

Ghosts, Devils, and the Undead City: Detroit and the Narrative of Monstrosity

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Abstract

As researchers working in Detroit, we have become sensitized to the rhetoric often deployed to describe the city, especially the vocabulary of monstrosity. While providing powerful images of Detroit's problems, insidious monster narratives also obscure genuine understanding of the city. In this article, we first discuss the city of Detroit itself, describing its place in the American and global social imaginary as a product of its particular history. Second, we consider the concept of monstrosity, particularly as it applies to urban environments. Following this, we relate several prevalent or popular categories of monster to descriptions of Detroit, considering what each one reveals and implies about the state of the city, its landscape and its people. Finally, we discuss how narratives of monstrosity may be engaged and utilized to serve alternative ends.

Keywords

Detroit, monstrosity, drugs, social and spatial imaginary

Introduction

The city of Detroit has recently received international attention due to its severe population loss, physical ruins, and financial bankruptcy (Draus & Roddy, 2014). Detroit's decline is often portrayed as more than a relative economic or demographic trajectory, but as something fated or destined, somehow linked to its essential character. Journalist Frank Owen, for example, called it "a throwaway city for a throwaway society, the place where the American Dream came to die," in a story tellingly titled "Detroit, Death City" (2004, p. 60). Nearly 10 years later, political scientist Peter Eisinger concluded that "It is quickly becoming hard to call Detroit a living city anymore" (2013, p. 9). The blunt implication is that any attempt to restore the city may be viewed as wasted effort, akin to reviving corpse.

As researchers in Detroit, we have become sensitized to the rhetoric deployed to describe the city. Engaging in ethnographic interviews with long-term residents provides a thorough education in the history of segregation that so powerfully shaped the landscape, and our own conversations have yielded descriptions of the city as a death trap, a ghost town, as a hell or a place of horror (Draus, Roddy, & Greenwald, 2010; Draus, Roddy, & McDuffie, 2013). The basis

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of these accounts is certainly real enough—times are tough, and the city is poor and often violent. At the same time, we maintain that these narratives and images get in the way of understanding what is actually going on in the life of the city. This sentiment is strongly conveyed by the title of recent Detroit-based documentary: *We Are Not Ghosts* (Moving Images, 2012). The title derives from a poem performed in the film by Jessica Care Moore, who states emphatically, “Somebody’s gotta tell them, that we are not ghosts, that we are in this city and we are alive!”

In the following pages, we first discuss the city of Detroit and its place in the American social imaginary as a product of its particular history. Second, we consider the concept of monstrosity, particularly as it applies to urban environments. Following this, we relate several prevalent or popular categories of monster to Detroit, considering what each one reveals as well as what it implies about the state of the city, its landscape, and its people. We engage the theme of monstrosity to explore the interplay of powerful images and the actual lives of people in a struggling postindustrial city. Finally, we discuss how narratives of monstrosity may be reversed or subverted to serve different ends.

Background: Detroit and the American Social Imaginary

There is no better barometer of American middlebrow sensibility than *Time Magazine*. Over the years, in mainstream media outlets such as *Time*, Detroit has served as a symbolic stand-in for all of the usual urban ills: illicit drugs, prostitution, poverty, and violent crime. The most recent image of Detroit to occupy the front page of that magazine featured a colorful panorama of an industrial ruin. This melodramatic rhetoric and imagery was on full display in a 2010 television program titled “America Now: City of Heartbreak and Hope,” in which the narrator intoned,

They litter the landscape, thousands and thousands of abandoned homes. And just like these buildings, Detroit is a shell of its former self (Hansen, 2010).

Local commentators were quick to point out that *Time* has been pronouncing Detroit dead since 1961. In fact, it was *Time* that first issued the infamous “Murder City” label in 1973, as Detroit moved from the status of major, modern, or model city, to being a deviant, declining city. Clearly, this was (then and now) connected to the issue of race, as the city–suburban divide proper became lastingly racialized by white outmigration, discriminatory lending patterns, and the election of the stridently militant former labor activist Coleman Young.

Revitalization rhetoric is not new, either. The New Detroit coalition was formed in 1967 in response to the riots that happened in the city that July. Detroit’s Renaissance Center was established in 1977. Neither of these efforts turned the tide of negativity in terms of either the city’s population or its image, but the narrative of rebirth persisted, and recently seems to be gaining purchase. Media coverage of the urban agriculture movement (Walljasper, 2012), for example, showcases the productive potential of Detroit’s land and people, and the writings of local journalist John Gallagher (2010, 2013) have chronicled the city’s piecemeal reinvention. The Detroit Future City framework, which was released to widespread attention in 2012, outlines a strategy for utilizing the city’s natural and human assets to return to economic and social health. A new light rail system was initiated in 2013 and two major grocery store chains moved into the city that same year, ending a prolonged period of grocery store absence within the city limits. Nonetheless, these efforts must contend not only with the city’s stark socio-economics, but its iconic negative image.

The reigning social imaginary related to Detroit goes back to one primary episode, the great urban disturbance of 1967, often termed a “race riot” but more accurately described as a popular rebellion against a racist and oppressive police force. While Detroit had been losing population for decades prior to this, the rapid subsequent depopulation and physical decay of Detroit can’t

be separated from this immediate historical backdrop (Herron, 1993; Martelle, 2012; Sugrue, 1996). The reasons offered for the city's dramatic decline (and the corresponding implications for the American present and future) are many and varied, though often predictable, if you know the politics of the person doing the interpretation. For most observers, Detroit's present identity is clearly connected to the racial struggle, and its reputation as the biggest "Chocolate City" in the United States is inextricably linked to its status as perpetual urban "Other."

Detroit's status as urban nightmare has been solidified, over time, by Hollywood movies such as *Robocop* (1987) and *The Crow* (1994), which utilized dystopian images of Detroit as a city overrun by murderous thugs, in need of rescue by (in the first case) a cyborg police officer with built-in automatic weaponry, and (in the second) a resurrected rock musician with a Gothic aesthetic and skills in martial arts. In both of these films race is effectively banished from the stage, as most of the murderers and criminals depicted appear to be White. However, because both films were set in Detroit and effectively positioned the "inner city" as a contemporary heart of darkness, one might assume that the American racial imaginary would be cued as well. In the case of *The Crow*, it is specifically "Devil's Night" in Detroit that is featured. The phenomenon of Devil's Night, memorialized in a book (Chafets 1990) of the same name, took place on the night before Halloween in Detroit and often involved the ritualized burning of abandoned buildings throughout the city. Chafets opens his account in a dramatic manner: "It was in the fall of 1986 that I first saw the devil on the streets of Detroit" (p. 1). He then proceeds to explicitly identify the entire city as spatial and racial Other:

For the two and half million whites who lived in America's most segregated suburbs, Detroit became The Corner writ large—an alien, threatening place, a place to drive through, if at all, with the windows rolled up and the doors securely locked. Whites not only left the city physically, they abandoned it emotionally as well (p. 23).

The notion of the city as a haven for evil spirits is of course nothing new, but Jeffries (2013) argues that in contemporary societies cities have reemerged as a "repository of fear." As a city and as a symbol, Detroit has been made to stand in for a particularly American set of fears about urban society and where it is heading. Whether Chafets intended to identify Black Detroit as one overtaken by "devils," thus summoning a historically racialized iconography which links both Black people and the places where they live (Africa, Haiti) to malevolent supernatural forces, his language makes this connection difficult to avoid. The dual identification of Detroit with urban corruption and primeval demonology makes for a potent cocktail that writers have difficulty putting down.

The Monstrous City

To understand what it means to deem a city monstrous, we must first explore the concept of monstrosity itself. Palencia-Roth (1996) writes that

The monster—*teras* in Greek, *monstrum* in Latin—generally is a creature similar to yet different from human beings. Both the similarity and the difference are important in the term's semantic field. A monster deviates from the accepted norm of humanity. This may be a simple thought, but it has enormous consequences (p. 24).

Palencia-Roth goes on to discuss the significance of teratology, or the study of monsters, in the history of colonial conquest. In particular, he highlights the fact that most descriptions of monsters are based on "hearsay and concern people who live far away . . ." that "each monstrous race has recognizably human features . . . , and "the descriptions utilize negations or reversals, which

may be either physical or social” (p. 26). Monstrosity has several functions: to reaffirm the shared normality of the person or people encountering the monster, to draw a clear line of difference between them and the “other,” and to implicitly justify the treatment of “them,” which is to follow. Perhaps it is needless to say that such monstrous definitions helped to pave the way for control, conquest and in some cases genocide.

But the application of monstrous iconography is not limited to those outside a nation’s borders. In the nineteenth century, as industrial cities expanded rapidly and produced new forms of human sociality and conflict, definitions of monstrosity were directed internally. Lange (2007) discusses the significance of the concept of monstrosity as it relates both to the David Lynch film *The Elephant Man* and the Victorian city.

This experience of meaninglessness is inherent to the experience of the monstrosity of the Elephant Man and his deformities as well as the urban explorers’ perception of the Victorian city, the “strangely mingled monster”, a city “so clumsy and brutal, and [which] has gathered together so many of the darkest sides of life,” that it would be “frivolous to ignore her deformities” (p. 2).

Charlie LeDuff’s *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013) uses the city’s intrinsic morbidity as its central conceit. In the book, he recounts the story of a homeless man found frozen in the bottom of an elevator shaft in one of the city’s numerous abandoned warehouses. The story was later picked up by national and even international news outlets, accompanied by a photograph of the man’s ankles protruding from a block of ice. In his original lead line, LeDuff (2009) likens the corpse to the state of the city as a whole:

This city has not always been a gentle place, but a series of events over the past few, frigid days causes one to wonder how cold the collective heart has grown (LeDuff 2009).

In his book, LeDuff discusses the reactions of others to the high-profile news story. Some accused him of focusing only on the negative side of the city. LeDuff acknowledged the fact that many of Detroit’s residents were hardworking, upstanding citizens who took care of their neighborhoods and each other, but then he responded,

But these things are not supposed to be news. These things are supposed to be normal. And when normal things become the news, the abnormal becomes the norm. And when that happens, you might as well put a fork in it (p. 129).

For LeDuff, Detroit’s abnormality has become a self-perpetuating negative force. A city that was once “frightening” has become “empty and forlorn and pathetic” (p. 71). While it continues to lose full-time residents, however, the city of Detroit still attracts observers and metaphors by the scores. Like Joseph Merrick, the historical figure known as the Elephant Man, Detroit’s reputation has made it the object of much curiosity. Its monstrosity is at once both social and spatial, manifested in language, behaviors, and in the city’s distinctive physical form.

Ghosts: The Haunted City

Like other ghost stories, the tale of Detroit’s fall from grace is not one which people get tired of telling. The narratives focus not only on what has been lost, but also what cannot be buried: they are equally about the past and the failure of the present to either leave it behind, or put it at peace. Frequently invoked are historic policies which are retrospectively viewed as collective sins or crimes, especially that of racial segregation. Documentary films such as *Requiem for Detroit* (2010), *DeForce* (2010), and *Detropia* (2012) represent variations on this narrative: all depict a



Figure 1 and 2. Disembodied voices: Graffiti and ghost signage on Michigan Avenue, Detroit.
Source. Paul Draus.

city full of abandoned buildings, effectively sacrificed on the altars of suburban sprawl and globalization. While Detroit's ruins have become a destination for urban explorers, they remind long-term residents of its precipitous decline and its bedraggled present status.

According to Hetherington (2001), ghosts and ruins provoke parallel discomforts: "What has passed still has the power to haunt us because it has not fully gone away and because it can continue to come back—out of time but revealed in space" (p. 25). As Swanton (2012) has written about the industrial ruins of Dortmund, the physical fragments of Detroit's past glory evoke both shame and melancholy. One is prompted to ask, "What the hell happened?" In his book *Getting Ghost* (2010), which chronicles the lives of young men caught up in Detroit's illicit drug economy, Luke Bergmann provides a personal perspective on the same imposing reality, reflecting on his first experiences of the city, seen through the windows of a car:

Tagging along with him [my father], it already seemed to me that Detroit was dead. Its failure was permanent. It had claimed a much-ballyhooed "renaissance" ten years before, but came out of it stillborn. Now, when I visited, all I could do was look around its carcass and wonder, like people must when they visit an Incan ruin, how something so massive and inexorable could have come to such a sudden end (p. 14).

The title of Bergmann's book does not itself refer to the ghosts of Detroit's past, but rather to the young men's practice of disappearing into the landscape, especially when confronted by law enforcement. Nevertheless, the passage above reveals how the city's physical backdrop intrudes upon the senses, signaling a constant and profound sense of despair and loss.

The visual objects of the ghost-chaser's gaze have become so familiar in Detroit that they have been granted their own subgenre, now known as *ruin porn*. The massive abandoned Packard Plant and the Michigan Central Depot are the typical poster shots, although the abundant vacant homes, office buildings, and factories scattered throughout the city provide nearly limitless fodder. Some, like the work of Marchand and Meffre (2011), are enshrined in high-priced coffee table books. Others live in perpetuity on the Internet: Kevin Baumann's "100 Abandoned Houses" and Lowell Boileau's "The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit," which includes in-depth history of the structures it depicts, are both quite reverent in tone. Even to the casual visitor, however, the disembodied voices speak, in the form of both graffiti tags that seem to appear and disappear mysteriously, and the signs from bygone eras that persist to the present day (see Figures 1 and 2). As Hetherington (2001) and Swanton (2012) attest, these haunted spaces, and the ghosts that linger

within them, may be viewed as either a curse or a resource: reminders of threats to be avoided, debts to be paid, or spirits to honor.

Vampires: The Predatory City

According to Abbott (2006), the figure of the vampire is now thoroughly identified with urban spaces, full of anonymous bodies on which to feed and shadows in which to lurk. As cold-blooded, immortal beings that feed off the blood of humans, however, the best analogues to vampires may not be individuals but organizations and institutions that consume lives in order to extend their own power and existence. The trope of capitalists and politicians as destructive parasites is, of course, nothing new. Marx himself employed the vampire metaphor in *Capital*, and authors working in this vein (no pun intended) have continued to employ these images (Panichas, 1981; McNally, 2011). Depending on the political perspective of the viewer, politicians, corporations, and unions might all be characterized as vampire-like, draining the lifeblood from their host (the public, the taxpayer, the employer, or the body politic) to fatten themselves.

Another urban figure that fits this image is that of the drug dealer. Like vampires, they are depicted as elusive entities that emerge at night and profit from the emotional and physical subjugation of others. This metaphor is at times employed very deliberately. For example, Sutherland (2006) argues that such language is quite prevalent in criminal law, precisely because it solidifies the notion of the drug dealer as “other” and deserving of the harsh punishments administered under the drug war regime: “the drug dealer as monstrous undying evil provides the justification for the incarceration of the individual, and focuses on societal concerns for safety over the potential rehabilitation of the individual offender” (p. 145). On the other hand, to allow that a young drug dealer may actually be an “entrepreneur” places that person on a continuum of behavior that is understandable. This is precisely what Bergmann (2010) undertakes in his book. Here he describes the spatial strategies of inner city drug dealers operating in the blighted landscape:

Drug dealing flourishes in spaces that are visible but also invisible . . . In Detroit, such spaces emerge around abandoned houses, in the midst of fluid traffic through legitimate businesses, in unbounded public places—on sidewalks and street corners—spaces defined by movement, routes between one house and another, or between houses and liquor stores. Young dope hustlers are always striving to claim ownership of spaces that are effective and secure, but that are simultaneously impossible to map, invisible, and mutable (p. 20).

Vampire mythology has become quite extensive and complex, and certainly drug dealers and their extensive networks and cartels would seem to correlate with the hierarchical empires of undead depicted by Anne Rice in her novels, or in the book and TV series *True Blood*. Rodenberg (2012), examining the near-mythological status of drug dealers in popular culture, also questioned the effect of this imagery:

Taking it at face value, societally, we’re displaced from these lives, as far as we are from the supernatural. And is this a good thing? Does it make drug dealers and street users that much farther from societal redemption? Could we understand and accept reformed users and dealers into our communities? My fear is that the more imaginary these lives and livelihoods seem, the more isolated the communities become.

The question raised here is a crucial one, because it pertains to the cumulative effects of the language and imagery that we employ on the very reality that we seek to describe. The effect is one of social distancing. Of course, the news media contributes to this image in its own way. Media coverage of the 2006-2007 fentanyl overdose epidemic in Detroit (Schaefer & Swickard, 2007) began like this:

Lauren Jolly was a popular girl from a wealthy suburb, but she ended up dead in a dilapidated drug house. The *Free Press* tracked the path of an illicit drug that authorities say moved from Mexico to Detroit and beyond, killing hundreds of addicts in its wake.

The fentanyl deaths were certainly real, and the series was based on some excellent investigative reporting. However, the drug is anthropomorphized as a killer stalking the innocent, luring them to their deaths with promises of pleasure. While inviting identification with the victims by humanizing them, the narrative also invests the drug with sinister intentions. The fact that the majority of the victims were from suburban areas, but that the drugs were purchased inside Detroit reinforces the spatial imaginary of the inner city as not only a place of statistical risk, but a deadly attractor state. The city actively preys upon people within (and around) it. Monstrosity is thus territorialized. Segregationist or containment policies are reinforced by this dramatic “otherization” of social space.

Zombies: The Mindless City

Zombies are another prevalent presence in the contemporary cinema, which have arguably surpassed vampires in popularity. While zombies originate in the *voudou* traditions of the Caribbean islands, they have by now been thoroughly enshrined in mass culture. There is even a growing subgenre of zombie scholarship (May, 2010; Stratton, 2011). Like vampires, zombies are undead, but they do not possess the intelligence, charisma, or internal conflicts of vampires, who may actively struggle with the human souls still inside them. They are literally mindless, automaton-like bodies that have been commandeered by a spell, a virus, or an alien life form.

Over time, zombie narratives have migrated from rural areas to urban areas, reflecting a coding of urban space as “other space” (May, 2010). Some have even suggested that Detroit market itself as a full-scale Zombie Apocalypse Theme Park (*Huffington Post*, 2012). It is also worth noting the symmetry between the image of the zombie and the now nearly universally recognizable character of the drug abuser or addict, most especially the “crackhead” (although in some places and times, the heroin “junkie” or “dope fiend” or the methamphetamine-addicted “tweaker” might fill the same role). In fact, the invasion of black urban communities by crack cocaine is presaged by Michael Jackson’s extremely popular video for the song “Thriller,” in which an urban graveyard releases its contents as shuffling, blank-eyed zombies. “Thriller” dates from 1984, which is around the same time that crack cocaine burst onto national headlines as the latest “demon drug” (Reinarman and Levine, 1997).

The dehumanization of crackheads, who are themselves intensely racialized, maps onto a pre-existing framework. But the crackhead-zombie category transcends race, not just because all crackheads (regardless of race) are similarly stigmatized, but because crackheads are also widely denigrated by Black people. They are the lowest of the low: drug-obsessed automatons in an endless search for more drugs, oblivious to their own appearance or physical health, much less the welfare of others. It is an image so stigmatizing that even acknowledged drug users use it in a disparaging way (Copes, Hochstetler, & Williams, 2008). Stratton (2011) compares zombies to displaced people or those confined to concentration camps—unlike vampires, who are others *with* power, zombies are others who are powerful only as a persistent mass. As individuals they are completely interchangeable and disposable, but as a category they exude threat.

While the spaces of the inner city may be characterized as “other” and strongly associated with drug markets and addiction-related behaviors, as zones of free-roaming zombies, increasingly the city itself may also be pictured as a mindless undead thing, which persists in its own movements even though others have defined it as dead. Neighborhoods that are largely depopulated, for example, may be characterized by an abundance of “zombie properties”:

Zombie properties are a specific type of abandoned structure. They are found in shrinking cities where demographic and economic decline make abandonment an enduring fixture of the urban milieu. (Silverman, Yin, & Patterson, 2013, p. 4)

In Detroit neighborhoods, the zombie image is also reflected in depictions of scrappers, who make their living by stripping materials from vacant houses and buildings, cannibalizing the urban infrastructure little by little; or squatters, who move into vacant properties and occupy them until they are ruined or burned. Their presence in Detroit communities is nearly universal, and they are sometimes regarded as akin to urban pests such as rats, that come out at night to scavenge on the detritus of the living. As many of them are drug users as well, the stigma and dehumanization of the crackhead is uncritically applied. Throughout the city one can see boarded-up houses with spray-painted warnings: “Squatters stay out.”

Werewolves: *The Feral City*

Giorgio Agamben (1998) used the European legend of the *wargus*, *loup garou*, or werewolf to illustrate the origins of *homo sacer*—the man who is in society but yet outside of it, condemned to bare life by his banishment:

What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. (p. 63)

The figure of the werewolf is thus equated with the outlaw or criminal, a denizen of the underworld (Knoll & Sejvl, 2010). In popular culture, the werewolf is often juxtaposed to the vampire, one representing an extension of humanity into forbidden realms of immortality, the other signaling a falling back to one’s animal origins. In Detroit, the idea of the werewolf emerges indirectly in the form of narratives and imagery that depict a city sinking into a savage state.

The description of Detroit as a city gone back to wilderness has become increasingly common in the last decade. In some cases, it is literally named a “wild city,” as in the French film *La Ville Sauvage* (2010). In other cases, the same message is conveyed by stories about Detroit that represent it as a place where law and civilization no longer apply—in effect, a new frontier. One photographer, James Griffioen (2009), christened a series of his images “feral houses,” because they depict human habitations transformed into foreboding skulls by creeping greenery. A recent local news story about a giant cat roaming the streets of Detroit’s east side shows how the trope is reinforced by both news and social media (Battaglia, 2013). The serval cat, which had actually escaped from a home in the suburbs where it was kept as a pet, was filmed roaming around a city neighborhood. A local resident eventually shot it and threw it in a garbage can, much to its owner’s dismay. The stories about the cat, which were picked up by national outlets such as *USA Today*, emphasized the animal’s cruel fate—with the implicit message that Detroit was more dangerous than the animal’s native habitat. The story of a Detroit man who hunted raccoons went viral because it was interpreted as a case of postapocalyptic survival. It turns out that the “raccoon man,” who was originally interviewed by local journalist John Carlisle, aka Detroitblogger John (2009), was killing the animals in rural areas outside the city and then returning to the city to sell them for their meat. In another story, Carlisle (2011) described the lives of men inhabiting the gargantuan Packard plant, who reported their numerous encounters with wildlife. The Packard plant and its inhabitants (human and otherwise) have also become a favorite destination for urban explorers.

Closely related to the feral image, but diametrically opposed in tone, is that of Detroit as pastoral. Wild pheasants have returned to the city’s interior, and are sometimes portrayed as

harbingers of a cleaner, greener city, consisting of self-sufficient eco-villages, neighborhood schools, and urban farms (Millington 2013). Its purest manifestation may be found in the visionary Adamah Project (Guyette 2001) and the ongoing work associated with activist intellectual Grace Lee Boggs and the Detroit City of Hope network. The Detroit Future City framework, referenced above, also adopts this model, at least in part. However, as criticism of Detroit Future City has highlighted, the crucial question of “who will benefit?” from this “leaner, greener” Detroit is often simply left out (Howell, 2013). The future city pictured in these utopian urban designs is conspicuously (and for some, suspiciously) devoid of monsters.

Conclusion

Like the apocalyptic scenarios of zombie films (Cantor, 2013), the postindustrial urban landscape has causes that lie far beyond the scope of one’s immediate vision. In a sense, the vocabulary of monstrosity may be a response to the gap that has opened up between the everyday needs of human beings, which are always manifested locally, and the shifting of structural forces, especially in terms of political and economic policies, that have resulted in the repeated systemic shocks that Detroit has experienced (Draus, 2009; Trachte & Ross, 1985). Adopting the language of Castells (1997), forces affecting cities may originate in the space of flows, but consequences are borne out in the space of places. Narratives and images of urban monstrosity may be promulgated by the culture industry and circulate through smooth networks of electronic media, but they take root and have an effect in individual minds and local settings. To put it another way, it may be “neoliberalism” and “globalization” that have devastated Detroit, but for residents, home invaders are a more imminent threat (Carlisle, 2013). Like the zombie, the vampire, or the ghost, they promise to scare and hurt us *personally*.

The images discussed above might be dismissed as fanciful distractions from the real problems of Detroit, or as unneeded aggravations to the city’s ill fortunes. Detroit residents are sensitized to sensationalistic portrayals of the city, as evidenced by reactions to the most recent “hatchet job” of Detroit presented on *60 Minutes* (Thompson, 2013). We agree with these points, but we contend that such images need to be discussed precisely because they are persistent, they are powerful, and they have an effect on the daily life of the city. Repudiating them is part of our intention. However, we must also make an effort to understand why they are so persistent, to engage and possibly mobilize them for different ends.

As one pastor said to us, in the course of our research: “You have to eat the monster one bite at a time.” In Detroit, this struggle takes place every day at the level of lots and yards and blocks. Neighbors collaborate to cut lawns and cultivate gardens; throngs of bicycles reclaim streets in the Detroit Slow Roll. Reclaiming the open spaces of the city (Allon, 2013) and occupying the spaces of fear (Jeffries, 2013), whether with bikes or flowers or sculptures, are two potential strategies for defanging the monstrous city. Artists are extremely sensitive to the power of images, and it should be no surprise that artists have seized upon Detroit’s distinctive visual and symbolic qualities. Detroit’s attractiveness to artists has gotten much play in the media as a potential source of spatial and social transformation, and many of these artists challenge stereotypes of the city while celebrating its resilient spirit (Ryzik, 2010).

The Heidelberg Project, a multiblock art installation started in 1986 by native Detroiter Tyree Guyton, is a deliberate reclamation of urban space as well as a critical commentary on the forces that contributed to Detroit’s decline. Once opposed as a public eyesore by the administration of Mayor Coleman Young, the Heidelberg Project now receives thousands of visitors every year. Busloads of White people from outside the city, and often from abroad, stop to visit and stroll through the colorful and uncanny outdoor displays. Because Heidelberg is so essentially *placed*, the urban context becomes part of the work itself (Crain, 2011).



Figure 3 and 4. Detroit Industrial Gallery, Heidelberg Street, Detroit.

Source. With permission from Tim Burke.

As Gandy (2005) has written, “The pervasive dilapidation of urban infrastructures, and especially those physical networks associated with the growth of the modern industrial city, is intimately connected with questions surrounding the state of the public realm and its future prospects” (p. 34). In the case of Detroit, the withering of the welfare state and the starving of municipal governments are reflected in the eroding structures that one confronts in the physical landscape of the city. An installation by Tim Burke (Figures 3 and 4), recently displayed at his Detroit Industrial Gallery on Heidelberg Street, portrayed cheap commercial alcohol, widely available in neighborhoods where healthy food is hard to find, as a “Weapon of Mass Destruction.” Another featured a modified cigarette ad in which the War on Drugs is depicted as a War on the Poor and the criminalization of drug users is called into question. Burke’s work utilizes commercial signs, salvaged items and found objects, recontextualized to promote dialogue on the role of the federal and state governments in systematically producing Detroit’s devastation through discriminatory housing policy, punitive welfare policy, and incarceration (T. Burke, personal communication, July 14, 2014), a perspective that recalls Wacquant (2010). The real monster here is not the city, or its residents, but those who have preyed *upon* them.

This possibility of reversal is contained in the monster genre itself, where central characters (often children, as adults cannot see past the monster’s visage) come to recognize that their fear of the monster may be misplaced. The reversal involves the recognition that “we” are more of a monster than “them.” After all, we are the ones who chased Frankenstein’s monster into a castle with torches, with the intent to destroy. Such reversals occur in the urban crime genre as well, from *Super Fly* (1972) to *The Wire* (2002–2008), where urban drug dealers, though sometimes ruthless, are portrayed as adept survivors, shaped by harsh environments and unresponsive or oppressive institutions. The larger villains, in these narratives, are those in positions of power who look on from above and do nothing, or benefit from the world as it is. In Detroit, as in other American cities, the monster reversal narrative relates powerfully to race. The White power structure becomes Dr. Frankenstein, whose hubris made the monster—or worse, the heartless corporation (Omni Consumer Products, or OCP) from the film *Robocop* that exploits fear for

profit. In either case, the monster is viewed as a malicious, external Other: the System, the Man, the Machine.

However, like Boggs (2011), we question whether reversing the original polarity disrupts the underlying dynamic, or merely reinforces it. We might make an analogy to the more mundane problem of weeds. Weeds, like drugs, are often endowed with malicious intent and mysterious power and equated with urban disorder. As with drugs, militaristic frontal assaults on weeds have historically produced uneven results, and afterward the weeds inevitably return (Falck 2011). A preferable approach might be to simply understand why weeds find urban habitats so attractive in the first place—what policies and processes have produced the landscapes that they occupy, both in our cities and in our imaginations, and how do we confront these locally? Then we might ask how to better live with, and learn from our *others*—to listen to the voices of our ghosts, and make peace with our own monsters.

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Online Resources

- Detroit 1967: Photos from the 12th Street Riot. <http://life.time.com/history/detroit-is-burning-photos-from-the-1967-riots/>
- DetroitFunk.com is an “ongoing archive of Detroit and surrounding areas” created by photographer Randy Wilcox. <http://detroitfunk.com/?p=10003>
- “Ruin Porn” References from the *Huffington Post*. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/detroit-ruin-porn>
- Short Film on Detroit Artists and “Ruin Porn” produced by AFP News Agency. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPCcq8ybyqs>

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