Longing for Detroit

The Naturalization of Racism through Ruin Porn and Digital Memories

Rebecca Kinney

“I found my old house in Detroit today . . . and I was horrified. I found the street, but all I found at my former address was a teal foundation and the remains of the pillars of my front porch. I used to feel safe in my neighborhood, but I was scared just trying to find my own former home. I drove up and down the streets where I used to let my children play. They’re now full of remains of burned down homes, caked with garbage, and infested with assorted stray animals. I moved out of Detroit 17 years ago, when the neighborhood was still pretty OK. I’m still in shock that all that could happen in under 20 years.”

-Remisc, www.city-data.com

“In our view, no other place on earth symbolized this state of things [ruins] more than the city of Detroit. True ‘capital of the twentieth century,’ Detroit has literally created, produced and manufactured our modern world, creating a logic that has eventually annihilated, destroyed the city itself. We learn about this dazzling rise and fall through the remains of that contemporary Pompeii, with all the
archetypal buildings of an American city in a state of mummification. In Motor City, ruins are no longer an isolated and anecdotal element, but become a logical part, a natural component of the landscape. . . . These photographs are a tribute to those ruins, a testament to decline in its most realistic, and therefore most poignant form.”

-Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit*

Vacant, deteriorating buildings, and landscapes returning to grasslands are big business these days, as countless journalists and photographers make the pilgrimage to Detroit to photograph the “ruins of Detroit.” Images of Detroit’s decay and demise, referred to as “ruin porn” or “ruin photography” circulate widely online and in print media. This paper focuses on the circulation of the discourse of Detroit’s “ruin” in images of ruin photography, and in the discussions of former Detroiters’ memories of the city on city-data.com, a popular Internet web forum that features discussion threads on a variety of topics related to city life. Although these two forms do not necessarily circulate alongside one another, this paper argues that the two genres work together to produce, maintain, and make invisible the work of institutional racism and naturalize narratives of the rise and fall of Detroit’s population, industry, and greatness. Ruin photography and online discussion are part of a larger memory industry that produces knowledge about Detroit, presenting its knowable image as simultaneously dangerous and full of criminals, and empty and in ruins. The past represented by the current circulation of Detroit’s decay relies on a race neutral understanding of nostalgia that remembers the city without consideration of explicitly racially-biased policies, and instead positions Detroit’s cultural and economic apex as a universal moment of prosperity and opportunity.

This article reveals the discourse produced by two forms of popular culture to show the ways in which institutional racism is naturalized and made invisible through nostalgia. Previously, I have analyzed how institutional racism in Detroit functions and persists in its pervasive manifestations in the spheres of legislation, policy, and popular culture. The goal of this article is to foreground how contemporary popular culture reproduces hegemonic discourses about the past. By analyzing both high-profile photographic images of Detroit in ruins, and the longing for a nostalgic Detroit expressed by former Detroiters on city-data.com, I examine two modes of narrative production.
While the Detroit of the early and mid twentieth century marked the rise of the United States as a global economic force—the arsenal of democracy—and the American workers who powered that force, the Detroit of the late twentieth century often stands in as a reminder of the United States’s shift from a production oriented, to a consumer and service oriented economy. Perhaps no metropolitan region in the United States is recalled as more stratified along markers of race and economics than the city of Detroit. A review of the literature suggests that Detroit’s decline is welded to the decline of the prominence of the United States auto industry and the rise of suburban growth. While the Detroit of the 1980s was notorious for media coverage of crime—“Murder City”—and the linkages of that criminality to its status as the “blackest city in America,” the Detroit of the 21st Century is known for its post-apocalyptic emptiness. Some position Detroit as perhaps the first post-urban city as the trees begin to retake the landscape that was originally cleared to build houses, factories, and stores. Instead of taking the narrative rise and fall of Detroit as a universal trope, I analyze how current productions of a longing for a Detroit that once was serve to naturalize institutional racism.

Racial Naturalization of Ruin

The most prolific images of the ruins of Detroit are the work of photographic team Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre and photographer Andrew Moore. In addition to their websites and books, Marchand, Meffre and Moore’s images are reproduced virally in countless blogs and news articles. The photographers produce visually stunning and aesthetically resonant images continuing a long tradition in the painting and representation of “ruins” as objects of art. Marchand and Meffre clearly present their narrative of decline of the “capital of the twentieth century” in Figure 1, as it depicts the once opulent Brush Park residence of William Livingstone, a bank founder and president of a shipping company. The photograph presents a house that almost appears to be collapsing inward towards its center, representing what many see as the internal failures of corporate giants that prompted the decline of Detroit. The forces of industrial decline are pressing upon the house, generating an implosion. The physical elements of the house simultaneously evoke the trope of a haunted mansion, a collapse of historical time and space, and a suspended sense of how, when, and why the ruin of
this home happened. The decay of the once magnificent home of a prominent member of industrial Detroit serves to corroborate the trope of Detroit’s rise and fall vis-à-vis the rise and fall of its industries. Yet the reality is that many prominent families who lived in the stately mansions of Brush Park did not leave or abandon their Detroit residences because of economic collapse, but increasingly sought newer and larger residences in the suburbs as automobiles and paved streets made a commute from city to suburb possible. Important to this discourse of mobility is the reality that made access to many Detroit neighborhoods and the outlying suburbs largely dependent on access to whiteness. In contrast to more explicit acts of physical and psychic violence surrounding neighborhood integration attempts, David Freund’s case study of suburban Detroit reveals the ways in which economic prosperity and protection of economic investment became the coded way to rationalize racially exclusive suburban developments. The parallel discourses of Detroit’s ruin and access to the suburban single-family home ideal must be further analyzed in terms of the naturalization of whiteness.

Figure 1. William Livingstone House, Marchand and Meffe
Frequently, the structural decay of the city’s built environment as well as increasing taxes and decreased services are cited as top reasons for the population shift—what is known popularly as *white flight*. However, the very racial signifier of white flight indicates that reasons for moving out of the center city frequently boiled down to a panic not about the city itself, but the increasing blackness of the city. Although white flight is typically only constructed through the movement of whites, it is also about the containment of blacks in the central city—so the process known as white flight could also be framed as black containment. By analyzing the current high profile circulation of the visual narrative of “uin and the nostalgic memories of once great neighborhoods, the invisibility of structural investment in policies that enabled white flight and its corollary black containment is made visible.

![Figure 2. Couch in the Trees, Andrew Moore](image)

The trope of the past greatness of Detroit is essential to the narrative of present day decay. Without these allusions to the city’s apex, the discourse of Detroit’s ruin would be untenable. The narrative of Detroit as ruined can be
seen in particular when reading an image such as Figure 2 alongside the memories and recollections posted in the city-data.com web forum, “I found my old house in Detroit today.” As one user writes in regards to her virtual visit to her old neighborhood:

MaryleeII:

You actually went back and looked? I "visited" my former neighborhood by google map, I could barely recognize my old neighborhood, most of the houses are torn down and nothing but vacant fields . . . I spent a lot of time just remembering the old neighborhood, the people who lived there, and spent the best years of their lives there. It was a solid, working-class neighborhood. My father, like many residents, found his way there after WWII, bought a home with his VA loan, got a job in the auto industry, and we all felt it would be that way forever. After all, we worked for the auto industry, we supplied the world with vehicles, and also the military. How could we fail and cease to be?

MaryleeII’s posting fuels the naturalization of Detroit’s state of decay. Her incredulity that some users actually “went back” reinforces the narrative of dangerous Detroit, as do the stories of the other users who reported what they found when they “went back.” Through the work of images like Figure 2 and technology like Google Maps, it becomes almost unnecessary for former Detroiters like MaryLeeII and voyeurs from around the world to “go back” or see firsthand the Detroit of today. MaryleeII’s memory of her old neighborhood and family reproduces the archetypal trope of universal access to home ownership and the American Dream through hard work, service to county, and “solid working-class” values that yielded access to the middle class. Her history is part of a larger national memory of the post-war access to home ownership and jobs for veterans and their families. Yet her memory, as well as the larger national trope of home ownership, obscures the racialized realities for veterans and civilians in access to the FHA mortgages and home ownership.

An important function in the idea of access to homes and neighborhoods is the presumption that blacks and other people of
color were able to also move freely into urban and suburban neighborhoods like their white contemporaries. However, even after the passage of Shelley v. Kraemer, the unofficial racial steering of real estate agents as well as unequal access to bank financing continued the policy of racially segregated access to homes. The lament for “the old house” is at once nostalgia for a neighborhood and also for a time and place when racial exclusivity was not only permissible, but also protected by the law.

While former Detroiters lament the neighborhoods that once were, the demise of the neighborhoods is made invisible, as both their rise and decline was fueled by the racially exclusionary practices of home ownership. The tropes of longing, flight, and ruin are clearly encapsulated in Figure 2. This image depicts the naturalization of demise, as nature has literally taken over the ultimate symbol of private property and the American Dream—the single-family home. This image serves as visual referent to the lament of “I found my old house in Detroit today,” fueling the narrative of a once proud home left to succumb to nature after years of imagined neglect and abuse by new or absentee owners.

Images like Figures 1 and 2 present a clear picture of ruin without actually providing context to those who left and those who stayed. In the user posts discussed in this article, the forum participants represent themselves as former Detroiters. A post like the one below offers a glimpse into where those users who left Detroit may have gone and provides a wider perspective on the notion of white flight.

SCBaker:
My childhood home was destroyed by arsonists back in the 80’s. In 2003, I looked at a vacant lot where my house once stood. I think looking at a vacant lot was a lot easier than seeing just a stub of a house remaining . . . Most of us have got on with our lives. We may have wonderful families, nice homes and a financially comfortable existence, but the destruction of our City and our first or childhood homes remain with us even if we have placed it far out of our minds. We still feel the loss, knowing we can never go back home.
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SCBaker’s offhanded assumption that “we have” nice homes and comfortable finances speaks volumes to the mobility that former (white) Detroiters were able to access once they left the city. As evidenced by the post above and similar posts in the thread, most of the former Detroiters are happy with their current neighborhoods and repeatedly gesture back towards leaving their Detroit neighborhoods due to fear and presumed threat of violence. Yet the users still lament this loss and “destruction of our City and our homes” despite the reality that “most of us have got on with our lives.” This is, then, an uncritical nostalgia for a past that once was, without the recognition that most users and their families were not pushed out but willfully decided to leave. White flight is recreated here in the thread as whites being forced to leave, and even goes so far as Maryleell later commenting “it is like we are refugees.” What is most striking in the narratives of nostalgia that circulate on the forum and in the photographs, is this analysis of longing for the past and “what was” without a sense of how their flight contributed to “what is.”

Making Race Visible

This article aims to make visible the ways in which memory and nostalgia work to perpetuate a colorblind narrative of access and inclusion—the idea that all Detroiters experienced equally Detroit’s “rise” and “ruin.” This work asks readers to question how historic discourses of rise and fall are naturalized and neutralized through contemporary media and nostalgia. By linking together and understanding the realities of white flight, the story of benign and race neutral decline and ruin is revealed as false. This work seeks to counter the normative notion of rise and fall, and reveal the institutional racism at work historically, and in the contemporary production of the past in popular culture. The analysis here then calls for a consideration of how history is made invisible through visual culture and nostalgia.

Notes

1 Remisc, March 18, 2010 (6:30p.m.), beginning comment on “I Found My Old House in Detroit” web thread http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html, post #1
2 Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010), 16.


6 So named because of its role in producing munitions for World War I and World War II as the factories of the automobile producers were retooled to produce airplanes and ground vehicles.

7 This moniker emerged in the 1970s and was cemented as national media discussed the preparations for 1980 Republican National Convention in Detroit, “Murder City.”
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8 See for example the 2010 Hollywood thriller, *Vanishing on 7th Street*, Brad Anderson, 2010, United States. The History Channel’s feature of Detroit in its “Life After People” show as a place where one can “already see what happens to a city after 40 years of life without people”
history.com/shows/life-after-people/videos/detroit-michigan#detroit-michigan.


11 See his website http://andrewlmoore.com/photography/detroit/;


13 See Dubin, Nina. 2010. Futures & Ruins. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute. Dubin’s work engages preeminent 18th Century ruin painter, Hubert Robert, also known as “Robert des Ruines,” positions “the aesthetic experiences associated with ruins permitted acculturation to a ‘time of contingency’: to a time, that is, when preoccupation with the past’s failure to serve as a guide to the present permeated multiple domains—including the economic” (3).

14 The home was designed by Albert Kahn, one of the most prolific industrial architects, and arguably the most famous Detroit architect, and built in 1893, in the Brush Park neighborhood.


17 http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/

18 Eric Avila describes white flight as “a structural process by which postwar suburbanization helped the racial resegregation of the United States, dividing presumably white suburbs from concentrations of racialized poverty. . . . White flight entailed a renegotiation of racial and spatial identities, implying a cultural process in which an expanding middle class of myriad ethnic backgrounds came to discover itself as white.” Eric Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 14–15.

I am reproducing all user posts from the city-data.com forum as written including spelling and typographic errors throughout the chapter and, for ease of reading, have chosen not to mark each error with (sic).


The Shelley v. Kraemer supreme court decision of 1948 handed down a decision not just about the Shelley v. Kraemer case of St. Louis, but also on two other companion cases, the McGhee v. Sipes case of Detroit, and the Hard v. Hodge case of Washington, DC. According to Patricia Sullivan, “On May 2, civil rights advocates won a major victory when a unanimous Supreme Court struck down judicial enforcement of restrictive covenants based on race. Chief Justice Fred Vinson, writing for the Court, paraphrased the major argument advanced by attorneys for the plaintiffs, ruling that in the cases of Shelley and McGhee such state action violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the Washington, D.C., case, *Hard v. Hodge,* the Court held that by enforcing the covenants
the district court denied the plaintiffs’ rights intended by Congress under the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and in accordance with the public policy of the United States.” See Patricia Sullivan *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: The New Press, 2009, 359. The recognition by the Federal Courts of the inherent violations of equal protection in housing was a huge rhetorical victory for the Civil Rights movement. However, in practice, the ruling made the enforcement of covenants inviolable by law, but did not outlaw them completely or take into account the precedence of legal segregation prior to the ruling. The ruling maintained that it was not illegal for property owners to adhere to them voluntarily, and did not ban the registration of covenants locally. Therefore it was only illegal for the state to enforce against the will of owner and buyer, but not illegal for the owner and buyer to enter into them under agreement, which in effect meant that barriers still prevented many from owning and buying homes. Federal and local governments were well aware of this disparity in practice, however after the legal ruling on Shelley v. Kraemer in May 1948, they had to actually make it seem as if they were doing something about it. Again, it begs to question the difference in the letter of the law and the actuality of the law. In a 1995 article entitled “Black Residential Segregation Since the 1948 Shelley v. Kraemer Decision,” *Journal of Black Studies*. “Black Residential Segregation Since the 1948 Shelley v. Kraemer Decision,” Vol. 25 No. 6 July 1995, 680-691, Joe T. Darden, professor of Geography, concludes that: “Blacks have made very little progress in reducing segregation in housing since the 1948 landmark Supreme Court decision...After a period of 40 years, Blacks remained highly segregated residentially despite the elimination of racially restrictive covenants. Over the years, new forms of restrictions have taken the place of covenants. Racial residential segregation is so deeply ingrained in American residential structures that the mere elimination of discriminatory practices may not be sufficient to eradicate it.” Joe T. Darden, “Black Residential Segregation Since the 1948 Shelley v. Kraemer Decision,” p. 688. PAGE NUMBER for QUOTE?

25 Although I don’t have the space to delve into these posts further, I do discuss the push back against the narrative of the benign, deracialized past elsewhere; see Rebecca J. Kinney, *The Mechanics of Race: The Discursive Production of Detroit’s Landscape of Difference*. (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2011).


27 SCBaker, March 27, 2010 (01:07p.m.), http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html, post #83

28 MaryLeell, March 22, 2010 (08:40p.m.), http://www.city-data.com/forum/detroit/925207-i-found-my-old-house-detroit.html, post #30

**Rebecca J. Kinney** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies and the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University. She is currently at work on a manuscript, *Assembling Race: Detroit and the Production of Race and Place*, which links the practices of the racial state to spheres of popular culture to reveal processes of race-making and space-making as an active practice at the levels of policy, popular culture, and the everyday experiences of people.