masculine false pride—consider her sarcastic quip that her father “fancies himself kind of a tough guy” by merit of having grown up on the southwest side of Detroit (182). Fed up with his hypocritical posturing, Jenna teases:

Know what *you* are? You're a Detroit snob. *Ooh, I live in the city. I'm an Urban Pioneer. Look at me. I'm all street and shit...* All you hipsters that live in the city are so self-righteous... You're the worst kind of hipster. You're such a hipster, you don't even think you're a hipster. You're an 'I'm beyond *hip*-hipster.' (173-4)

Digger's caustic response, "Stop calling me that. I'm not a fucking hipster" (173) and "Go fuck yourself," stuns Jenna with its vehemence (174). Digger has no idea who he is, hence his frustration with Jenna's accusing question, "Know what *you* are?" to which he can only offer negative responses. Combined with his demonstrated need to define himself in proximity to Detroit, Digger's inability to answer her question reveals the extent of his self-alienation. Aware of his limited understanding of self, Digger several times admits to a state of incomprehension regarding his motives and feelings—among them, such examples as: "I don't know why that made sense to me, but it did" (177); "It's beautiful,' she said... 'I know. I don't know why'" (179); "I didn't know why I was telling her all this" (183); "What was I doing?" (189); "I wasn't really sure what it was I came to do" (191). This self-directed questioning demonstrates a desire to understand, but is only revisited near the story's conclusion in moments of reflection once Jenna convinces Digger that he is capable of being not only a whole person, but more than just himself.

Zadoorian reveals the source of Digger's alienated condition conceptually through absence and negation. First, let us consider Digger's insistence on defining himself in proximity to Detroit, which reveals an anxiety born of a suburban upbringing that includes the loss of community and cultural heritage. While there are several contextual clues that Digger is not black, Zadoorian provides no information concerning Digger's

ethnicity until the fourth-to-last paragraph of the story at which point the author explicitly says he is “white” (Zadoorian 191). Digger informs Jenna that his parents had moved out of the city immediately following the violent events of July, 1967. Once more used as *the* formative moment in which a character’s life is altered, the riot and its effects defined Digger’s existence even before he was born (182). Digger’s family’s departure from the city was the originating point of his cultural alienation. His parents’ vitriolic hatred of post-riot Detroit was so great they “forbade” him to visit, forcing Digger and his friends to “lie when we went to shows downtown” (182). It is clear Digger was raised in an environment defined by negativity, both in a tangible sense—he references his father’s abusiveness twice (176, 183)—and in a metaphorical sense. Our only knowledge of Digger’s cultural upbringing is marked by references to what it was *not*, which to say that it was defined by the virtue of not being Detroit. For example, his parents only ever provided him with one racist refrain regarding Detroit, evident by his ability to parrot them: “They were always saying *the goddamned niggers took over. They ruined the city. Goddamn sons-of-bitching jungle bunnies. That goddamn jigaboo mayor.* That sort of thing” (182). For Digger’s parents, as for many former Detroiters who fled to the suburbs, post-riot Detroit is equated with blackness, and their bitter estrangement from the city is fueled by their racist attitudes. A belief that “they ruined the city” requires a renunciation of both “they” and “the city,” thereby concluding that everything contained within Detroit is irredeemable. This delineation of white suburban space and black urban space is structured upon a belief that the place fled to is better than the place fled from, and requires a constant renewal of white superiority to maintain it.

Describing the concept of alterity, Arthur Redding writes that identity “is predicated on and constituted by that which it excludes; a self is never an autonomous entity, but is distinguished by the line of demarcation that separates itself from what it is not” (22). The white suburban community from which Digger hails has defined itself by virtue of not being Detroit, and therefore, pointedly, not black. White identity, Tim Wise explains in *White Like Me*, only has meaning if it stands in relation to an Other. “Being white means to be advantaged relative to people of color, and pretty much *only* that,” he writes (179). The implication, of course, is that without blackness as an opposing force, whiteness, as a construct, falls apart. White identity, therefore, is haunted by alterity (Redding 22). By working to homogenize ethnic communities in the early twentieth century, Americanization campaigns lured European immigrants with access to white privilege. While many white Americans trace their heritage to once-marginalized populations, Wise explains that engaging white privilege requires one “to give up all the meaningful cultural, personal, and communal attributes that had once kept our peoples alive in Europe and during our journeys here” (179). It is evident that Digger’s sense of cultural isolation stems from his parents’ inability to provide him with a model of positive identity formation. Disgusted by his parents’ racism, Digger finds himself as belonging to neither the suburbs or Detroit, but on the periphery.

Digger has thus far sought meaning in Detroit’s decrepit buildings, the exploration of which reflects his haunted status. This is evidenced by his self-appointed *nom de guerre*. Sociologist Tim Strangleman notes that many Rust Belt youths look to their post-industrial landscape as a connective resource to mitigate a lost cultural legacy (34). He argues that, for those who explore declining spaces like Digger:

Material culture and its artifacts act as physical points of reference for intangible aspects of culture. They symbolize, encapsulate and epitomize both the general and the in shared as well as in individual lives. Material culture, then, performs a dual function in the remembrance of an industrial past. It is a link with creative tangibility, the making of things, as well as a vehicle for a person or community's link to that past. (32)

Trying to connect with a past he is estranged from, Digger fills the empty United Artists Theater with an imagined crowd for Jenna. He narrates the "scene":

It's so strange to think about the thousands of people—the millions—who walked through here over the years... Just standing here, you can tell that people laughed and cried and applauded here, smiled at each other. They threw popcorn and drank Pepsi and broke their teeth on Jujubes. (Zadoorian 179)

Digger's ability to picture life in a place of ruin underscores the immense loss that he feels at being denied that experience, either in actuality because of Detroit's economic decline, or in memory due to his parents' insistence that Detroit was not open to whites like him. Within the deteriorating walls of such structures, Digger begins to process the odd (dis)connection he feels with Detroit as both the origin and departure points of his family legacy.

Jenna's first experience exploring an abandoned building is highly emotive; she cries silently and Zadoorian describes her as "lost in wonderment," "confused and astonished" (179, 80). Touched by her vulnerability, Digger admits that he too is deeply affected by the destruction they witness: "It's awful that this would happen to a building. This should never happen anywhere. But I see something like this and I want to try to

find the beauty in it, make some sense of it, give it a reason, *fill* it with something” (179). Note Digger’s sense of obligation to the building to “give it a reason.” Considering the narrative of hate expressed by his parents and his rebellion against it, it is evident that Digger experiences white guilt over Detroit’s decline. His exploration of such buildings is an attempt to “find the beauty” in what his parents refused to see when they left the city. Their abandonment of Detroit further signaled the abandonment of such buildings, leaving a void that Digger feels responsible to “fill.”

Describing the theater’s interior as “a big, fucked-up Faberge egg,” Digger expresses a fascinated horror at the “carnage” he witnesses around him (Zadoorian 178, 180). The immensity of the ruin threatens to overwhelm him. Everything is presented in large-scale: “Forty-foot-long tatters of curtains hung over what once was a stage... jagged mammoth remnants of broken Gothic filigree... giant cone-shaped sconces... long-gowned art deco Indian maidens...” (178-9). Staring out from the theater’s balcony, Digger experiences an overwhelming impulse to give in to the “madness” of the place (180). Using Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Imp of the Perverse” to explain the “uncontrollable urge” he has in “open high place[s]” to jump, Digger describes the insidious pull of self-destruction (180). As he envisions “jumping, maybe even hanging there in the air for a moment, legs wind-milling, an exemplar of cartoon physics,” what becomes apparent is his fear of absence, of nothing being there to stop this perpetual fall (180); Digger suffers from *horror vacui*. The building’s inability to serve its intended purpose renders it void, without meaning, which terrifies Digger. By the same token, however, he is perversely drawn to a shared fate of succumbing to the void. The lure of seeing something that is equal parts beautiful and repulsive, such as blighted areas of

Detroit, represents the irrational Imp that haunts Digger. He knows that finding beauty in misery is perverse, and that it is furthermore rife with class voyeurism (recall his vehement refutation of Jenna's accusation of "hipster elit[ism]" (170)), yet he cannot stop himself from "jumping" into it anyway.

Likening this urge to "daemonic" possession, Sigmund Freud discusses at length the seemingly bizarre tendency towards self-destruction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (42). Far from being an external force enacted upon a possessed victim, the "death drive" (Thanatos) is an instinctual and immanently natural reaction to the state of being alive (conversely, Freud suggests that *life* is the "external disturbing [force]" (42)). Freud posits that an entity, once unwillingly thrust into a state of being, will engage in self-destructive behavior because it unconsciously seeks to complete the cycle of life so as to "restore an earlier state of things," i.e., an "inorganic," "inanimate," pre-conscious state (42-44). Overwhelmed by the site of "carnage" before him, Digger confides to the reader, "Sometimes real life was too intense for me to understand without a filter, without a way to view it" (Zadoorian 179). The violence done to Detroit's decaying structures may appear senseless, but the complex reasons contributing to the damage—exploitation and its corollaries: racism, alienation, desperation and neglect—are so embedded in Detroit's structural framework that the prospect of dismantling them appears daunting. Freud's explanation of the death drive as an instinctual resistance to consciousness helps us understand the distress and shame Digger feels viewing the theater. Digger's affinity for these buildings gives him the cultural connection he craves, but once confronted by the immensity of loss, he cannot avoid his forebears' responsibility in abetting it. Arguing that the unconscious state is the preferred state, Freud suggests that the tendency towards

death is stronger than the instinct to live (42). Death is the path of least resistance. Confronting and accepting one's legacy of privilege and abuse is arduous and uncomfortable, whereas giving in to the void (meaninglessness) offers serene and eternal silence.

Oposing the death drive is the instinct for self-preservation, which Freud terms "Eros," or that "which holds all living things together" (55-9). Eros is the "libido of our sexual instincts," the biological imperative to reproduce, and, while Freud believes it subservient to the death drive, its presence constitutes a powerful force (55). Acting as Eros, Jenna challenges Digger's method of identity formation through the exploration of Detroit's empty palaces; she makes obvious to him the sterility of a life built around absence. After having spent significant time with her, Digger contributes less to his website, observing that "Jenna had pulled me away from my usual loneliness, which was what generally fueled my work" (Zadoorian 183). He even criticizes his fans' interest in his photography as merely "fill[ing] the gaping holes" in their "empty existences" (184). Propelled by Eros—"Before I had nothing... but now I had a woman" (184)—Digger exhibits a growing awareness that his explorations were an inadequate attempt to feel less alone. Jenna's presence in his life even improves Digger's relationship with Martin and Chip, who, incidentally, go from being called his "crew" on the first page of the story, to being his "best friends" on the seventeenth (185). After they meet her, Chip tells Digger, "I just love her... She's just the kind of woman you need... We've all been wondering if [you] would find someone decent" (185). Responding to this sentiment with humor, Digger jokes, "Yes, I know Martin, in particular, has been very concerned about my social life," to which Chip responds with seriousness, "You know, Martin actually does

worry about you” (185). Digger’s attempt to deflect Chip’s earnestness with humor is not an atypical response from a young man, but it is nonetheless emblematic of Digger’s continued discomfort with vulnerability.

Because falling in love requires vulnerability between partners, Digger must be willing to share with Jenna his feelings of cultural isolation, dislocation and guilt if this relationship is to succeed. Believing himself to be “strange and ugly” like the buildings he explores, Digger feels that Jenna should be repulsed by him and is confused when she is not: “I started to wonder what she saw in me,” he reflects (Zadoorian 185, 190). When her steadfast affection for him suggests that he is not “strange and ugly,” he becomes frightened of what that might mean for him, and furthermore, what it might require of him in return. When Jenna proposes that they have a baby together after only a short time of knowing each other, Digger panics. He asks, “Are you fucking nuts? Shouldn’t we get to know each other better?” to which she replies, “I know you fine, Digger. I think I even understand you. I’m pretty good at figuring people out. It was really nice to see you with your friends. I know you’ll be great as a dad. You have a full heart” (186). Hearing Jenna’s proposal that they become parents naturally scares him, but her assertion that she *knows* him provokes in him a “rage” (187). He still cannot accept that she might know him better than he knows himself and that she may have the solution to ease his isolation. He responds to her belief that he has a “full heart” with a refutation: “No I don’t. I’m not full at all. I’m empty” (186). Having spent his adulthood in his solitary quest for cultural connection and atonement, the prospect of being full—no longer alone but one-half of a loving partnership and caregiver for a new life—would leave little room for melancholic

self-pity. Living fully would give him a new identity as a partner and father, no longer just a spelunker, a “digger.”

Shortly after Jenna’s proposition, Digger discusses the prospect of becoming a father with Chip and Martin while exploring the David Whitney building. Digger has not engaged in spelunking activities since meeting Jenna; a previous attempt to do so leaves him feeling “strangely relieved” when a police presence prohibits their entry into the Michigan Central Station (Zadoorian 186). As such, “The Imp” has been absent from his life, but it reappears in this scene. Chip, who is “usually pretty gentle when it came to dealing with [Digger] and The Imp,” becomes “exasperated” with his friend’s refusal to accompany them to the roof (188). “Trying to remain calm,” Digger instead locates a room in which to drink (187). “After a few pops,” Digger observes, “I didn’t think at all about that star-lined bowl of darkness above me or the exhaust-dimmed streetlights below or the void in between. Although you think it would be the other way around, alcohol kept The Imp at bay. Depressants actually made me want to kill myself less” (188). While incomparable in scope, Digger’s use of alcohol as a coping strategy is reminiscent of the way that Francis Turner drinks to mitigate his loss of self. Here Digger uses alcohol not only to mollify his fear of emptiness, but to distract himself from thinking about the even scarier prospect of fatherhood. When Martin and Chip question him about what he plans to “do about Jenna,” Digger reacts hostilely (188). Chip’s suggestion that he “give this a chance” because Jenna is “a good woman” irritates him; he snaps, “What do *you* know about women?” (188). Chip’s response, “[m]ore than you,” reveals that he actually knows a lot about *Digger* (188). Consider Chip’s frustration with his friend’s

fear of propelling himself off the roof. He knows that if Digger can confront his fear, just “give this a chance,” he will overcome it.

The following day, Digger returns to his home “bone tired” from performing a paid “freelance photographic job... shooting spark plugs” to find that Jenna has prepared a meal for him (Zadoorian 189). Refusing to leave at his insistence, she has instead embedded herself in an image of domestic bliss. It is a scene furnished with all the nostalgic cultural touchstones of twentieth century working-class life: the exhausted husband returning home from an honest day’s work to the culinary preparations of his loving and fertile wife. While photographing spark plugs is entirely different from installing them, the presence of the automotive part represents a tangible connection to Detroit’s famed industry. This scene likely played out a thousand times in Detroit’s homes, perhaps in Digger’s own grandparents’ home. Jenna’s willingness to invoke this image gives Digger the sense of community and historical connection that he seeks, and he finds that he is comforted by it.

Catching himself enjoying the meal, he suddenly reflects, “What was I doing? Putting up with all this because I was hungry?” (Zadoorian 189). At his repeated insistence that she leave his house, she simply refuses, offering him instead a spoonful of the dessert, a gesture that intimates her willingness to sustain him (190). Mirroring Chip’s earlier advice that he “give this a chance,” Jenna says, “Just try it” (190). In a symbolic gesture, Digger accepts the food and returns the favor by feeding her. This act demonstrates a turning point in Digger’s life after which he will look to Jenna rather than the empty structures of Detroit for emotional sustenance. By repeating the action, Digger gives himself to Jenna, finally dismantling the barriers that have kept him isolated for so

long. He consents to live with “a full heart,” allowing no room to ghost through life “leav[ing] only footprints” (187). But even more than this, Digger is doubled. Fulfilling her role as Eros, Jenna announces she is pregnant with his child (190).

With a new life to care for, Digger must rid himself of his self-destructive tendencies; he must confront “The Imp.” In the concluding scene of “Spelunkers,” Digger maturely reflects on his motivations for urban exploring, accepting his limited understanding of self:

I hadn't been in an abandoned building in almost a month, yet I didn't miss it. I had lost my hunger for that sick, sad beauty. I can't tell you why it had resonated so deeply with me. When I had found the empty buildings, I'd like to tell you it was as if I had found myself, but that's not exactly true. Sure, I had long believed myself rotting from the inside out, but that's too easy an explanation. We're all rotting inside, but we don't all tramp around fucked-up old buildings. All I really knew was that I needed to go back one more time. (Zadoorian 190-191)

Replaced by a fulfillment of his own making, Digger no longer feels the need to surround himself with tangible representations of his emptiness. Taking a sophisticated view of his self-directed pity—“We're all rotting inside, but we don't all tramp around fucked-up old buildings”—reveals a recognition that the instinctual pull toward death is something to be accepted, but not overwhelmed by. The presence of “we” in that statement indicates that Digger no longer feels uniquely burdened by his “mortal coil,” to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare. With the support of his friends and the creation of a new family, Digger finally has a community to which he can belong. Starting this new, grown-up chapter of

his life, Digger must conclude his quest for identity and confront his demon, “The Imp,” which he does by entering the Fine Arts building, slated for demolition.

Digger journeys alone, the first time he has explored without his friends, and he admits, “It was the first time I had ever been really scared inside a building” (Zadoorian 191). He climbs the seven floors to the roof where he forces himself to “[push] aside the image of me leaping, soaring out over the street, to land with a hollow wet *fwoomp*. I took a taut breath and I looked out at the city beneath me” (191). Here, Digger banishes his loneliness, confronts his fear of the void, and overpowers his urge to jump. He finds he can relax, reflecting first on “the darkened carcasses of the empty buildings I had explored,” and then shifting his gaze to “the new buildings going up, their shiny exteriors, work sites mercury bright even in the nighttime” (192). Lamenting “all that history soon to be gone,” Digger mourns his inability to experience Detroit’s once-proud symbols of modernity and elegance as they were intended, but he accepts that “the old city was going away” to make room for renewal. He is uncertain of the future of this city and his place in it, but as he stands in a building belonging to the past and looks to the “shiny exteriors” of the future, he spans the space between without fear. He will likely always feel the cultural loss that his suburban upbringing wrought upon him, but his very presence in Detroit will help to shape the future of the city for his child. In a reversal of the wholesale abandon of Detroit by their parents’ generation, Jenna and Digger are making a life together in the city, thereby contributing to its resilience. In a final act of self-assertion Digger paints his “name on the cleanest wall I could find,” leaving the reader to wonder which name he wrote (192). Whereas he was formerly shadowed by these ravaged structures, his final act is to impose himself upon the building, thus

signifying that he will continue even after the building falls: ‘Digger was here,’ but now he is elsewhere.

Zadoorian’s short story about wrestling with the past and coming to terms with an uncertain future provides an allegorical rendering of the crisis Detroit continues to struggle with as it establishes itself as a twenty-first century city. Buildings have a curious effect on a city’s collective psyche. They can be a source of pride or an eyesore of degradation; they can provide a comforting memory or remind one of violence. It is understandable, then, that a collective shudder went through Detroit when Camilo José Vergara proposed in 1996 that “100 troubled buildings” downtown be preserved as an “American Acropolis” (22). As demonstrated, Thanatos, that Imp that follows Digger around as he “tramp[s] around fucked-up old buildings” urging him to give in to the sweet relief of nothingness, must be likewise difficult to resist for a culture that has been battered for half of a century (Zadoorian 190). Like Digger’s reticence to banish “The Imp,” the daily ordeal of hard times becomes an identity itself, the acceptance of which only fuels its self-destruction.

Steve Pomerantz describes the stubborn way that his family operated their east side hardware store for thirty years in what became “a crumbling neighborhood of empty lots and dilapidated buildings” in his recollection entitled “Fort Gratiot” (60). As the neighborhood emptied out and violence escalated during the 1970s, he writes:

Fear, which had always been a quiet presence, now demanded and gripped my father’s existence from that point on. However, moving the store was never discussed and, much like the generations of mice, rats, and spiders that inhabited the store, my father and his brother were too comfortable to leave. It was easier

selling what they always sold, to those they always sold it to, in a building they already owned. At least they knew fear and how to deal with it, but hope was a scarier proposition. (62)

As Pomerantz succinctly puts it, “it was easier” for his father to live with the “fear” to which he had become accustomed, the prospect of “hope” anathema in a world that had been turned on its head. Digger’s exploits in Detroit’s battered buildings, his insistence on imprisoning himself in the sadness and shame he experiences in them, initially prohibit him from grasping the “hope” that Jenna offers. It takes a courageous act at the top of the Fine Arts Building to convince him that, even though he acutely feels the decay of his family’s legacy, he deserves wholeness. Rather than be defeated by this history, he must authorize his identity. Detroit, with its poor history of exploitation and racism must likewise confront this legacy if it is to find any success in the future.

Imagining the fate of his beloved city, Michael Zadoorian calls on Detroiters to renew their efforts at self-determination. Using the image of an egg to visualize the struggle between Eros and Thanatos—fullness and void—the author suggests that we imagine the possibilities. As noted, inside the United Artists Theater, Digger observes, “It was like standing in the middle of a Faberge egg. A big, fucked-up Faberge egg, mind you, but still incredible with the sun rushing in, glowing through the paint...” (180). Faberge Eggs, famed for their jeweled carapaces, were designed to contain gifts, but are primarily decorative objects prized for their rarity. As marvels of intricate metal-work and encrusted with jewels, these eggs have great artistic and historical significance, but have little use-value. The Theater, luxuriously appointed just like a Faberge Egg, was once prized for its ability to delight and entertain Detroit society. Stripped of its finery

and falling apart at the seams, the structure is only a ghost of its former grandeur, the imprints of which reminding all that, like several Faberge Eggs, a great gem has been lost. Scrappers, “gaunt, desperate-looking men” who have pried loose everything left of value, have no need of hollow *objets d’art* (181). What is left is a battered and bruised “fucked-up” egg. But the humble egg, stripped of the ornamental, suggests potential life. This egg, far from hollow and insubstantial, represents the new, full life that Jenna and Digger are creating. Leaving the reader to imagine what this new life will entail, Zadoorian suggests the power lies in seeing past its “fucked-up” façade and valuing it for its potential. As the short story concludes, Digger has little clout to dictate the fate of buildings such as the United Artists Theater, Michigan Central Station, and Fine Arts Building, but he and Jenna do have power by their very presence in Detroit. As a new generation populates the city, they will buy houses and find work and raise families to furnish their own version of Detroit’s American Dream. They will form neighborhood associations and join preservation coalitions and will make decisions about the buildings in their midst. It is the ordinary, unceasing drama of such lives that will keep “The Imp” of Detroit at bay.

Conclusion

In her essay entitled “The Detroit Virus,” Shaun Nethercott explains her intense affection for her adopted home by asking the reader to consider, “Is there a place that has more imminence, in which the future is more present? Or that the past has more painfully marked?” (216). This sentiment—one that is echoed in numerous written accounts of life in the city—perfectly describes the interstices of past, present, and future in which Detroit has, by turns, failed and thrived. The author’s poignant use of the word “imminence” to describe the Motor City intimates the unceasing motion with which the city has had to invent and reinvent itself, never giving up despite a gamut of eulogies announcing its demise. Always on the precipice of change, the city’s creative and ever-adaptable spirit has seemed, in its most desperate moments, the last great resource for its residents, who, after half a century of violence, abandon, neglect and ridicule, have persevered, “trying to make a way out of no way,” to use Nethercott’s words. The pervasiveness of history, with its proud moments and painful memories, citizens’ stubborn persistence in the face of great odds, and the uncertainty of the city’s future, make Detroit the most *American* place in which to unfold the story of twenty-first century America.

Authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides, Angela Flournoy and Michael Zadoorian present fictional characters who live normal lives in which they have falling outs, fall in love, bear children, bear witness, find themselves, and lose their loved ones, but who are also haunted by a collective history which they cannot escape. The challenge presented to each character—and every Detroiter—is not to succumb to the inevitability of that history but to engage with it, learning from past mistakes and addressing injustices wherever

possible. Both *The Turner House* and “Spelunkers” feature such characters who, while enacting the ordinary drama of their lives, are forced to consider all the ways in which their lives are informed by the struggles, oppressions, and triumphs of past Detroiters.

Cha-Cha, dedicated to the myth of the American Dream with its pioneering self-reliance, finds himself unhinged when the governing principles of his life prove violable. Confronted by his limited knowledge of his father, Cha-Cha must acknowledge his failure to recognize the sacrifices made by Francis on his behalf, accepting in the process his own complicity in what he has determined to be the great disappointments in his life. Digger is likewise bound to his family history, but whereas Cha-Cha struggles to distance himself from the actions of his predecessors, Digger is consumed with guilt for his parents’ (and, by extension, his people’s) racist attitudes toward Detroit’s black citizens. Paralyzed by the seemingly irreparable destruction wrought by white flight, Digger must confront how his own inaction contributes to that decay through his fetishization of Detroit’s ruined buildings. Culturally alienated, Digger discovers that in order to access the community he desires he must first engage in an act of self-determination. Each character’s quest for fulfillment requires a rigorous examination of one’s relationship to the past, thereby confronting its injustices and one’s role in perpetuating them. Reduced by haunting figures—Cha-Cha’s “haint” and Digger’s “Imp”—the two men find that reckoning with a painful past is necessary if they are to move forward in their lives.

The city of Detroit, as its poets have declaimed, is not an easy place in which to find one’s self; rather it is a “city of sharp edges,” to recall Jon Counts (50), a “[b]reaker of hearts,” Chantay Leonard writes (209), and an “impossible place,” according to Danny Wilcox Frazier (287). As Cha-Cha and Digger struggle to come to terms with a violent

and unjust history of their city, Detroit's present condition proves as undetermined as their shaky senses of themselves. When faced with the destruction of his childhood home, Cha-Cha despairingly wonders, "Why not give into every impulse, break free and go insane, if he lived in a world where people made structures disappear overnight?" (Flournoy 313). This "impulse" toward "madness," as Digger calls it, is a powerful force with which beleaguered Detroiters continue to battle (Zadoorian 180). As the birthplace of what may be more generally termed the American Way, Detroit's last decades of struggle—so prominently displayed on its deteriorating façades—publicly undermines the organizing principles of the middle class and its attendant American Dream. For this foundational myth to prove so untenable is a grave disturbance to the American psyche. For many white Detroiters, such as Digger's parents, placing the blame for the city's deterioration at the feet of black citizens proved easier than examining their own culpability in contributing to conditions which prompted the violent uprising of 1967. For others, inaction seemed the path of least resistance and a failure to address the underlying causes of socio-economic discrimination in the city precipitated its decline. A divorce from the past with its legacy of individual erasure and marginalization of those who did not fit into the Fordist model, informs the subsequent "madness" of Detroit, where the *impossible* assumes the form of literary hauntings. Confronted with a world that literally has poor foundations, Cha-Cha and Digger each experience a crisis of conscience that represents the larger crisis that Americans face today.

Writing at the fiftieth anniversary of what Jeffrey Eugenides calls "The Second American Revolution" (248)—the uprising of 1967—Thomas Sugrue argues, "the line between past and present is a blurry one," cautioning that "until we confront and

overcome our troubled history of discrimination, exploitation, and violence, our cities will continue to burn” (“Foreword” xii). Here, Sugrue refers to the demonstrations that have occurred over the past three years against police brutality and discrimination in U.S. cities such as Ferguson, Baltimore, Chicago, Milwaukee and Charlotte. As we reflect on Detroit’s “troubled history,” it is obvious that the city still suffers from the long-reaching effects of Fordism. Because the logic of Fordism required laborers to forfeit their individuality, an entire culture was essentially whitewashed. In the process of becoming Americanized, Detroiters became ghosts of themselves, their individuality and aspirations allowed to exist only so far as the industry needed them. This alienation, combined with the unrelenting waves of newcomers seeking employment in the city throughout the first half of the twentieth century, made possible the racist attitudes of the city’s white inhabitants who felt justified in their unwillingness to share the American Dream with their black counterparts. Marxist theory determines that it is common for people who lack full agency to denigrate those with even less power than themselves. Resultant discriminatory housing policies, policing, hiring practices and poor educational opportunities created a yet unresolved fracture in Detroit. In presenting their fictional protagonists as haunted by the unresolved past, Flournoy and Zadoorian demonstrate the real need for a public reckoning of the kind to which Sugrue refers. Through these intimate stories of men seeking fulfillment and reconciliation in an impossible, fractured, and uniquely American place, the authors weave a parallel story apropos to the crisis of identity faced by twenty-first century America.

An ever-widening income gap, stagnant wages, a decrease in unionism, increasing political polarization, the 2008 collapse of the housing market and the economy’s slow

recovery continue to distress and destabilize the working and middle classes for whom the American Dream had been carefully crafted as an aspirational tool. There exists countless articles, essays, and books that address what appears to be widespread anxiety about how the American Dream has been killed or stolen. As demonstrated here, Detroiters have been experiencing the fallout from Dream's disappearance longer than most Americans. Aaron Foley notes the "gossip, feigned concern, funny stares, distrust, and, most notably, shame" to which Detroiters have long since become accustomed to as "the butt of jokes and the target of pity" (15). As the much-maligned "throwaway city," to recall Frank Owen's words (60), Detroit has suffered as an object public derision, the fact of which only serves to hide a painful and often ignored truth. This truth is revealed if we examine Owen's entire sentence: "It's a throwaway city for a throwaway society." As discussed in the beginning of this analysis, the morbid graveyard motif that many journalists employ when discussing Detroit's decline is often insensitive and frequently hyperbolic, but it is also a useful device for grasping the breadth and scope of the forces which have plundered Detroit and its people. Owen's acerbic indictment of America as a "throwaway society" incisively summarizes the often neglected fact that Detroit's burden is shared by all Americans. The same capitalist forces that left the city's working classes alienated from themselves and each other, leaving in its wake violence, poverty, and hopelessness, have affected the entire Rust Belt. As income inequality increases, the people of the Midwest, once the quintessence of American identity, have become more disenfranchised than ever. One only need examine the desperation and anger many middle westerners expressed during the 2016 Presidential election to understand how anxious and uncertain Americans are about the future.

It is here that Flournoy's and Zadoorian's works of fiction provide valuable insight into the current crisis the Rust Belt faces. For many who feel estranged from and threatened by a world they do not recognize, such as Digger's parents, assigning blame to the marginalized is preferable to levying a critique against the flawed status quo which defines their ethos. Others, such as Cha-Cha, simply fail to interrogate the conditions which make marginalization possible, for to do so would reveal that the systems which structure their lives are riddled with incoherencies. There are also those who find themselves overwhelmed by such destructive forces that have rendered the world seemingly irreparably fractured, and are thus hopelessly acquiescent to the "madness" they witness around them, as is the case of Digger. Each of these responses represents a haunting. As Flournoy and Zadoorian have suggested, the only way these characters are to find peace is through a reckoning, and the message to readers is clear: Detroit—and by extension, America—must undertake a collective reckoning if it is to rid itself of the specters of inequality, racism and exploitation in the twenty-first century. Until that happens, as Cha-Cha and Digger learn, we will remain stationary, doomed to languish as, to use Sugrue's words once more, "our cities... burn."

"Here is the truth about self-discovery," writes Flournoy, "it is never without cost" (106). As Cha-Cha and Digger reckon with their ghosts, they each learn a great deal about themselves and about the ways in which the past has informed their lives and decisions. Furthermore, each man discovers that, while his path may have been influenced by the actions of others, he bears a responsibility to himself, his community and his city to address and correct the injustices of the past. Self-discovery, as Flournoy points out, is a painful act, and like Digger, who is often paralyzed by the work that needs

to be done, it is easier to feel either defeated by it and do nothing or to assign blame to others rather than examine one's own potential culpability. It is only after he makes a conscious decision not to live with the fear that defined his childhood that he is finally able to fully engage with a community that had hitherto been just out of his reach. Cha-Cha, set in his ways and convinced of the permanence of his memories, experiences literal pain when confronted with the dissolution of his faith in the status quo and is only relieved of it once he has acknowledged his father's haunting presence in his life. As each narrative concludes, the reader is left with the impression not of finality but of life renewed. *The Turner House* sees Cha-Cha reconciled with his wife, determined to achieve the personal satisfaction that had eluded his father. A short flashback that comprises the novel's concluding chapter depicts a young Francis holding his daughter in his arms and finding the will to "hope," which is also the novel's final words. "Spelunkers" concludes with the promise of an unborn child, a vision of the new city rising "mercury bright," and a newly-minted and self-determined identity (Zadoorian 192). The openness of these conclusions is remarkable considering the unyielding finality with which Vergara once pronounced, "A world ended in Detroit" (37). These are narratives in which work has yet to be done, and in relaying these stories to us, the readers, Detroit's authors have placed the burden of reckoning and reconciliation on us. "This is how it begins," writes Flourney, "[a] moth-like sound, and a light too blue in a corner of your bedroom. If you ignore it, it does not exist. But speak its name and you've invited it into your mind... what we *acknowledge* as having occurred, what we tell others, can metastasize, grow ubiquitous overnight" (Flourney 135). Referring here to the haint that has lived on the periphery of Cha-Cha's life, Flourney's words also awaken a

consciousness of our obligation to respond to the newly visible reality. Once we are aware of the injustices of the past and our part in perpetuating them, as Cha-Cha and Digger discover, we become complicit if we do not act to correct them. This is what Frazier refers to when he writes that Detroit is “An American / place from which Americans cast away their eyes. / But giants cast long shadows,” meaning that the long shadow of racism and inequality that has haunted Detroit likewise touches us all, for as long as we “cast away” our eyes, we become willing participants of its destruction (287). However, as Flournoy suggests, if we “acknowledge” and reckon with this history, sharing with others what we have learned, collectively taking responsibility for our mistakes, then the resulting hope with which the novel concludes may also “metastasize [and] grow ubiquitous overnight.”

In their conclusions, both authors remind us of the saliency of Detroit’s motto, in use for over a century: *Speramus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus*, which translates to “We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.” Having survived numerous fires that have leveled the city, the motto’s literal meaning refers to the stubborn persistence with which Detroiters have physically rebuilt their city. Battered by half a century of economic devastation, racial conflict, and national neglect, the city’s infrastructure remains a source of pain for residents. Hope, however, is eternally permanent. An unmitigated belief in the permanence of their city is shared by many Detroiters who, as Sugrue writes, “are hard-edged optimists, fighting against the odds for the city that, for all its troubles, haunts their imaginations” (“Notown” 23). Consider Detroit’s motto another way: It is not the city’s buildings that are guaranteed to rise from the ashes (although that work is certainly being undertaken by dedicated residents) but hope itself. As *The Turner House* and

“Spelunkers” (and *Middlesex* as well) suggest, hope is not hope when salvation is certain, but rather it is the commitment to hope itself that ensures a culture’s survival. We must first reckon with the ashes of our past failures, believing ourselves capable of realizing a better future. That hope is perhaps the purest and most enduring aspect of the American Dream.

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