

**Jerry Herron**

Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress

**Just Like Home**

**W**e love a parade—Americans do—and anniversaries and special days and “festival” occasions and sites. Politicians issue commemorative proclamations, the calendar fills up with memorializations, so many in fact that they become impossible to keep track of: General Pulaski Day, Panama Canal Day, Trivia Day, National Hugging Day, National Pencil Week, National Snack Food Month, et cetera. We invented the greeting card after all, and we can’t seem to get enough when it comes to reasons for sending one. And it’s not just happy times that people want remembered. We love a good disaster too: perfect storms and earthquakes, plane crashes and catastrophes (both monster induced and otherwise). Even 9/11 has now made its way to the big screen—first with *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2006), and more recently with *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006). Or more to the point, when it comes to our national obsession with popularized catastrophe, consider James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), which set records for production cost and subsequently box office take, and then went on to win a record eleven Academy Awards.

That film is particularly emblematic of our craving for real-life disaster translated into “spectacle,” borrowing that term from Guy Debord.

Debord’s 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* still provides a useful gloss on our native brand of spectacularization, and the urge for disaster relief that makes us who we are. “The spectacle,” he writes, “is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.”<sup>1</sup> We relate to each other by means of spectacular transformations. So RMS *Titanic* sinks, invoking all the human catastrophe that Hollywood can summon up, but miraculously transformed, with questions of class and race and gender being invoked with high-tech precision and then transmuted to a question of feeling—specifically the way we feel about the love that “will go on” between the two characters played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. So successful is the transformation and the triumph of feeling that at the end of the film human disaster is fully relieved, and the ship reappears intact with the dead miraculously resurrected for a final round of applause and self-congratulation—as if thanking us, the audience, for having managed to feel better about ourselves, now that we’ve had a good, and therapeutic, cry.

That is a ridiculous example of spectacular response to disastrous events. But it’s not the example itself that matters so much as its success at doing the work that needs to be done. The one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina provides an example of a different sort—the disaster that was visited on the people of the Gulf Coast first by nature, and then by our national government. That anniversary was immediately followed by the fifth anniversary of 9/11, which likewise offers an occasion for spectacular rounds of media event-making. We are invited to contemplate certain kinds of human catastrophe and specifically within the context of the cities where those catastrophes occurred—New Orleans (standing in for the whole range of devastated Gulf Coast communities) and New York. In both cases, events—a devastating hurricane and a terrorist attack—were compacted in a way sure to heighten the disastrous consequences and dramatic potential. And the city—familiar, populous, even perhaps loved—plays a crucial role in this exaggerated dramaturgy. Cities make for better *mis-en-scène* than the countryside.

There are lessons to be learned here, surely, as the *New York Times* points out in an anniversary story on New Orleans. The article opens with a good news/bad news evocation of what might be the future of that city. As for the good news, maybe New Orleans will come back, more vital and artsy

and even cooler than before. Or maybe not. On the bad news side—citing the city where I live—the reporter writes, “are the gloomy predictions of the pessimists. New Orleans will be like Detroit at its nadir, they say, a sickly urban wasteland abandoned by the middle class. A moldering core will be surrounded by miles of vacant houses, with wide-open neighborhoods roamed by drug dealers and other criminals. The new New Orleans will be merely a grim amplification of its present unpromising self, the pessimists say.”<sup>2</sup> What is remarkable to somebody who lives in Detroit is not only the aptness of the comparison but also the fact that the “nadir” referred to is not something in Detroit’s past but an accurate description of ongoing conditions. Not only that, but it’s remarkable how disastrous conditions in Detroit are simply taken for granted, which of course they are by practically everybody in this country, including the people who live here.

Detroit is the longest-running disaster story in American history: more than half the population has fled, and of the half remaining in the city, half say they would leave if they could; the poverty rate habitually runs neck-and-neck for the claim of the nation’s highest; it has disastrous rates of illiteracy and violence; it’s the most racially segregated spot in this country; almost half the adult population is not employed and not seeking work; the public education system is in free fall collapse; and misery and hopelessness of the worst kinds are visited routinely on generations of young children, the majority in single-parent households, half of them at or below the poverty line. But the disaster here has been so spread out over time that it begins to look not like a disaster at all but something else, something natural, as if this condition were to be expected. The city has so spectacularly succeeded at being its apparent self that it has become virtually unremarkable in any practical way. There’s nothing to be done about such disastrous human problems—at least not here. Not in Detroit. And that is the real story—the one that doesn’t make the news, because it isn’t news any longer; disaster hasn’t been news for a long time here.

### “A Mean-Spirited Mardi Gras”

“Our first story is not a story about a city,” as Diane Sawyer began a *Prime-time Live* report in 1990: “It’s a story about some Americans who may be sending a kind of warning to the rest of us—a warning about what happens when bitter polarization takes over the place where you live. In this community, the rich are divided from the poor, the races divided from

each other. And it's all compounded by violence and drugs. We're talking about Detroit—once a symbol of U.S. competitive vitality. And some say still a symbol—a symbol of the future, the first urban domino to fall.”<sup>3</sup> That report—with dramatic accounts of poverty and crime, arson and drug dealing—aired at the “nadir” of Detroit’s public humiliation almost twenty years ago, when the shrinking of the city and its radical changing of hands, from white to (then) 76 percent black, still made news. Also considered newsworthy was the local observance of Devil’s Night, the night before Halloween—“a mean-spirited Mardi Gras,” as the *Primetime* report put it—when local citizens torched hundreds of buildings each year (although the notorious “holiday” seems to have had more to do with the exigencies of the media than with any genuine local tradition). In that same year, 1990, Ze’ev Chafets published a book bearing the “holiday” title, *Devil’s Night and Other True Tales of Detroit*.<sup>4</sup> Chafets dubbed Detroit “America’s first Third World city.” The *New York Times* promptly noted that he might be “the Tocqueville of the 1980s.”<sup>5</sup>

That comparison, of Chafets to Tocqueville, was apt in at least one sense. It was Tocqueville who coined the term *American exceptionalism*, and it is surely the urge for a new kind of exceptionalism that motivates the spectacular representations of Detroit. The city has become so exaggerated a symbol of disaster that it ceases to refer to anything but itself—a fallen “urban domino” too far removed from others to provoke a chain reaction. Which is the point of the *New York Times* reporter’s passing reference to Detroit in the comparison with New Orleans—a point that Judd Rose made as well in the *Primetime* report on Detroit, in a moment of twisted but still exemplary logic:

Most big cities do have the same problems as Detroit. And in some cases they’re worse. Washington has more murders. LA has more gangs. New York has more racial violence. America’s cities are on a dark and dangerous road. But you come here, and you get the feeling that this—this is what the end of the road looks like. Here in Detroit we have seen two worlds, one poor and black, one wealthy and white. Two worlds with their backs turned to each other. Here in Detroit we have seen the future, and it’s frightening.

The exceptional thing in the report is not Detroit, but the presumption that ABC News needed to come here to witness those two worlds of black and

white and the consequences that follow upon racial and economic segregation. There's nothing local about our situation; those are American problems with results that are pervasive throughout our society.

The urge for exceptionalism is understandable, however, given the precipitous fall of Detroit and all that that fall might portend for the rest of this country. No city in America has so completely changed hands in so short a time, and no city has consequently provoked so strong a wish on everybody else's part to explain away any causal connections that might link Detroit's disaster to America generally. To invoke Judd Rose's metaphor, the urge was to locate Detroit at "the end of the road" the rest of Americans need not reach. ABC's spectacular rendering of Detroit was an attempt to translate to a problem of feeling—as in *Titanic*—the real disaster of social relations based on racism and economic segregation. To his credit, Mayor Coleman Young was insistent on pointing this out in the *Primetime* episode. "Black people are victims of racism," he said. "It's not accidental that the cities around the nation that have the largest percentage of blacks have the largest percentage of poverty and the largest percentage of crime, [and that they] have the largest percentage of unemployment." The episode ends, however, not with politics or economic realities, but with feeling—a despairing mother whose son was murdered. We get to feel for her, just as we get to feel ourselves slipping off the hook of blame.

No wonder Americans want off that hook. Detroit is a perfect storm of convergent characteristics to be avoided—a place that is black, poor, Rust Belt, postindustrial, and, perhaps most damning of all at the time, Democratic. The *Primetime* episode aired in 1990, following eight years of Ronald Reagan, with the presidency of George H. W. Bush only just begun. In the twenty-five years since Reagan took office, there has been an ongoing shift of population and capital as well as political power away from the old cities of the Northeast and Midwest—traditional centers of Democratic political clout, dependent on the black vote. During that same span of years, there has been a widening gap between rich and poor, with the formerly expansive middle of our economy now affording less and less space. Yet the majority of Americans continue to believe that prosperity is a matter of individual choice. "The gap between rich and poor is bigger than in any other advanced country," as the *Economist* writes in a recent article, "but most people are unconcerned. . . . Eight out of ten, more than anywhere else, believe that though you may start poor, if you work hard, you can

make pots of money. It is a central part of the American dream.”<sup>6</sup> In order to maintain that dream, it is necessary to get over the potentially troubling evidence of Detroit, which is precisely what has happened.

We still come in for an occasional spectacular drive-by—in *Playboy* magazine, for example, a couple of years ago, “Detroit: Death City,” hauled out all the usual suspects: violence, drugs, race. But the news is mostly old by now, the disastrous free fall of Detroit so established a fact that it hardly seems worth reporting, except as the basis for opportunistic self-aggrandizing, such as that undertaken by the *Playboy* author, who ramps up a personal tragedy by playing it out against the spectacular backdrop of Detroit.<sup>7</sup> But the results, regardless of how painful for the individuals involved, don’t get much farther, analytically, than the T-shirt slogan locally popular a few years back, “I’m so bad I party in Detroit.” This routinizing of Detroit’s disaster is a testament to the success of our spectacular machinery, which renders the city sufficiently exhausted—both actually and symbolically—so that its disaster no longer refers to anything outside itself. But this truth of spectacular exceptionalism is of course a fundamental lie, as Mayor Young pointed out, heatedly, in the 1990 ABC broadcast. Taxed with the collapse of urban neighborhoods as if that were his fault, he urged upon Judd Rose the point that “neighborhoods collapsed because half the goddamn population left.” The disaster of Detroit, in other words, is the result of white, not black, decisions. It is the people who left, not the people left behind, who have created this place.

If that point were taken seriously, however, it would be difficult to maintain Americans’ generally held belief, which the *Economist* points to, that prosperity is an elective decision. It would be impossible to preserve our faith that human decency and social justice are likewise not questions about somebody else’s condition but instead matters of how we feel about ourselves. We have no choice, then, as Americans, if we wish to continue believing in ourselves, except to get over Detroit. But Detroit is not an elective condition that can be avoided simply by wishing it off on somebody else, which is the point that Thomas Sugrue—a native Detroiter—makes in his book *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*:

It is a commonplace observation that Detroit’s urban crisis began with the riot of 1967 and worsened with the inauguration of Coleman Young as Detroit’s first black mayor in 1974. Detroit, argued journalist Ze’ev

Chafets in an influential *New York Times* article and subsequent book, became America's "first major Third World city" in the wake of the 1967 riot. . . . What has become of Detroit, however, is not the product of post-riot panic or the alleged misrule of Coleman Young. . . . [T]he rehabilitation of Detroit and other major American cities will require a more vigorous attempt to grapple with the enduring effects of the postwar transformation of the city, and creative responses, piece by piece, to the interconnected forces of race, residence, discrimination, and industrial decline, the consequences of a troubled and still unresolved past.<sup>8</sup>

It is Sugrue's point, in other words, that Detroit may be a disaster, but the causes of the disaster are common to us all. It was no storm that carried Detroit away. The disaster here was and is a matter of design. In that sense, Detroit is no exceptional place; on the contrary, it is the most representatively American place on the planet.

### **When America Happens to a Place . . .**

In 1805, Detroit burned to the ground, the result of an accidental fire that started, supposedly, when a stray cinder from the town baker's pipe set fire to some straw in his stable.<sup>9</sup> It was a windless day—Tuesday, the eleventh of June. The town's one pumping apparatus malfunctioned almost immediately, and bucket brigades were not up to the task of controlling the blaze. In about three hours' time, the fire consumed all there was of Detroit, which amounted to no more than 300 wooden structures. It was a disaster, certainly, for the 500 people who lived there at the time. For the most part, however, the fire was unremarkable—simply one of those things that happened in the days of all-wood construction. And it was no great loss, either, since the village that had just burned down hardly mattered in the greater scheme of things—at least not yet. The fire did produce one memorable outcome, however, which is the city motto. As the story goes, a local priest, Father Gabriel Richard, was overheard to say to himself as he surveyed the smoldering ruins, "*Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*" (We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes). That has turned out to be a prophetic reading of this preeminently American place, with disaster and hope being forever linked, the one being the necessary price, it seems, of the other.

Consider the way Americans have conducted our lives under industrial

modernity, which is the era of Detroit's special status as preeminently representative city. First, we lived in the country, with the U.S. population not becoming urban until the 1920 census. Then, for about fifty years, cities dominated before giving way to suburbia as the preferred form of life. Even though suburbs are still where half of all Americans live, the future seems to belong now to the exurbs, ever farther away, beyond historical limits of urbanism.<sup>10</sup> The period of the city's dominance, from 1920 until 1970, was also a period of increasing racial segregation. According to a study by the Brookings Institution, it was not until the 1970 census that urban segregation began to diminish: "During every decade between 1890 and 1970 segregation rose, and rose dramatically, across American cities. Starting in the 1970s, however, segregation began to fall."<sup>11</sup> Even so, the pattern of diminishing segregation is indicative—more the result of happenstance and unregulated growth in the places people are headed toward, rather than fundamental changes of traditional attitudes. In other words, it's not about white people moving into predominantly black neighborhoods, especially urban ones. It's about successful blacks following whites out of town and into a better life.

Which returns things to Detroit and its exemplary status. Detroit's rise and fall exemplify the general pattern of Americans' striving, first to get ourselves into the city, and then to get out of it. In 1890, Detroit had a population of a little more than 200,000 and ranked as the fourteenth largest city in the United States. By 1920, the population had increased five-fold, to just less than 1 million, making Detroit America's fourth largest city. The city reached its peak population in 1950 and then immediately began to shrink, a trend that has continued until today, when Detroit's population numbers 836,056, returning it to roughly where it was in 1890, relative to other American cities. At the same time, the population of metropolitan Detroit continues to grow, numbering 4.4 million in the 2000 census. The city itself is now more than 80 percent black, with the second highest poverty rate of any large U.S. city (31.4 percent) and a child poverty rate of 47.8 percent, according to U.S. Census data.<sup>12</sup> Detroit is the result, in other words, of the general patterns of American movement and striving, away from town and away from the problems of violence and poverty and race that the cities stand for, with the "collapse" of Detroit being the result, as Mayor Young insisted, of white, middle-class attitudes, rather than those of the people who don't get to choose where and how they will live.

*Speramus meliora*: we hope for better things. Detroit stands not only for



the general American trend toward ex-migration and the hopeful pursuit of a better life, the push toward bigger houses, farther apart, with somebody “just like me” living next door, with the average new American home now being the largest structure ever lived in by average humans.<sup>13</sup> The city also exemplifies our careless delinquency when it comes to whoever and whatever gets left behind. *Resurget cineribus*: it will arise from the ashes. What has risen in Detroit is a human disaster that makes it difficult to sustain a belief in our common decency as a people. Half of the children in the city live in poverty? How can this be? Thus the urge for spectacular exceptionalism. “It’s a throwaway city for a throwaway society,” as Frank Owen informed readers in *Playboy* in 2004, “a place where the American dream came to die . . . a global symbol for what happens when cities go bad, a byword for violent crime, urban decay and racialized poverty. Today Detroit is America’s forgotten city.”<sup>14</sup> Or at least forgetting is what most Americans hope will happen to Detroit and all it stands for, an uncanny place that only *looks* like a city but really isn’t one, at least not any more (as Diane Sawyer urged), with the repressed truth of its typicality—and representative brutality—remaining disturbingly close to the surface.

But that’s not the worst of it, although this is surely bad enough. What is perhaps most troubling and also indicative about Detroit is the underlying condition that makes all the rest possible—a condition not exceptional, but generally shared by Americans as a matter of design. As Philip Fisher argues, we derive from an intellectual project, the U.S. Constitution, rather than ongoing traditions. “The deep meaning of having a Constitution,” he writes, “is the privilege not to have a tradition or a traditional culture. . . . To have a Constitution is to be able to say good riddance to culture in the anthropologists’ sense of the word.”<sup>15</sup> We are a designer people, in other words; we keep ourselves together not through reverencing past culture but through consuming—specifically, the spectacular consuming facilitated by the entertainment industry, which has played so crucial a part in making Detroit “America’s forgotten city.” That is Fisher’s thesis, although he reaches a happier conclusion than I do, given the evidence of Detroit. We live by a design that renders the historic space of the city unreadable—as if it has no claim on our sense of responsibility or attention, except as a potential subject for spectacular entertainments. This is perhaps the price we pay, as Americans, for the hope we continue to want to believe is ours by right, as a matter of individual choice.

The members of the Kerner Commission anticipated this conclusion in

their report prepared in response to the riots and civil disturbances that wracked America's cities in the 1960s. "The primary goal must be a single society," the report read, "in which every citizen will be free to live and work according to his capabilities and desires, not his color. . . . No American—white or black—can escape the consequences of the continuing social and economic decay of our major cities."<sup>16</sup> Detroit in 1967, following the riot (the deadliest to that point in American history), was in better shape than the city today, forty years later, and the same goes for most older American cities. The cities that the Kerner Commission saw as crucial to our understanding of who we are have been abandoned as sites of public memory and responsibility. According to a recent study by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, only 13 percent of Americans prefer to live in central cities,<sup>17</sup> with the majority opting out to suburbia and beyond. That ever-expanding world of larger houses and lots and longer commutes is also one of increasing isolation. It's not just that fewer people live in those expanding houses;<sup>18</sup> it's that we have fewer ties to the world outside the house, which is the now familiar point of Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and of a more recent study that tries to estimate the declining number of friends the average American has—now supposedly down to two or fewer, including spouses and family members.<sup>19</sup> The surprising thing is that any thoughtful person would find this condition surprising, given the design Americans have so visibly chosen to live by.

Detroit is—as usual—so representative that it seems exceptional. The most abandoned city in America, where almost half the citizens (46 percent) would rather be someplace else,<sup>20</sup> a metropolis the majority of metropolitan residents never enter, whether in fact or imagination. It's a city where "nobody" lives any more, which is not literally true, of course, although it seems as if it might be, in terms of how people act toward each other and toward this vast physical wreck. And this is typical too, although the condition is no less painful and disturbing for that—not just the seemingly endless ruins that make such a dramatic backdrop for spectacular souvenir hunts, but the wasting of humanity that follows when the public imaginary ceases to function in a public way. That is the conclusion urged by the Kerner Commission. One example, of course, doesn't prove a case, but still, it can make a point.

A local newspaper columnist reported an altogether familiar story not long ago about a young Detroit, Christopher, who was on his way to his freshman year in college but instead ended up getting shot in a gas station

holdup that went wrong. His father is a mailman who remained in the city not out of loyalty but because, as the columnist told it, he owned a house he would have had to abandon because nobody would want to buy it. "I really don't want to be here . . . anymore," Christopher told the reporter. "I know the same thing could happen in other places, but this happened here." "If Detroit cannot make itself safe enough for young men like Christopher and his brothers," the columnist concludes, "the luxury condos on the Detroit River won't matter, and we won't care that we have a home-town team in the World Series in October."<sup>21</sup>

But this is a disaster, like that proverbial tree falling unheard in the forest, with nobody apparently attending to it, aside from the reporter, so that when it comes to consequences, there won't be any, except for the isolating pain of the victim. That is Debord's point about the spectacle and history: "Another side of the deficiency of general historical life is that individual life as yet has no history. The pseudo-events which rush by in spectacular dramatizations have not been lived by those informed of them. . . . Individual experience of separate daily life remains without language, without concept, without critical access to its own past which has been recorded nowhere."<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the columnist's conclusion, then, it is the luxury condos on the Detroit River and the possibility of having a team in the World Series that count. These, at least, are recognizable as news—hopeful news. *Resurget cineribus*. As for the rest, *speramus meliora*: we hope for better things because it is our right, as Americans, to do so, elsewhere, outside the history of individual, daily disasters such as the one that befell the young man in the columnist's story and will go largely unrecorded in any meaningful way. When America happens to a place, Detroit is the disastrous consequence—a consequence we are all of us, always, fleeing from, as from a fire, which may providentially reduce to ashes the remains of a troubling past. In that sense, then, we are all from Detroit, whether we want to admit it or not.

### The History of Forgetting: How to Remember the Past

Not that all the news has been bad. Far from it. Detroit is one of the great success stories of the modern world. Maybe *the* great success story. "Nowhere in the world may the trend of the new industrial cycle be perceived more clearly than in Detroit," as one typically gee-whiz reporter put it in the late 1920s. "In this sense it is the most modern city in the world, the city of

tomorrow. There is no past, there is no history.”<sup>23</sup> Men and women came here from all over the country, and the globe, to escape the history that kept them down. They made together something that no people—let alone so many different kinds of people—had ever made before. They created the modern industrial world and all that went with it. In like process, they got rich, richer than any working man or woman had ever imagined possible. “Nowhere in the world or in human history,” the reporter continued, “were great masses of human beings lifted to such a scale of well-being and mechanical comfort.”<sup>24</sup> Great rivers of wealth flowed out of this place for generations, carrying everything before as if in a flood, rushing along the world’s first concrete highways out into the green world of suburbia. What was good for General Motors *was* good for the country, and it kept on being good for so long a time that it seemed as if the prosperity of Detroit were not something human-made and therefore subject to human failings but more like a law of nature, a design that would go on producing wealth forever.

But the design failed, of course, with disastrous results. Looking at the city now, one is struck by its similarity not to the third world (per the spectacular musings of our 1980s Tocqueville) but to the photographs of America’s other two great disaster cities, New York and New Orleans, especially New Orleans as presented in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2006. The cover photograph shows a hollow-eyed little boy posed against a background of rubble left by Katrina. “Where Hurricane Katrina, and we, have left the kids,” the subtitle reads. And the evidence, at least photographically, is that we have left them stranded in a hopeless field of devastation. As the magazine characterizes Brenda Ann Kenneally’s images, they are “intimate, captivating, sad, infuriating—and in their way, an indictment in black and white.”<sup>25</sup> It’s the backgrounds of those stark black-and-white photographs that remind me of home—the fields of rubble with domestic objects thrown together haphazardly with rocks and broken trees, the ruined houses with their insides turned out, much as ground zero in Manhattan used to look, inside out. But New York and New Orleans both still exist in the public imagination as cities, and so they must be addressed, mourned, brought back to life whole, because they stand for something about ourselves—all of us—that we want to go on believing in. Thus the “indictment” of Kenneally’s photographs. Detroit, however, no longer exists in that way; its disaster is so smeared out over time and the landscape that it

evades outrage, although you'd think a city where half the children grow up in poverty ought to be enough to awaken national sentiment. But it isn't.

This exceptional position is not something visited on Detroit from outside, or not exclusively that, and Detroit is representative here as well. The history that Detroit made, and that keeps on making Detroit necessary, is representative of the history that we all share as Americans. It's not so much that we forget the past; it's more complicated than that. Our history is a history of forgetting<sup>26</sup> how to remember the past—a sequence of site-specific acts of taking apart the apparatus of shared recollection. And that kind of history making and unmaking not only is essential to who we are, but it is essential to the modernist project that pays the bills, nowhere more visibly than here in Detroit.

This is Marshall Berman's thesis about the inherent character of modernity. "To be modern," he writes, "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. . . . To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air.'"<sup>27</sup> Modernity, then, is a kind of controlled disaster, founded on the destruction of "everything we have, everything we know," with the control not always being as good as it might be. Berman is interested in a global phenomenon of 500 years' duration. My concern is more specifically with the United States and our designer culture of legislative self-invention, starting with the Declaration of Independence and extending to the U.S. Constitution. How have we lived out, and lived with, the controlled disaster of our own native modernity? Detroit, again, is exemplary, not only in the period of the city's unprecedented growth and economic success in the first half of the twentieth century, but also in the way subsequent history gets produced in Detroit—in particular, in the way Americans' history of forgetting gets remembered and forgotten here.

"In every American personality," Philip Fisher writes, "there exists a past history of abandoned differences. The deep topic of American culture is not difference, but abandoned difference."<sup>28</sup> He is concerned specifically with the culture of immigration to which all of us belong. Nowhere has that culture worked itself out more visibly than in Detroit. Henry Ford was quick to realize what was at stake. The man who invented the Model T also invented a means of managing a vast immigrant workforce, with fewer than a third

of his workers in 1914 being native born. Those who wanted to share in the benefits of the five-dollar day were required to submit to the uniform domestic standards imposed by Ford's Sociological Department; they were compelled to turn themselves visibly into Americans. At the graduation ceremony of Ford's compulsory English-language classes, students staged an Ellis Island arrival, walking down a gangway in ethnic costumes into a great "melting pot" set up on a stage. Teachers stirred the pot from above with paddles; inside it, the students effected a quick change, emerging dressed in proper dark suits, white shirts, and ties, waving little American flags.<sup>29</sup> Ford's forgetting engine succeeded, of course, beyond anybody's wildest dreams. Whatever pain workers may have felt at surrendering their past, they were compensated with the prospect of unprecedented wages and prosperity. And that is not just how Ford worked; it is how life seemed to work.

The city—which is the great staging place for modernity—becomes an assembly line of forgetting machines, the point of each being the translation of difference into a standardized culture of consumable objects, entertainments, and expectations. That is what the department stores and movie theaters were for—to extend the work of the factory and the school, to produce a melting-pot culture of sameness, where difference could be overcome and the work of modernity could proceed. Success, then, was to be measured by the rate at which the institutions born of difference—like ethnic costumes—became obsolete. The quicker we got over the past and its problematic differences, the quicker we could get on with the future. "History is more or less the bunk," Henry Ford famously proclaimed. "We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."<sup>30</sup> Given that mandate, the city, he said, was "doomed": "We shall solve the city problem by leaving the city."<sup>31</sup> And that's just what we did. The city becomes a junkyard of no-longer-relevant forgetting machines—the department store and the old hotels, the great downtown office buildings and the train station, the old neighborhoods and public parks. The "problem," then, is getting over the memory of things that once were necessary, which stand now for the way we were, not for the way we aspire to be. The biggest problem of all, of course, is the city itself. And the solution is summed up in Ford's proposal that we would just drive away in our cars. Nowhere has that designer solution been applied more than in Detroit—and nowhere more quickly and disastrously.

The question, then, is one of cost. What have we paid for our history of

forgetting, which has made us rich and mobile and hopeful but has also left many of us stranded inside a disaster as seemingly inexplicable as it is spectacularly exceptional? In a recent editorial, Frank Rich laments our forgetting how to remember what we might have learned from the disaster of 9/11. Specifically, he points to a photograph by Thomas Hoepker in which a group of young people chat congenially on the Brooklyn waterfront while in the background smoke rises from Lower Manhattan. Rich refers to the photo as “a snapshot of history soon to come. What he [the photographer] caught was this: Traumatic as the attack on America was, 9/11 would recede quickly for many. This is a country that likes to move on, and fast. . . . The companion trait to American resilience is forgetfulness.”<sup>32</sup> It’s not just forgetting that’s at stake here, however. It’s forgetting how to remember the past—redefining our relationship with the visible remains of history so that their potential for posing questions ceases to be relevant. Our design on the future is similarly rooted in denial; it has driven Americans out of the city, both as residence and as site for imagining the future, and the city itself becomes the primary object to be forgotten, just as Henry Ford suggested.

It is the “ruin” of the city and all it stands for that finally must be dealt with, using this term in the sense of J. B. Jackson. He sees ruins as a necessary precondition to the spectacle of “restoration,” which divests the past of any cause-and-effect relation with the present and instead places it at the disposal of contemporary desires for correction: “There has to be (in our new concept of history) an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape.”<sup>33</sup> First the fire, then the *speramus*, which is how the history of forgetting gets written, as a chronicle of restorative acts, which are not history at all but something else—the ruin of history. “Increasingly, ruins herald the coming of the post-urban era,” according to Camilo José Vergara, surely the most successful and exemplary purveyor of America’s urban ruins: “We may find ourselves staring at our throwaway structures with increasing fascination, being profoundly moved by them and asking, as the members of London’s Metaphysical Society did one hundred and twenty years ago: ‘Are not ruins recognized and felt to be more beautiful than perfect structures?’”<sup>34</sup> Vergara proposed that Detroit deal with abandoned downtown buildings by turning the center city into a ruins theme park. “I can think of no better place for meditation,” he writes. “Detroit’s downtown moves me like no other place.”<sup>35</sup> And that is precisely the spec-

tacular consummation of the history of forgetting. The “ruin” of the city becomes libratory and ennobling, a site for “contemplation.” It’s not a question of blame, as Vergara is quick to point out, but one of feeling: how the individual spectator feels confronted with a depopulated spectacle of disastrous consequences—one not of his or her making.

### The Ecology of Hope

Nostalgia defines the vanishing point of history; once we get there, victory is achieved, as America’s chief executive might say. The forgetting machines’ work is done; the past can be returned to without risk, because its ruin is incapable of implicating the individual spectator in questions of shared responsibility of the sort that the old cause and effect of history might imply. The only responsibility now is one of restorative feeling, such as that offered by coffee-table books of the sort produced by Camilo Vergara, or else the actual restorations now undertaken in the name of history but which are really its opposite, the site where “history ceases to exist,” as Jackson puts it.<sup>36</sup> Old buildings yield to the will of developers—to “conversion,” in that telling phrase. When we run out of authentically old stuff to convert, as we have in some parts of Detroit, developers put up new buildings made to look like old ones, because it’s not so much authenticity at stake as it is a perfecting of the past. In the same way, the disasters visited upon New Orleans and New York have opened the debate about which version of the city is the true one, the one that must be restored, since all are agreed that a literal restoration of the past is the last thing anybody wants. Whether there or in Detroit, we don’t want the place that history made; we want the place that nostalgia can call home.

Our nostalgic urge to get right with the past is perhaps to be expected, given the uncertainties that beset the future for Americans. The ruin of our cities and all they once stood for is like the ruin of our aspirations to global acceptance and leadership in the wake of 9/11. We have made war on our best hope for a better future, just as we made war on our cities and the people left stranded in them. In that context, then, nostalgia becomes an automatic reflex. We are beset by a Gatsby-like wish to have the past over, as many times as it takes, until the act of historic conversion, *Groundhog Day*-like, often enough repeated, takes on its own history and begins to seem real. We convert the site of disaster into a spectacular theme park, and from there, we can once again imagine that we will be able to make



ourselves feel right about what lies ahead. Nowhere, it could be said with confidence, is this more visibly true than in Detroit.

This is where the future—our distinctly American future—went disastrously out of business and consequently where the pull of nostalgia becomes the greatest, a nostalgia for the future we once believed possible. The future according to Detroit was based on the school and the factory and a whole range of city institutions and on the democratic promise that even workers would become middle class. That future has gone, never to return, at least not here. So we must seek other means to achieve a believable tomorrow. But there aren't any, at least not for all of us together. As a result, the future becomes proprietary, fractured, a kind of gated community not intended for common access but instead believable and desirable precisely because it isn't for everybody. It's a matter of individual conversion.

This raises a question about what I want to call the ecology of hope and whether it is possible to be hopeful and at the same time to accept all that has gone on here. What I don't mean is the kind of hope founded on conversion—the old Wonder Bread factory that becomes a gambling casino, with the spectacle of magically produced wealth converting an urban ruin into a tourist destination. Not that, then, but something sustainable and capable of systematic inclusion. There is a picture of that future here, in my city, painted on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts in a series of murals created by Diego Rivera. Rivera came to Detroit at the depth of the Great Depression in the spring of 1932. In most ways, things couldn't have been worse. Half the auto workers in the city were out of jobs. The banks were all closed, with the city printing its own worthless scrip just so people could pay bills. A month before Rivera's arrival, the Ford Hunger March had taken place, when police shot dead four demonstrators at the Rouge River plant, the world's largest industrial facility. Five days later, a funeral march was held in downtown Detroit; an estimated crowd of 60,000 attended, and the "Internationale" rang through the streets.<sup>37</sup> Rivera worked on his murals through the winter and on into the spring, finishing them in March 1933. His main subject is the Rouge River Ford plant; his work consists of twenty-seven panels, covering the walls of an interior court. The main sections of the north and south walls show scenes of auto production, with attendant panels representing the yin and yang of industrial modernity, which brings lifesaving vaccines along with poison gas, bombers as well as cargo planes, and so on.

When the murals were opened for public viewing, a great scandal

erupted. The press denounced Rivera's work as decadent and un-American, and there was fear that his "communist" depictions might incite class warfare. Demands were made that the murals be effaced. Crowds of as many as 10,000 people a day came to see what the fuss was all about.<sup>38</sup> And this is where I think there is a lesson to be learned about disaster and the ecology of hope, both then and now. What people found in the murals was not an incitement to riot but a highly particular depiction of labor, of men—and women—at work and the machine-made wonders those workers were capable of producing. It is possible to imagine that what happened in 1933 here in Detroit, a city where history seemed to have run out, much as it would seem sixty years later when *Primetime Live* came to visit, is that a new kind of memory began to form—one in opposition to the official history of what had gone wrong, as M. Christine Boyer explains in *The City of Collective Memory*: "Memory, as opposed to history, responds more than it records, it bursts upon the scene in an unexpected manner demanding an alteration of established traditions. Operating only in fragments, memory is an art that connects disparate events; it is formed on the tactics of surprise, ruptures, and overturnings that reveal its true power and its grip over the spectator's imagination."<sup>39</sup> People gathered by the thousands there at the Institute of Arts to see themselves depicted and to surprise themselves with the memory of who they were, in spite of history, in opposition to it.

Or at least it is possible to imagine that's what happened—that a new memory was forming locally, in opposition to the spectacular failure of industrial modernity. Not Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, devoured by the machine in *Modern Times* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1936) and rendered a solitary refugee who abandons the city. Not that, but something people found memorable because they could have it together here, not in spite of the work they shared, but because of it. That is why the city did not erupt into class warfare but kept on working, even in the worst of its misery. Is that kind of memory still possible in Detroit, this most American place? Is the ecology of hope such that it can restore a system of belief that has been poisoned by all manner of nostalgic dumping and spectacular pollution? It's hard to say. There is evidence on the side of hope, of course, aside from the big-foot interventions as capital makes its way back into the city with stadiums and casinos and office towers and even some public spaces. There is evidence on a scale too small to get noticed, even locally, much of it. That's a good thing, probably. It is possible that the disaster summed up in Detroit will only be memorable locally now that we have disappeared from general

view. Alone with ourselves, maybe we'll remember who we are. Or maybe not. We're still Americans after all.

## Notes

- 1 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), statement 4.
- 2 Adam Nossiter, "Bit by Bit, Some Outlines Emerge for a Shaken New Orleans," *New York Times*, August 27, 2006.
- 3 Judd Rose, "Detroit's Agony," *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 8, 1990.
- 4 Ze'ev Chafets, *Devil's Night and Other True Tales of Detroit* (New York: Random House, 1990).
- 5 See the book jacket for *Devil's Night*.
- 6 "Inequality in America: The Rich, the Poor, and the Growing Gap between Them," *Economist.com*, June 15, 2006, [www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=Er\\_SDVVJTT](http://www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=Er_SDVVJTT).
- 7 Frank Owen, "Detroit: Death City," *Playboy*, August 2004, 60–64, 132–137.
- 8 Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 270–71.
- 9 Frank B. Woodford and Arthur M. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays: A Brief History of Detroit* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 105–7.
- 10 Ford Fessenden, "Americans Head Out beyond the Exurbs," *New York Times*, May 7, 2006, [www.nytimes.com/2006/05/07/weekinreview/07fessenden.html?ex=1173330000&en=1a24ed8a8683c83f&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/07/weekinreview/07fessenden.html?ex=1173330000&en=1a24ed8a8683c83f&ei=5070).
- 11 Edward L. Glaeser and Jacob L. Vigdor, *Racial Segregation in the 2000 Census: Promising News* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), 3.
- 12 Census information found at the FactFinder and Population Estimate sections of the U.S. Census Bureau Web site, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov). See also [www.census.gov/mp/www/cpu/fact\\_of\\_the\\_day/007857.html](http://www.census.gov/mp/www/cpu/fact_of_the_day/007857.html) and [www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-5.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-5.pdf).
- 13 See Jerry Herron, "House Bloat: America's Endless Quest for More Room(s)," *MetroTimes*, June 29, 2005, [www.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=7883](http://www.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=7883).
- 14 Owen, "Detroit: Death City," 60.
- 15 Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 41.
- 16 Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 23.
- 17 Joel Kotkin, "In Praise of Suburbs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 29, 2006.
- 18 Herron, "House Bloat."
- 19 Henry Fountain, "The Lonely American Just Got a Bit Lonelier," *New York Times*, July 2, 2006. See also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- 20 David Josar, "Hendrix Leads Race for Mayor," *Detroit News*, July 17, 2005, [www.detnews.com/2005/metro/050717/A01-250517.htm](http://www.detnews.com/2005/metro/050717/A01-250517.htm).
- 21 Rochelle Riley, "Another Shooting Hurts Two Victims," *Detroit Free Press*, September 6, 2006.

- 22 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, statement 157.
- 23 Matthew Josephson, "Detroit: City of Tomorrow, 1929," in *Detroit*, ed. Melvin G. Holli (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 163–64.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 25 *New York Times Magazine*, August 27, 2006, 1, 3.
- 26 See Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997). Klein is interested in the particular site of Los Angeles; I am concerned with a specific site as well, Detroit, but also with the mechanism by which a history of forgetting how to remember the past becomes a history itself.
- 27 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 15.
- 28 Fisher, *Still the New World*, 39.
- 29 Robert Lacey, *Ford: The Men and the Machine* (Boston: Little Brown, 1986), 124–26.
- 30 Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 148.
- 31 Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 175.
- 32 Frank Rich, "Whatever Happened to the America of 9/12?" *New York Times*, September 10, 2006.
- 33 J. B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 102.
- 34 Camilo José Vergara, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 205.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 214, 215.
- 36 Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins*, 102.
- 37 Linda Banks Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 30–31.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 174–79.
- 39 M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 68.

The disaster merges with everyday life as generation after generation learns to live with what hobbles it, while the rest of the country and its government institutions watch with tacit acceptance, or barely watch at all. Like in many places where the things the rest of the country uses are made—steel, gasoline, electricity, cotton—the people in and around Detroit have become collateral damage. If you're the optimistic type, it's possible the disaster in Flint will spark an inquest into the slow, steady poisoning of Americans of color, or at least put the spotlight on other toxic hot spots. But the national public attention span—and the media attention fueled by it—is already waning. Meanwhile, the kids being born every day, and their parents, don't have time to wait for their Silent Spring moment. Why COVID-19 Is a Disaster for Detroit. More. A pedestrian walks down an avenue in Detroit, Michigan on Tuesday. As of Wednesday, the city had the largest coronavirus caseload outside of the East Coast. JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP via Getty Images. The thing I hope people understand as we watch this coronavirus pandemic burn is that the best way to tackle a pandemic is to prevent it in the first place. So when you look at the circumstances in Detroit, and you have a community where any disaster like this was going to have a substantially higher, more devastating impact simply because of the context. And this is sad because every time something we talk about on the national stage occurs, it hits. Comparing Detroit to disaster resulted in two provocative recent articles: Reese's, Laura A. "Economic versus Natural Disasters: If Detroit Had a Hurricane," *Economic Development Quarterly*, 20, 3 (2006), 219–31; CrossRef Google Scholar; and Herron's, Jerry "Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (2007), 663–82; CrossRef Google Scholar. I do not want to suggest that the motif of disaster is not useful in order to make policy suggestions, but merely that a concurrent attention to what functions as vibrant in the city enhances our complete understanding of the realities of urban places.

3. Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress. Detroit and Los Angeles: A Study in Similarities. Disagreements, Spinoffs, and the Evolution of Detroit as the Capital of the US Automobile Industry. Drawing Lines. Effectiveness of Educational and Behavioral Asthma Intervention. Enforcement Mechanisms Discouraging Black-American Presence in Suburban Detroit. Enhancing Organizational Effectiveness through the Implementation of Supplier Parks. Fair Housing Testing. Neither was Detroit, if we're honest, but in spite of gaudy stat lines for the Bulls the Pistons featured an esprit du corps that Chicago couldn't hope to match—such has been the Bulls' season thus far. The Pacers will leave Philadelphia knocking their heads for almost blowing a game against the league's worst team, but in this realm a win is a win.