



Greening the urban frontier: Race, property, and resettlement in Detroit



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ABSTRACT

In 2014, approximately 100,000 lots lie “vacant” in Detroit after decades of industrial decline, white flight, and poverty. Planners and government officials have proposed to repurpose Detroit’s highest vacancy neighborhoods, deemed to have “no market value,” as blue and green infrastructure (retention ponds, carbon forests, urban farms, greenways). According to the Detroit Future City plan, traditional public services (water, street lights, transportation, garbage pickup) and the “grey infrastructures” that deliver them will be reduced and eventually withdrawn from these zones. While Detroit is widely touted for its potential as a model green city, the costs and benefits of green redevelopment are distributed unevenly within the context of gentrification and bankruptcy. Through an analysis of media representations, a contentious citywide planning project, and the construction of a private urban forest, I demonstrate how settler colonial imaginaries and rationalities articulate with austerity measures to prepare a postindustrial urban frontier for resettlement and reinvestment. During the historical era of U.S. settler colonialism, economic development happened through westward expansion on a continental scale (and then imperial scale), but today, in the urban United States, it occurs through internal differentiation of previously developed spaces and is taking a new form. Where the rural settlers of the 19th century sought to conquer wilderness, “urban pioneers” in the 21st century deploy nature as a tool of economic development in a city with a shrinking population and a large spatial footprint. Yet accumulation by green dispossession still turns on some of the defining features of settler colonialism, e.g., private property as a civilizing mechanism on the frontier, the appropriation of collective land and resources, and the expendability of particular people and places. The production of this new urban frontier also depends, like any frontier, on erasure: the material and discursive work of presenting “empty” landscapes as in need of improvement by non-local actors. I argue that understanding the stakes of postindustrial urban development struggles requires attention to how concepts of (white) settler society – which have been absorbed into political and legal-judicial institutions, discourses, myths, symbols, and national metaphors – are used to claim “wild” and “empty” lands like those in Detroit.

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A message is getting out ... that there is free and open space available in Detroit – and that message is attracting people, many of them uncommonly creative and entrepreneurial. Detroit, for all its problems – or perhaps because of them – has become nothing less than a new American frontier. Once, easterners heeded the call to ‘Go West, young man,’ to leave behind the comforts and sophistication of the established citadels in search of adventure and fortune and to tame this great continent. Now, that same whisper is starting to build around Detroit.

[Aaron Renn (2011), “Detroit: A New American Frontier,” *Yes! Magazine*]

What we’re trying to figure out is how to drive up the market demand for land in the city ... Detroit can lead the way to responding to the ‘urban condition.’ The question is how can we take the land and really make it work for us?

[Dan Kinkead, Director of Projects, Detroit Future City Implementation Office (author interview, 6/2012)]

Somebody’s gotta tell them, that we are not ghosts, that we are in this city and we are alive.

[jessica care moore, Detroit poet, performed in the documentary *We Are Not Ghosts* (2012)]

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Introduction

In December 2013, a 50-year plan for the city of Detroit was released to the public. Arguably the most radical reimagining of a postindustrial city to date, the Detroit Future City (DFC) plan reconceptualizes urban infrastructure and the city's role in providing basic services to its citizens (DFC, 2013). According to the plan, Detroit's highest vacancy neighborhoods with "no market value" will be repurposed as blue and green infrastructure (retention ponds, carbon forests, urban farms, greenways). Over time, traditional public services (water, street lights, transportation, garbage pickup) and the "grey infrastructures" that deliver them will be withdrawn from these zones. Green infrastructure – a multipurpose strategy that promises to produce healthy ecosystems while mitigating urban woes from crime to depressed real estate markets – is fast becoming a multibillion-dollar industry as it is adopted in cities across the country from New York to Los Angeles (Benedict and McMahon, 2006; NRDC, 2013).

While urban green spaces have often been thought of as unequivocal goods in the United States, struggles in Detroit suggest that these new green fixes for surplus land and urban shrinkage are highly contentious. The DFC plan is complicated by the fact that over 90,000 people live in the neighborhoods it characterizes as "empty." The plan is presented as neutral, but is a pernicious reworking of the logic of ethical environmentalism, enabling and justifying otherwise controversial dispossessions. The DFC framework represents a new mode of market-oriented environmental planning and a lucrative frontier for development, but the rationalities of productive property that undergird it are old. I argue that as a new technology of erasure and gentrification, it links with problematic frontier narratives in the media that describe Detroit's postindustrial landscape as empty and underutilized. To call a place a frontier characterizes it as awaiting inhabitants and transformation, nullifying existing ways of life. Settler colonial imagery (e.g., "urban wilderness," "dangerous jungle," "urban pioneers") is often deployed in shrinking cities like Detroit where excess land has emerged as a planning problem (e.g., New Orleans, Cleveland, Buffalo).

Urban environmental conflicts are not new to geographers who have examined the uneven development endemic to neoliberal environmentalism (e.g., Heynen et al., 2006). Urban studies scholars have called attention to gentrification associated with urban greening (e.g., Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009). Meanwhile, geographer Neil Smith (1996) noted the colonial frontier overtones of gentrification decades ago. Yet little attention has been paid to the points of intersection between these areas: that is, how colonial logics shape contemporary market-based green redevelopment and animate current urban debates. This article builds upon recent work that approaches settler colonialism as a historical structure of dispossession that persists in the present (cf. Cattelino, 2010; King, 2013; Smith, 2006; Wolfe, 2006). In attending to the "colonial present" (Gregory, 2004) of urban resettlement I do not mean to suggest that nothing has changed since formal colonialism ended in the United States, but that settler colonialism, as a form of productive power, is embedded in and works through institutions, discourses, culture, and spatial practices in the 21st century. Settler colonialism is about settlement, meaning that it turns on the acquisition of land and territory. Moreover, property rights and uneven development in the United States are rooted in a racial grammar of citizenship established under settler colonialism. Historically, private property rights were used to extend state power over territory (the frontier) and make responsible and productive subjects who improved the land.

This paper examines how settler colonialism articulates with the redevelopment of postindustrial urban landscapes. Within this

context, settler colonialism functions as a "repertoire of strategies" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 404) aimed at resettlement and recaptalization. I argue that its discursive and technical treatment of land as "empty" and open to settlement and private property as a civilizing mechanism on the frontier is imbricated in contemporary imaginaries of Detroit and extended through urban planning practices in ways that facilitate large-scale "green" redevelopment schemes. In calling attention to settler colonial spatial patterns, I seek to deepen understandings of neoliberalism and gentrification by situating these processes in relationship to both a racist history of settlement that has intimately bound liberty, property, and whiteness in the United States (Harris, 1993; Hartman, 1997) and resistance efforts aimed at capacitating more ethical forms of societal organization. Thus, the ultimate goal of the paper is to make seeable the often-invisible geographies of settler colonialism so that we may then consider what it would mean to decolonize Detroit and other places and stand in solidarity with those already working to do so.

The paper proceeds in three main parts. First, I situate greening in Detroit within the contemporary political moment and explain what a settler colonialism analytic offers for understanding neoliberal environmentalism and 21st-century urban crisis. Second, I discuss how popular media representations of Detroit construct the city as an urban wilderness in need of settlement. Next, I analyze how such imagery works in concert with market-based green planning initiatives to spatially organize investment and disinvestment. I examine how settler colonial discourses of nature and value, private property, and good citizenship articulate in one controversial case of green redevelopment, Hantz Woodlands, a large-scale privately owned urban tree farm that was, by 2012, under construction on Detroit's east side. By way of conclusion, I look at resistance to this project and proposals for alternative land-use models.

Contested urban ecologies

Conflicts over Detroit's future are inextricable from its industrial, racial, and land-use histories. Once the nation's fourth-largest city and car manufacturer for the world, Detroit has been in economic and population decline since the 1950s. It was one of the first cities to experience the postwar exodus to the suburbs in a tense racial climate. By the time the infamous 1967 race riots left 43 dead and Detroit scorched, white flight was already underway. Between 1964 and 1966, an average of 22,000 whites left the city annually. In the years following the "riots" (a disputed term because many Detroiters stake a political claim by referring to them as the Detroit Rebellion), outmigration increased almost eightfold. Between 1967 and 1969, 173,000 residents (mostly whites) left the city (Fine, 1989). In the decades that followed, the residential and business exodus continued, particularly after the election of the city's first black mayor Coleman Young in 1973. As city services and jobs were displaced to the suburbs, a segregated landscape of abandoned factories, empty lots, and boarded-up homes emerged. Today, 713,000 residents occupy a city built for almost 2 million (U.S. Census, 2010). In recent years, the subprime crisis, relentless cutbacks in primary education, and the discontinuation of residential requirements for municipal employees has led upwardly mobile residents of all races to join the outmigration. While many actors in the city and beyond proclaim a renaissance ("Detroit is going to be the next Brooklyn") the city remains a site of intense racialized poverty.

Detroit – which is surrounded by predominantly white and relatively prosperous suburbs – has an 83% African American population and by some estimates over 50% of working-age residents cannot find jobs (Data Driven Detroit, 2010). The median house-

hold income in Detroit of \$28,000 stands in stark contrast to that in adjacent counties, where median incomes range from \$54,000 (Macomb) to \$66,000 (Oakland) (U.S. Census, 2010). The income gap grows even larger when Detroit is compared to third- and fourth-ring suburbs, pointing to the fact that Detroit's crisis is largely due to racism and regional isolation (Darden et al., 1987; Farley et al., 2000; Sugrue, 1996). In March 2014, the city began an unprecedented process of declaring bankruptcy. This decision followed Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder's order that Detroit be placed under emergency management. Detroit is one of six cities in the state (all with predominantly black populations) that Snyder has deemed to be in financial crisis. Emergency managers – who are unelected – are tasked with balancing cities' revenue and expenditure and are granted sweeping powers to do so. They nullify the power of elected officials and assume control of not just city finances but *all* city affairs, meaning they can break union contracts, privatize public land and resources, and outsource the management of public services (Peck, 2012, 2013).

It is in this neoliberal context that Detroit's public infrastructure is being dismembered and repurposed as green infrastructure. As planners and development boosters champion market-based greening, austerity, and gentrification, social movements contest the values embedded in this territorial restructuring, particularly its inattention to racial inequality. Indeed, the 347-page Detroit Future City plan only invokes the concept of racial economic disparity six times.¹ Reading the report, law professor Peter Hammer ironically observed, one would think Detroit's most pressing issue is stormwater mitigation (Hammer, 2014). In contrast, social movement actors also call for greening as a way to repurpose landscapes, but according to different logics and ends, including community land control and more democratic forms of governance. These contested landscapes exemplify the kinds of urban environments being created as cities country-wide seek private capital to transform infrastructures from gray to green – and the winners and losers of such transformations.

In 2002, James McCarthy called for a “First World” political ecology (McCarthy, 2002). He argued that political ecology research in the global North was slow to catch on because of lingering colonial geographical imaginaries caught up with fieldwork, ethnography, and sites of appropriate research. In the global North, he argued, environmental problems are often studied vis-à-vis legal structures, rational choice models, and environmental science (McCarthy, 2005). In the global South, by contrast, political ecologists (Davis, 2009, 2007; Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Peluso, 1992) have investigated the ways colonial and imperial environmental knowledges are institutionalized through narratives, legal instruments, property laws, and maps in ways that shed light on contemporary urban resource struggles worldwide. Urban political ecologists in the global North have tended to draw attention to how capitalist economic relations shape uneven processes of urbanization and regulate human-environmental relationships (Heynen et al., 2006; Keil, 2003, 2005) in urban forests (Heynen, 2003), on front lawns (Robbins, 2007), and through water flows (Kaika, 2005). However, more attention to the intersection of racism, capitalism, and colonial legacies (Pulido, 1996; Wainwright, 2005) is needed to understand the stakes of new patterns of urbanization underway in Detroit.

Meanwhile, the environmental justice literature offers a productive model for scholarly engagement with social movements,

but it has mostly focused on how environmental “bads” (e.g., air and water pollution) intersect with race and class and less on struggles around environmental “goods,” which present a new conundrum (e.g., the distributional effects of urban greening projects in Detroit) (Anguelovski, 2013; Gould and Lewis, 2012). Attention to such “goods” is the focus of an emerging literature on “green gentrification” (Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009; Newman, 2011), which has argued that seemingly benevolent or benign urban greening and ecological restoration projects perpetuate inequities (rising rents, displacement, unequal access). Meanwhile, an urban sustainability literature demonstrates that not all boats rise with neoliberal environmentalism and case studies are needed to assess its benefits and burdens (e.g., Jonas and Bridge, 2003; Keil and Desfor, 2003; Pearsall, 2010; Raco, 2005; While et al., 2004). Critics of ecosystems services and carbon markets have come to similar conclusions and show how such markets can create negative social and economic impacts for rural people (Cobera et al., 2007; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010). These framings help us understand the pernicious, if often unintended, effects of urban greening, but none of them alone provides the long historical lens needed to make sense of how such models reiterate colonial rationalities and help position Detroit as a “new American frontier.”

This paper contributes to scholarly debates on urban greening by examining how settler colonial rationalities shape contemporary environmental politics in Detroit. Anthropologist Jessica Cattelino (2010, 2011) has called for more attention to the United States as a society where the settler colonial project has been so complete that it is rarely recognized as such (see also Mikadashi, 2013). As argued earlier, settler colonialism is not an isolated event but a persistent structure (Wolfe, 2006). In what follows, I highlight how land and territory have been foundational to settler colonies where settlers displace previous residents and establish their own governments. Examples include the United States, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and Israel (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 1999, 2001, 2006).

Under settler colonialism, land acquisition works through violence, erasure, and spatial technologies such as cartography and planning to tame racial “others” and their disorderly landscapes (Blomley, 2003; Porter, 2010). In the United States, private property has served as a key mechanism for settling the frontier and, in so doing, spreading the virtues of improvement and civic-mindedness. Under early U.S. settler colonialism, the legal capacity to claim property rights was contingent upon race. Slavery created white privilege through black subordination and the legal conversion of blacks into property. At the same time, the extermination and removal of Native Americans from the land and nullification of their first possession rights justified the conferral of landed property to white settlers. As legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues, “Possession – the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property – was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites” (Harris, 1993, p. 1721).

Today, we see the racialized dimensions of settler colonialism in the abrogation or containment of native rights, the racial geography of cities, and the selected absorption of immigrant populations (Obenzinger, 2008) and, I would add, in how postindustrial urban greening and market-based planning function as technologies of erasure in the creation of a new frontier. Recycled frontier discourses of decline (Beauregard, 1994) and romantic settlement (Smith, 1996) are used to claim urban space. Urban frontier discourses and imagery, Neil Smith argues, “treats present inner-city populations as a natural element of their physical surroundings. The term ‘urban pioneer’ is therefore as arrogant as the original notion of ‘pioneers’ in that it suggests a city not yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment. . . . the frontier

¹ Three references call for moving beyond racial and economic difference to develop a common vision for the city's future. Two are statistical citations about the high incidence of health hazards in Detroit and low rates of African American business ownership because of the legacy of racial policies. The final argues the city should work to attract and retain residents regardless of race or household need. That all are passing references with no critical analysis suggests the DFC strategic framework is an explicit strategy of deracialization.

discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest, whether in the eighteenth or nineteenth-century West, or in the late-twentieth [or twenty-first] century inner city” (Smith, 1996, p. xvi). Smith’s work draws attention to how gentrification reflects a larger economic and cultural shift in the late 20th century through which the city could be imagined as “urban wilderness” and colonial discourses legitimated displacement through redevelopment. However, his analysis preceded the rise of green urbanism, which, as we will see, has brought “nature” into urban politics in new ways.

Methodology

My analysis draws on data collected over 17 months of mixed-method qualitative research in Detroit from 2010 to 2012 on competing visions for the city’s future and the stakes of green redevelopment plans. I engaged in participant observation at over 60 meetings, including planning charettes, city council meetings, municipal financial review board meetings focused on the city’s fiscal crisis, and community land management meetings. My participation allowed me to understand the logics that undergirded redevelopment plans for Detroit and resistance to them. I also conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with residents, activists, planners, maintenance workers, urban farmers, and developers. I first interviewed leaders in these groups and then used snowball sampling to identify other key actors within their networks. My interview guide for residents, activists, and urban farmers focused on conceptions of property and rights, urban agriculture, and land tenure. My interviews with city officials and planners responsible for the acquisition and distribution of abandoned land focused on how they made decisions about the use and ownership of the city’s “vacant” land.

The paper also draws on data from a community-based participatory research project called Uniting Detroiters, which has been led by an organization called Building Movement-Detroit since 2011 and of which I am a part. The project – a collaboration between residents, activists, and academics – aims to present a counternarrative to blank slate understandings of the city. In the development of a video documentary and “people’s atlas,” we conducted 47 interviews and 19 oral histories about challenges facing residents and their visions for Detroit’s future. We also held 3 workshops on development and land control, which approximately 150 Detroit residents attended. We audio and video recorded and later transcribed the sessions where participants engaged in discussion and participatory mapping exercises around a set of questions: To whom do Detroit’s “abandoned” lands belong? By whom and how is ownership determined? What would you like to see done differently? Their maps and discussion transcripts illuminated how they perceived territorial reorderings underway in the city and struggled to articulate progressive land-use alternatives.

Finally, I supplemented participant observation and interviews with document analysis. I gathered media on Detroit on a daily basis from local, national, and international news outlets, documentaries and films, websites, and books. I analyzed dominant imagery used to describe Detroit. I also gathered material generated by the master planning process, which included policy audit reports, plans, and maps. I analyzed these plans for how they categorized the city’s land problem and presented green infrastructure as a solution. This mixed-method approach allowed me to triangulate between representations, plans, what was actually happening on the ground, and people’s understandings of these changes.

Representations of a new American frontier

Detroit’s decline and rebirth have become an object of national and international fascination, attracting filmmakers, photographers,

journalists, and tourists to the city. A number of scholars have analyzed how Detroit has become a spectacle (Herron, 2013, 2012, 2007; Kinney, 2012; Leary, 2011; Millington, 2013; Slager, 2013). Here I extend such analyses by examining, first, how the settler colonial myth is perpetuated through images and narratives of Detroit’s collapse and rebirth, and, second, the ways settler colonial rationalities are extended through planning and land governance. I analyze in particular how popular media representations work to render Detroit an urban wilderness. I argue that characterizing Detroit’s lands as empty and wasted positions them to be easily settled and appropriated. Once land is left “wholly to nature,” as John Locke (1952 [1609]) and his adherents claim, there is a moral imperative to claim it through labor and secure it as private property. However, as the case at hand demonstrates, under settler colonialism, only certain forms of labor and settlement are recognized and legitimated. As we will see, the portrayal of Detroit as an empty frontier awaiting settlement is not simply a discursive displacement. It involves the dispossession of people and life ways.

No man’s land

Representations of uninhabited nature are central to settlement. Indeed, during the colonial era, anthropogenic landscapes settled by Native Americans were considered empty (Denevan, 1992). The idea that Detroit has been ceded to nature is perpetuated by a genre of documentation that locals frequently refer to as “ruin porn.” These dystopian representations are best exemplified by two glossy coffee-table photography books – *The Ruins of Detroit* (Meffre and Marchand, 2011) and *Detroit Disassembled* (Moore, 2010) – with images of iconic buildings in ruin, such as Michigan Central Station, the Packard Automotive Plant, and the Grande Ballroom. Ruin porn is linked to a parallel narrative of the “return of nature.” Urban nature photography and journalism depict houses ensnarled in vines (what some call “*The Huffington Post* feral houses”), skyscrapers with saplings growing on their roofs, groves of invasive Chinese “ghetto palms,” and wildlife sightings. For example, the journalist Kisa Lala wrote in *The Huffington Post*, “who can complain when vast tracts of downtown Detroit are being reclaimed by nature. Like the ancient temples of Cambodia the earth always wins against the will of men. The city’s asphalt is cracking open and reverting back to prairie; foxes and deer are making malls and parking lots their new hunting grounds” (Lala, 2011, cited in Millington, 2013).

Foregrounding urban nature taps into postapocalyptic cultural imaginaries in a way that can deemphasize the ongoing struggle of the city’s hundreds of thousands of human residents. These representations become more problematic when excessive nature is celebrated as cleansing, a discourse with racial connotations (Millington, 2013). Consider, for example, comments like this one posted on a blog about Detroit’s feral houses: “I am pulling for mother nature to take back that which was used and abused . . . consume it and keep marching forward” (Sweet Juniper blog, 2010, cited in Millington, 2013). In some cases, the city’s inhabitants are dehumanized in more explicit terms. Julien Temple, a filmmaker who made the documentary *Requiem for Detroit?*, wrote in *The Guardian*, “Approaching the derelict shell of downtown Detroit, we see full-grown trees sprouting from the tops of deserted skyscrapers. In their shadows, the glazed eyes of the street zombies slide into view, stumbling in front of the car” (Temple, 2010). Temple’s comparison of Detroit residents to zombies was echoed by a peculiar 2012 proposal to create a zombie apocalypse theme park: “Z World Detroit will be a unique and spectacular zombie themed experience park that will transform a virtually neglected section of Detroit, Michigan. Participants will be chased by a growing zombie horde through abandoned factories, stores and homes across hundreds of derelict urban acres” (Z World website, 2012). What

stories of zombie Detroit ignore are the technologies of abandonment – including state policies, everyday bureaucratic procedures, diagnostic criteria, and zoning ordinances – through which landscapes become “empty” and populations are reimagined as faceless, monstrous, and ultimately disposable.

While documentarians often grapple with global economic shifts that have shaped Detroit’s landscape, less attention is paid to Michigan state and regional processes. Consequently, sensational renderings of urban decay, resurgent nature, and zombie populations abound, contributing to a voyeurism in which the spectacle of ruin becomes the story. In Detroit, which American studies scholar Jerry Herron has called the Mecca of urban ruin, many tourists participate in “decontextualized gawking” (Herron, 2013) that ignores the race and class implications of this kind of landscape consumption. For example, Bradley Garrett, a geographer and self-identified urban explorer from the United Kingdom, described his visit on his blog called Place Hacking: Explore Everything.

Sneaking through a network of decaying corridors [in Michigan Central Station], we made our way to the main building and started climbing . . . while we were running around playing on the roof, we were slightly shocked when three other explorers clamoured out of the stairwell . . . two from Paris and one from Melbourne. Later, we tried to entice them to squeeze under a fence into the old school building across the street where they found a body of a homeless man frozen in the ice last winter but they gave it a miss and we went on without them (Garrett, 2011).

These examples show, as others have argued, how ruin art (Leary, 2011) and urban exploration (Mott and Roberts, 2014) contribute to a misreading of the landscape that fails to account for existing (live) residents and their experiences of urban decline. For many Detroiters, abandonment is perceived in terms of absences rather than emptiness – the sounds, scents, tastes, and feelings that conjure place, what sociologist Alesia Montgomery calls the “sight of loss” (Montgomery, 2011). Garrett defends urban exploration, arguing that it is not about the “aesthetics of decay” but “experiencing the worlds in the here and now” (quoted in Mott and Roberts, 2014, p. 232). His claim raises a set of ethical questions about the distance between the bodies of privileged explorers and poor residents whose experience of urban decline is not the thrill of decay but frustration with daily struggles to meet basic needs. It also recalls geography’s own historically vexed relationship with exploration and the settler colonial project.

Cartography has long been used to produce frontiers and assert control over land and resources. Whereas representations of ruin and nature depict a Detroit out of time, another genre of documentation – “vacancy maps” – isolate the city in space. The maps circulate in planning documents, public meetings, private conversations, newspapers, articles, films, and books. In concert with representations of ruin and resurgent nature, they portray Detroit as a *terra nullius* – a “land belonging to no one” – for which there is a moral imperative to settle. One map, in particular, that appeared in a local paper, the *Detroit Free Press*, has travelled widely. It compared the area of Detroit’s vacant land to other cities. It shows the city’s urban footprint: faint gridlines of streets and highways stop abruptly at Detroit’s municipal boundaries. The areal footprints of San Francisco and Boston are positioned side-by-side and superimposed inside Detroit. A smattering of red dots symbolises Detroit’s hundred thousand tax-foreclosed properties. Alone inside a white square, Detroit is geographically decontextualized, removed from its relationship to the surrounding suburbs and state of Michigan. In addition to portraying Detroit as empty,

the map implies that Detroit’s problems are internal rather than regional.

Maps of Detroit, like all maps, should be understood not only as representations of reality but propositions: arguments about the way the world works or should work. While the map is not the territory, maps are important because they “bring into being the territory as we know it” (Wood, 2010, p. 52) and serve as vehicles for the imagination (Harmon, 2003). Vacancy maps, as we will later see, are critical tools that state officials, planners, and private developers use to present Detroit as a “blank slate,” an unprecedented opportunity for settlers to build the city and society anew.

Calling all pioneers

Detroit is arguably the place where the 20th-century American dream was born and died. Now, the myth is being reimagined. Detroit, as one writer put it, is where “millennials can join the fight for a just and sustainable future and demonstrate America’s character once more” (Frost, 2011). The entrepreneurial and “creative classes” (Florida, 2002; Peck, 2005), seen as carriers of improvement, are especially beckoned to cross the frontier. A 2012 *National Geographic* article exclaimed, “Even outsiders have started arriving, drawn by a sense of adventure . . . If you visit Detroit, you’re an explorer” (Nelson, 2012). New migrants range from artists and urban farmers to developers and entrepreneurs. Yet, what they share, as did early U.S. settlers, is their relative access to capital, being predominantly white, and their quest for land and opportunity whether driven by desire for self-reliance, monetary accumulation, or quality of life. Take, for example, an advertisement posted on Craigslist Portland in 2013 in the category “creative gigs” that exemplifies how the urban frontier is claimed in the Internet age:

Calling All Pioneers: The Michigan Trail (Detroit, MI)

Are you fascinated by Detroit?

Are you, like me, a young person (or young person at heart), who does not want to get stuck with some lame position working for table scraps for the rest of your life?

Have you, ever played the computer game Oregon Trail as a youngster? (or better yet, as an adult?).

If your answer was YES to any of these questions, send me an email. Tell me about yourself, your current position in life, your passion/s, skill/s, desire/s, and issue/s (there [sic] don’t have to be =) and how you see yourself living and creating in Detroit. Idealists welcome.

I’m in the process of rounding up a good group of fellow Michigan-Trail-ers for the long trek to the promised land. Detroit.

The plan is to round up a good group, (no number in mind yet), buy a property, or two or three, fix em up, farm everything to Eden, and give back to the community (ourselves included). Gentrification not included.

What you will need: Your brain. Your body. And most importantly, your Heart. It kinda keeps everything going.

Besides that, you will need to have a reserve of funds (or food stamps) to live off of while the housing and farming comes together (plan to have reserves to last you at least 12 months). I am looking towards acquiring a parcel or a few sometime early next year to early 2015, depending upon the number of people interested in this little project, and the level of energy.

You will not need to provide anything monetarily towards this project except for your own food and basic sleeping comfort.

The sky is not the limit. There is no limit. This is your chance to be a part of something great, something amazing, and something with the potential to be a complete failure. If you’re not ok with taking risks, putting yourself out there, and living in the most violent large city in the country, take some time to re-evaluate your participation in this project.

Detroit will be Portland without large-scale gentrification. It will be revitalization that includes the people who are currently living there, the people worst affected by the arbitrary machinations of a system and way of life that does not care enough for people's well-being. It's time to take back our world for the people. It's time. And the place is Detroit.

With all Sincerity, Heart, Aloha, and LOVE.

[Manu]

Manu's call is creative but by no means exceptional. His characterization of Detroit as "the promised land" where American opportunity can be realized (if you have a "reserve of funds") and his invocation of frontier discourse that involves pitting the rugged individual against danger ("if you're not ok with taking risks . . . re-evaluate") are discourses that abound in Detroit discovery narratives. Moreover, that the call was issued to Portland pioneers elucidates what Lorenzo Veracini (2010) describes as the "unfettered mobility" of the settler. Like the urban explorers, the pioneers' mobility stands in sharp contrast to that of local residents who do not have disposable income to travel or relocate. Unlike some, Manu does acknowledge current inhabitants, invites those who are on food stamps to join the project, and argues for development without "large-scale gentrification." However, his good will is complicated by his self-identification as a settler. Settlers by definition are engaged in a relationship of domination and negation. The Craigslist advertisement demonstrates the consequences of the visibilities and invisibilities that accompany settler colonialism (e.g., "the arbitrary machinations" and gentrification unfolding in Detroit), regardless of the intentions of settlers themselves.

Such zealous promotions of Detroit are frequently accompanied by calls for a 21st-century Homestead Act. Unbeknownst to many, the Michigan legislature passed an Urban Homesteading Act in 1999 intended to transfer "underutilized" public land to private ownership in poor cities like Detroit.² The Michigan Urban Homestead Act remains on the books but has never been implemented. The act emerged as part of a conservative push to privatize public housing and with hopes of developing a "formula" for replication in other states. The proposal was celebrated as a "fresh take" on the federal Homesteading Acts aimed at settling the American West that began in 1862 (Akers, 2013, p. 1079). As Republican politician Bill Schuette (then a Michigan state senator, now its attorney general) put it, whereas the "challenge" in the 19th century was "a wild and lawless West; today it is Cabrini Green [a former public housing project in Chicago] and South Central Los Angeles" (Schuette, 1998, p. 2–3, quoted in Akers, 2013). Conservative think tanks and government officials promoted urban homesteading as public interest legislation to lift up the urban poor. The Michigan Urban Homestead Act, like its antecedents, prescribed private property ownership to remedy social ills (violence, poverty, blight, disrepair) and "build real neighborhoods" in the inner city. However, "state-enforced moral strictures" blocked many from participating (cf. Akers, 2013, p. 1079–1082).

As before, private property creation necessitated categorizing civil and uncivil people. On the 19th-century frontier, would-be settlers could apply for a "homestead," which normally included 160 acres, at little or no cost by simply filing an application for land, improving it, and registering a deed. Although it was widely celebrated as the "great equalizer" in land relations, not everyone could receive a homestead. The fact that democratic participation in the United States depended on the systematic exclusion of

certain populations extended to homesteading. The 1830 Indian Removal Act made available 270 million acres, or 10 percent of U.S. land by area, to mostly Euro-Americans settlers participating in the Homestead Acts. While nonwhites could technically apply for a homestead, eligibility required citizenship, which African Americans did not gain until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 and Native Americans until 1924. Even then comparatively few became homesteaders because of the initial outlay of capital needed.³

On the contemporary frontier of urban Michigan, homesteaders would also have to fulfill moral requirements. As Schuette, a sponsor of the 1999 act, explained, "Just as Lincoln's homesteaders were required to fulfill certain minimal conditions, Michigan's Urban Homestead Act has a similar message tailored to the problems of a new era: keep your kids in school, make sure that they learn to read by the fourth grade, stay crime- and drug-free, and make a good-faith effort to improve your public housing unit. A homesteader invests courage and commitment and receives a home and a chance to break the cycle of despair" (Schuette, 1998, p. 3). Potential homesteaders were to be subject to strict review on these conditions: "Convicted felons and parolees were excluded. Drug tests were required. Proof of school attendance was to be provided each term. Credit counseling would be mandated for some participants. In addition, tenants were expected to pay 80% and 90% of the market rate for rent while homesteading and bring houses up to code within 18 months" (Akers, 2013, p. 1080). Senator Schuette concluded, "If staying off drugs is a hardship, if continual employment is not your bag, or if you don't care if your kids stay in school, this isn't for you" (ibid).

Patrick Wolfe argues that the racial zoning of cities and prisons in the United States demonstrates how settler societies fall back on old strategies (e.g., spatial sequestration) for dealing with surplus populations (Wolfe, 2006, p. 404). This argument is perhaps nowhere more violently articulated than in a recent *New Yorker* profile in which L. Brooks Patterson, the county executive of Oakland County, which borders Detroit, declared, "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're going to do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn'" (Williams, 2014). Patterson is known for making racist and appalling slurs about Detroit and celebrating the economic benefits Oakland reaps from Detroit's demise. His proposal reminds us that the discourses deployed in calls to join the "Michigan Trail," to homestead, and to seize Detroit as a "new frontier of American opportunity" – while admittedly more sympathetic and less fanatical – are nonetheless historically entangled with the same racial state violence and abandonment to which he appeals. They also suggest that new settlers, like those who came before, often arrive with "a misguided and misleading hope for the future" (Bird Rose, 2004, p. 5) that obscures the brutalities of progress. While Patterson advocates what Wolfe calls the "spatial sequestration" of surplus populations, many of the new settlers fall back on a different strategy of settler colonialism. Like Manu, they see crossing the frontier as conferring a right to make a claim.

³ Under the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, modeled on the first Homestead Act, tribal land was divided into allotments for which Native Americans could then apply for individual title. However, one had to first prove their "Indianness." Prior to application for land, Native Americans were subjected to blood quantum testing (Pugliese, 2010). The state racially classified African Americans and Native Americans in opposing ways. The one drop rule meant that the category "black" withstood unlimited admixture, whereas the category "red" was created for dilution (Wolfe, 1999). These racial categories, which were intended to legally augment slave populations as a surplus labor force and at the same time reduce populations of Native Americans who had a right to claim territory, are manifest in racialized uneven development today.

² In 1981, Detroit started an urban homesteading program (now defunct) following the enactment of the federal Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 (cf. Christensen, 2011). As part of the program, the federal government transferred ownership of 81 single family residences to the City of Detroit to be used for homesteading of which 38 were transferred conditionally to homesteaders and only 12 became occupied (HUD, 1982).

Ceremonies of possession

Colonial frontiers were advanced through ceremonies of land possession (e.g., the British planted gardens, the French staged processions) (Seed, 1995). The Marche du Nain Rouge (March of the Red Dwarf) is an annual festival staged since 2010 in Detroit that purportedly revives a French colonial tradition. According to legend, the red dwarf first attacked the French settlement of Detroit in 1701 and came to be feared by colonists as a harbinger of misfortune (Skinner, 1896) – or an external threat to the sovereign gains of the settlers. The dwarf was reportedly seen before the Battle of Bloody Run where Chief Pontiac's tribe killed 58 British soldiers, when the city burned in 1805, and on the morning of General William Hull's surrender in the War of 1812. Thus, a group of “hip urbanites” (in the words of one local paper) invented a tradition of reenacting the settler/savage relationship, which involved dressing in colonial garb, dancing, singing, chanting, and marching through the Cass Corridor to banish the dwarf and his negative baggage from the city. This neighborhood has recently been rebranded as Midtown and is the epicenter of private redevelopment, philanthropic investment, and gentrification. The march, which has drawn more than a thousand people, culminates with participants destroying an effigy of the *nain rouge* in a different part of the city: Cass Park, a meeting place for the homeless population.

Longtime residents and activists have called it a “march of gentrification.” The founder has defended it as simply “a sort of Mardi Gras tradition, a chance for catharsis after a long winter,” a way to mark “new beginnings,” and “celebrate whatever is good and working in the city.” These good intentions are complicated, however, by the racial and classed dimensions of the ceremony of repossession. As journalist Paul Abowd wrote about the event in 2011: “Overcome by a somewhat admirable will to party, the [predominantly white] crowd saw little irony in banishing one of the few people of color involved in the event – the Red Dwarf himself” (Abowd, 2011). In 2014, critics planned an Anti-Funeral Procession for Cass Corridor to be staged concurrently with the Marche du Nain Rouge.

Ceremonies of repossession are linked to efforts to repopulate Detroit with “uncommonly creative and entrepreneurial” people in carefully delimited zones. Michigan Governor Snyder has praised programs to attract “15,000 young educated people” to greater downtown Detroit by 2015. Two programs – sponsored by corporations, medical and educational institutions, and foundations – offer financial incentives for their employees to relocate to downtown and Midtown (\$20,000 forgivable loans for home purchase and \$2,500 annual allowances for renters). In the summer of 2013, Quicken Loans, whose CEO is buying up vast swaths of real estate in Detroit, hired over a thousand interns from outside the city, encouraging them to take advantage of the greater downtown cultural offerings. Other programs are designed to attract the creative class. A program called Write-A-House renovates houses for writers. After two years of paying property taxes and insurance, and writing, the authors will be given a free house. (In contrast to the Michigan Urban Homestead Act, the writers need only creative capital). As of 2014, a *New Yorker* article about the project was shared 7,600 times on Facebook and more than 2,500 people had sent inquires (Aguilar, 2014). Three houses have been acquired so far. According to the group's organizers, a squatter occupied one of the houses and they hypothesized a family had been recently evicted from another based on the belongings left behind. Meanwhile, in the largest effort to attract upwardly mobile residents, Governor Snyder petitioned the federal government to grant 50,000 EB2 visas for entrepreneurial immigrants to move to Detroit. Critics have characterized the plan as an attempt to “dilute” the majority Black population. Glen Ford writes, “The

current Black concentration is far too thick to attract sufficient white families to effect a profound racial transformation in the near term . . . An infusion of global migrants would enable Detroit's corporate masters to market the metropolis as a ‘cosmopolitan’ urban cocktail, as opposed to the nation's largest ‘Chocolate City’” (Ford, 2014). He reminds us that the spatialization of race and the racialization of space (cf. Lipsitz, 2007; McKittrick, 2006) are central to the settler colonial project. Synder's proposal is about stretching the boundaries of whiteness around a new group of immigrants and new geography; inclusion is less about the color of one's skin than one's access to capital (cf. Omi and Winant, 1994).

Incentive programs have been so successful that the “creatives” who precipitated the gentrification of greater downtown are starting to have trouble finding housing (Reindl and Gallagher, 2014). In these reinvestment zones, landscapes are being constructed for the new and future arrivals – gourmet coffee shops, yoga studios, a Whole Foods, a light rail line – as long-time residents are facing foreclosures and evictions from private and public housing. Even as gentrification proceeds from downtown to Midtown, the seeds of future redevelopment are being planted in other areas through more experimental forms of green redevelopment.

Detroit futures: Technologies of abandonment

The market value analysis

The Detroit Future City (DFC) Framework began in 2010 when then-mayor David Bing unveiled a sweeping and controversial plan to address the city's economic crisis through “rightsizing.” Known as the Detroit Works Project (DWP), the plan aimed to “re-align” and “leverage” city services and resources into seven to nine population zones so that the government could eventually shut off or reduce public services to roughly one third of the city's geographic footprint. The project was resisted by some residents, particularly those living in zones targeted for disinvestment who were concerned they would be forced to move. In response, the Bing Administration split the DWP into short-term actions, which would remain under the executive branch, and a long-term engagement process to be funded by foundations. Meanwhile, publically disavowing the contentious language of “rightsizing,” the administration hired The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a community development organization, to conduct a Market Value Analysis (MVA) of the city. They created a color-coded map that divides the city into market-based zones from orange (distressed) to purple (steady). The colors of the MVA map were not just diagnostic, but prescriptive: each color corresponded with a set of strategies for investment and disinvestment and for the allocation of municipal funds and services. In the context of austerity, color-coded zones shaped decisions about water provision, streetlights, transportation routes, and housing assistance, respatializing the state's role as a distributor of resources and the “public” in “public services” (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Distressed areas, where upwards of 90,000 people lived, were slated for service delivery reduction, disinvestment, and green redevelopment.

The value of the MVA to the state lies in its abstraction and simplification (Scott, 1998). Detroit is among over a dozen poor cities in the United States with predominantly black and brown populations that have hired TRF to conduct MVAs as part of redevelopment strategies that emphasize the reorganization of space according to market typologies, so that municipalities can geographically target local assets and package them for investors, settlers, and private sector capital. To this end, the MVA uses property value indicators (from residential sale prices to properties with building code violations to ratio of prime to subprime loans) and

social indicators (from race and ethnicity to income, education, and crime) to identify areas with similar market characteristics. After conducting statistical analysis using census tracts and block group data sets, TRF staff worked with “local market experts” to conduct a physical inspection of each city block. These experts drove the city over several days with drafts of the MVA map, verifying that the different market type characterizations were accurate. The map was then adjusted based on “fieldwork” findings (Goldstein, 2010).

While analysts did attempt to ground truth the MVA, what could be reported vis-à-vis the MVA’s established algorithm was narrow; its indicators all related to the current exchange (rather than use) value of property and potential investment yields. The variables were selected, according to the MVA’s developer, “because they reflect the conditions that any developer might observe when evaluating areas for investment or intervention” (Goldstein, 2012). Informal economies and quotidian practices of care through which Detroiters maintain land in their neighborhoods fall outside the indices of value used in analysis and are thus ignored. With one quarter of Detroit’s properties in some state of tax foreclosure, another third in mortgage foreclosure, and a sizable number of parcels in the hands of speculators, the cultural and political systems that govern the exchange and maintenance of landed property are in crisis. Many residents without legal title spend an inordinate amount of time caring for land. They develop coordinated systems of maintenance, including scheduled mowing of vacant lots, boarding up some houses, and planting flowers in front of others to make them look lived in. Some hold antiforeclosure protests, petition against evictions, and demand that absentee landlords take care of land and buildings. Others start community gardens, paint murals, and claim vacant parcels for parks and theater spaces. For some, caring for the land is about keeping up property values and creating safe neighborhoods. Others see the city’s de facto public lands as a commons. For them, caring for land is about building new forms of community and more just systems of governance. The MVA, by definition, is unable to reflect these more expansive definitions of value and values.

Yet the most damning aspect of the MVA is not just that some practices, knowledges, and systems of care are ignored, but how the MVA transforms the reality it represents. The formulas used in the MVA geocode parameters of profitability, which are used to measure the worth of space and human life in delimited areas. In other words, the misreading of the landscape becomes the landscape. Critically, the MVA works to establish not only what will be considered valuable in Detroit’s future but also how value is defined.

While few people beyond city hall have heard of the MVA map and recognize its implications, inside it is ubiquitous. The Bing Administration’s use of the MVA to make decisions was part of a broader effort to depoliticize the planning process by making it data-driven. In a November 2012 interview, a city planner told me, “As resources get limited and we look for greater impact, everyone is moving to a targeted strategy. You can’t have targeting be a political decision.” She showed me a document of service delivery changes associated with the MVA zones. “It has to be driven by empirical data. That is our reality here. I have to imagine colleagues in other cities feel the same way. You can’t have people saying, well you just picked these areas because...”

The MVA also lays the conditions of possibility for DFC’s green infrastructure plans. What is purported to be a simple cost-benefit analysis that allocates resources to maximize social utility exacerbates the bifurcation of segregated landscapes and prepares Detroit for what might be described as accumulation by green dispossession. This is to say that along Detroit’s frontier, accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003) is happening through green redevelopment. Whereas in the 19th century, settlers sought to

conquer nature (for its extractive value), 21st-century urban planners and developers aim to create value through nature’s “poly-functionality” (Bérlanger, 2009). Yet accumulation by green dispossession still involves some of the defining features of settler colonialism, e.g., the hegemony of private property, the appropriation of de facto collective land and resources, and the expendability of particular people and places.

Accumulation by green dispossession

In 2009, a group from top U.S. planning schools challenged the global academic planning community to develop a more robust research agenda on how to adapt growth-oriented planning tools for shrinking cities (Hollander et al., 2009). They recommended greening as the key strategy for capitalizing on urban decline. Their argument echoed that of an influential article published a year earlier entitled, “Greening the Rust Belt.” The paper’s authors, Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan, proposed rightsizing-via-greening as a new model for reorganizing shrinking cities. They defined rightsizing as “stabilizing dysfunctional markets and distressed neighborhoods by more closely aligning a city’s built environment with the needs of existing and foreseeable populations by adjusting the amount of land available for development” (Schilling and Logan, 2008, p. 3). To do this, they advocated replacing vacant and abandoned properties with green infrastructure. Green infrastructure, according to their model, would convert surplus, blighted land into green space and stabilize property values and population levels. While Schilling and Logan did warn of social equity issues and that the legacies of urban renewal would require politicians and planners to “balance residents’ immediate interests with long-term visions of community viability,” they remained vague about the criteria for measuring “balance.”

As plans for Detroit’s future progressed, they increasingly incorporated rightsizing-via-greening strategies, but bureaucrats were careful to distance themselves from the language of rightsizing. The MVA, which helped city officials rationalize investment and disinvestment in technical rather than political terms and to allocate scarce resources with more geographical precision, came to dramatically shape the “participatory arm” of the Detroit Works Project, which evolved into the Detroit Future City plan and deploys green infrastructure as the key strategy by which these disconnected spaces will be repurposed.

While uneven development appears to be largely ignored in the DFC plan, it guides the internal reterritorialization of the city and makes its approach to urban greening so deeply problematic. In July 2012, I interviewed Dan Kinkead, who was then a lead consultant for the team that produced the DFC framework and in 2014 became the director of projects at the DFC Implementation Office. Kinkead explained how his team had worked to morph the MVA into a land-use typology in which areas previously characterized as “distressed” markets would be recoded as “high vacancy” and slated for greening. In other words, the market analysis, more than vacancy, guided the DFC’s disinvestment and repurposing plans. Like the city planner, he saw the shift in terminology as critical: “Everyone is looking at language. It’s highly scrutinized. We finally found something that is accessible to the public. It’s high vacancy. It’s low vacancy. Even though what we’re talking about is more than vacancy, it’s easy.” Other city planners who I interviewed explained the rhetorical shift from “distressed” to “vacant” in similar ways. One said: “People felt like we were saying, you have a distressed reality. They felt like it spoke to the quality of life in the neighborhood. We told people, we’re not talking about the people. We’re talking about the market conditions in the neighborhood. They are strong or they are weak.” By contrast, she explained, the term vacancy has been widely used in Detroit for a long time, so citizens will be less likely to debate

characterizations of neighborhoods. By emphasizing vacancy, Detroit's planners no longer seemed to be "talking about people" and their removal, but projecting a technically rationalized and purportedly neutral landscape removed from the deeply political conditions of its production.

Like the frontier of the American West, this new urban frontier is far from empty. Yet as a frontier, it is characterized as uninhabited and underutilized – an untapped resource for capital and settlers. Despite the historical gulf that divides them, frontier (re)development is in both cases a form of displacement premised on erasure. Under European colonialism, settlement involved the erasure of native populations and their collective ways of life through war, disease, and starvation, breaking tribal land into alienable freehold, assimilation and resocialization programs, and spatial sequestration. Today, erasure involves representations of emptiness and accumulation by green dispossession. In the next section, I focus on a case of green redevelopment and show how theories of rightsizing-via-greening work with frontier narratives to redefine what it means for postindustrial landscapes to be productive.

An urban cover crop

Hantz Woodlands exemplifies how the green redevelopment approach presented by the Detroit Future City plan as technical and neutral is embedded with logics of productive use that are redistributive and controversial. The Hantz Woodlands origin myth, as told by its founder John Hantz, goes like this: Every morning, the 48-year-old white financier drives through the city to the multi-billion dollar planning and investment firm he owns in the suburbs. One morning, he realized that the mismatch between Detroit's population size and spatial footprint was fundamentally a problem of supply and demand. With almost 30,000 acres of abandoned land in Detroit, he thought, there is no incentive to buy real estate, because every year it becomes cheaper. He then pledged \$30 million to build "the world's largest urban farm" in Detroit with the explicit aim of reducing the supply of real estate on the market. Over time, Hantz's vision assumed different forms, the most grandiose of which was a proposed 5,000-acre complex to integrate vegetable, fruit, timber, and biofuels production, agritourism, and a hydroponic and aeroponic research center. After a four-year struggle with residents, urban farmers, and community activists, construction began on the comparably humble 180-acre Hantz Woodlands on the east side of Detroit. Not coincidentally, this area was deemed by the MVA to have "no market value" and slated for greening under the Detroit Future City plan.

Between 2009, when Hantz first proposed a farm in Detroit, and December 2012 when the city council approved the land sale, he encountered various stumbling blocks. Residents worried about the impacts of a large farm in their neighborhood. Would it attract rodents? Would pesticides be used? What would the environmental impacts be (especially given that the city council had yet to pass an urban agricultural ordinance)? The city council and planning commissioners hesitated to sell such a large tract of land to one individual. The most vocal opposition came from Detroit's well-organized food justice community. They wrote op-ed pieces in local newspapers, organized rallies, and appeared on talk shows. They argued that land ownership and control must be at the forefront of discussions about social justice and development in Detroit. They pointed out that many farmers who "improved" lands struggled to get legal title, even as Hantz ultimately acquired thousands of parcels. In addition, they pointed out that the project lacked a community benefit agreement and would generate only modest revenue for the city. Finally, they worried about the implications of the city cutting deals with Hantz or other developers in areas being decommissioned through the elimination of public

services. Malik Yakini, a prominent figure in the food justice movement, underscored these points in a radio interview, arguing the city needed to consider the social justice, class, and racial implications of land disposition and not just sell to the highest bidder. The Hantz project, he said, perpetuated a global legacy of "wealthy white men owning large tracts of land" and the majority of people being landless. "This is a legacy project. He is looking to leave this to his daughter. We are talking about the intergenerational transmission of wealth and continuing to create this imbalance of power in the city of Detroit" (Yakini, 2012). Yakini, like others, felt Detroit had an opportunity to reimagine land use in a way that would benefit the majority of the people. "How can we use this [land] for the common good?" he asked.

In the weeks leading up to the 2012 city council vote, the Detroit Food Justice Taskforce, a consortium of people-of-color-led organizations and allies that aim to create a food security plan for the city, organized a door-to-door canvassing campaign within Hantz Woodland's projected footprint and estimated that 90% of residents did not know about the project. The week before the city council was scheduled to vote, the activists demanded a public meeting. About 400 people attended the meeting and there were over 2.5 hours of public comment. Ninety-nine percent of the people who spoke to city council members expressed opposition to the project. However, with the Detroit Works Project moving ahead, and the city's takeover by an emergency manager imminent, the city council voted to sell Hantz 1,900 parcels on the east side for \$520,000.⁴ The land, located a half mile from the waterfront, would be sold for 8 cents per square foot. In turn, Hantz agreed to plant at least 15,000 hardwood trees on the land or use it in any other way consistent with applicable law, regulations, and ordinances; maintain the landscape and mow the properties every three weeks during the growing season; and tear down at least 50 dilapidated structures. If he follows the agreement, in 2016, he will be given right of first refusal to buy all city-owned lots in a one-mile radius around the site. Hantz could potentially own one fourteenth of Detroit. Nothing in the development agreement binds Hantz to forestry or agriculture after the initial 4 years. Thus, the city council's approval of the project – seen by many as a land grab by a white businessman in a black city – upset the community's moral economy.

While Hantz Woodlands is distinguished by its scale, the project's rationality is emblematic of a wave of public-private green redevelopment underway in Detroit and other shrinking cities that is cast as an environmentally friendly fix to urban land and labor crises. In June 2012, I interviewed the president of Hantz Woodlands. Mike Score showed me around the company's demonstration plot and described their vision. Hantz will buy tax-foreclosed lots from the city, demolish any buildings on them, and plant hardwood trees (sugar maples, swamp oaks, bur oaks, white birch, flowering dogwood). When – or if – the trees mature (after an estimated 60 years), they will be sold as logs. When I visited, the plot of trees looked less like a forest than another vacant lot. Upon closer inspection, skinny saplings held up by poles were planted in rows 12 feet apart. Yet, if we focus on the trees themselves, we miss how economic value is actually to be produced through this urban forest. In Hantz's words, the aim of the forest is value creation through subtraction: "We have to figure out how to create positive scarcity so that people have a reason to take action. . . . How could we create scarcity in a way that impacts everything else we're trying to fix, like reduced services? With a farm, you can turn the sewage and the water off; it takes care of blight – It's really the cheapest option you have" (The Atlantic, 2010). The 60-year production horizon reminds us that Hantz's

⁴ On March 14, 2014, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as emergency manager of Detroit. In July 2013, Orr sold Hantz another 1,500 lots.

primary focus is not timber production, per se, but a green fix for depressed real estate markets that is infused with settler colonial logics. To his credit, Hantz has always been transparent about this.

“John’s first proposal,” Mike said, “was not a farm. His real vision is to get property back into the private sector. He suggested to the city that there be a homesteading program.” Hantz said he would give up the farm and fund the creation of a Homesteading Office that his company would administer instead of the city, which he argued would be incapable of implementing it efficiently. “When people come in they’d bring their deed, there is a one-page application, we’d do a site visit, yes you own the property, yes it is adjacent to your house, you don’t have a blighted site now, you have to agree to cut the grass for three years, at the end of three years, you have to agree to pay the taxes ... The Homesteading Office signs off on the deal, they visit your site, at the end of three years it is yours.” For Hantz, economic development is predicated on the transfer of Detroit’s foreclosed public property into responsible private hands. The liberal assumptions about responsible use and individualism embedded in Hantz’s vision for urban homesteading and forestry raise questions about the ways these concepts have been used to justify dispossession since the settler colonial era and get recycled under neoliberal environmentalism to support a new round of enclosures.

Hantz’s project relies on John Locke’s labor theory of property to make a claim to Detroit’s “empty” land (Locke, 1952 [1609]). Locke argued that labor put into land confers ownership. However, the project is not simply about ownership, per se, but property as a disciplinary mechanism for moral behavior. Locke argued that once people became property owners they also become civilized and rational subjects who seek to “improve” (i.e., productively use) their land. In short, private property was seen as a way to induce progress and economic prosperity, much like Hantz’s homesteading proposal to transfer property to individuals today; even if land was productively used, it would only produce exchange value when rendered legible within the private property apparatus. A host of other assumptions followed. If wealth derived from the proper use of property, then poverty was the result of individual mismanagement. Thus, creating private property not only necessitated drawing boundaries between the formal and informal, but people considered eligible and ineligible for citizenship and, by extension, ownership.

In response to community opposition, Score wrote an open letter that appeared in the Detroit *Huffington Post*, in which he argued: “People who have been *generous*, and who practice *civic duty* and *pride* in their communities understand and support Hantz Group’s willingness to make this type of investment. The effort is to clean up, maintain and create a beautiful environment that will grow the City’s population base and create an economic catalyst by stimulating new business opportunities and therefore, jobs” (Score, 2012, emphasis added). The letter calls attention to the polyfunctionality of new green landscapes and accuses people who oppose or question the Hantz development of lacking civic mindedness and pride in Detroit. Moreover, its argument that private property instills civility, responsibility, and economic productivity carries racial undertones in an often-denigrated majority-black city. A blogger on a site called the *Above Ground Tumblr* (2012) wrote, “there is one common narrative we keep hearing: that this land grab is a good thing because the people currently living in the area (or the ones who lost their own parcels of the land through foreclosures) don’t know how to take care of the land. Those people are responsible for the blight of Detroit, they are responsible for ‘everything that is wrong with Detroit today’ ... and so it’s decided that it’d be best if the people on the land are removed to make way for people who know how to take care of it *properly*.”

Others who opposed Hantz tried to make visible the ways they steward land. For example, Edith Floyd, who has been farming for 40 years near Hantz Woodlands but has had trouble getting even a temporary permit for her greenhouse, argued that the city should sell land to people who have been caring for it. “He’s getting a special deal. This city is not treating us fair at all ... It’s two laws: one for the rich and one for the poor” (quoted in Sands, 2012). Not only did residents argue that smallholder farmers should be granted property rights, but that the labor of those who mow lawns, plant flowers, and board up buildings should be recognized through land rights. Like Hantz and Score, their arguments invoke Lockean logics – that labor should confer property rights – but they do so in a way that seeks to acknowledge past and present informal labor rather than promised benefits.

The reterritorialization of Detroit demonstrates how private property depends on active “doing” (Blomley, 2003). Hantz Woodlands is an urban “cover crop” that obscures previous geographies of settlement and prepares the land for a new round of accumulation and development. As such, it represents a new landscape of capitalist accumulation and valuation of nature in the postindustrial city. However, it is one that invokes – and whose possibility of existence is conditioned by – settler colonial rationalities and an imaginary of romantic nature. As anthropologist Anna Tsing (2004) has argued, “A key feature of the frontier” is that it asks “participants to see a landscape that doesn’t exist, at least not yet. It must continually erase old residents’ rights to create its wild and empty spaces where *discovering* resources, not stealing them, is possible. To do so, too, it must cover up the conditions of its own production” (p. 68).

Conclusion

As opposition to the Hantz project demonstrates, “productivity” is a term with a long history, loaded with liberal and racial exclusions. On the 19th-century U.S. Western frontier, new lands and new (white) blood for nation building were produced through enclosure and severalty. This practice occurred most violently through the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Modeled on the first Homestead Act, it was the centerpiece of Native American assimilation programs. Severalty is defined as the quality or condition of being separate or distinct. In property law, it expresses the tenure of property, especially land, as an individual right, not to be jointly held with another or others (American Heritage, 2006). Frontier development has no place for the idea that common property and conceptions of personhood that transcend the individual could be productive in terms of community social relations. Therefore, settler colonial logics of property, race, and citizenship continue to erase other types of property as they did on the “frontier” a century ago. They do so to such an extent that for many – particularly those who engage in common property practices – creating alternatives is a challenge because legal-judicial frameworks and institutions support private property regimes, but also because our subjectivities and racial identities are deeply imbricated in – and disciplined by – these structures. As Cheryl Harris (1993) argues, the legacy of slavery and seizure of land from Native Americans created not only a racist property law regime, but an actual property interest in whiteness, which is another way of saying that racism has shaped who owns what, which forms of ownership are recognized and legitimated, and which practices are considered sufficient to establish possession.

Some Detroit residents see common property as an alternative to private land ownership, arguing that de facto public land held by the city should be redefined as “commons.” Indeed, as the Hantz deal moved toward a vote in 2012, a coalition of over 14 organizations argued that community land trusts – a legally sanctioned

alternative to private property and state property – were the best path for future development. In an open letter to the city, they wrote:

We . . . have done sustained, substantial work on the east side of Detroit for many decades. We have established youth programs, worked on anti violence efforts, organized business initiatives, encouraged economic innovation, established gardens, reclaimed homes, planted trees, developed new models of education, and supported artistic and creative activities. Like all Detroiters, we have contributed to the support of public lands, and we have all suffered from their neglect. We Believe: Public lands are a public trust; Public land should be used to further community health, welfare, beauty, independence, and interconnection.

As of 2014, the Detroit Community Land Trust was still in its infancy. The search for alternative structures of land tenure point to the dearth of models in the United States available for communities that would address what many saw as a key problem in Detroit – more just systems of development depend on a recognition of how histories of colonialism, slavery, and racist housing practices are written on the land in ways that shape how we think about stewardship and ownership.

Since the early days of settler colonialism in the United States, the state has facilitated accumulation by dispossession, creating “free” capitalist markets through the establishment and maintenance of a private property regime (Perelman, 2000). However, it is only over the past decade that urban green spaces have been reconceptualized as infrastructure and used to create new frontiers for capital accumulation within postindustrial landscapes. The process of remaking “nature as infrastructure” (Carse, 2012) leads to contestations when groups have different ideas about how landscapes should be valued and ordered and when the material organization of infrastructure unevenly distributes costs and benefits. These contestations raise ethical questions about the ontologies and epistemologies embedded in maps, plans, and the built environment: What values support them? How are they challenged? The struggles over Hantz Woodlands, representations of Detroit, and planning processes are significant because they stand for something much larger. They are not simply struggles of refusal, but struggles to create new modes of being that counteract the colonial and racial expropriation on which capitalism is rooted.

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