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# “i Can See My Values In Places”: Relationships, Place, And Growing Old In Detroit Neighborhoods

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**“I CAN SEE MY VALUES IN PLACES”: RELATIONSHIPS, PLACE, AND GROWING  
OLD IN DETROIT NEIGHBORHOODS**

by

**WENDY D. BARTLO**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2016

MAJOR: ANTHROPOLOGY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## DEDICATION

To Will and Vivian

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin by thanking, most importantly, the participants in this research. Thank you for opening your homes and lives to me and making this dissertation possible. A special thank you to the Corktown Historical Society who let me participate with their group for two years.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                              |      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Dedication.....                                                              | ii   |
| Acknowledgements.....                                                        | iii  |
| List of Tables.....                                                          | viii |
| List of Maps.....                                                            | ix   |
| Prologue: Values in Places.....                                              | 1    |
| Chapter 1: Introduction and Background.....                                  | 11   |
| <i>Welcome to Detroit</i> .....                                              | 11   |
| <i>Cities in the Neoliberal Era</i> .....                                    | 13   |
| <i>“Good” Cities and “Bad” Cities</i> .....                                  | 16   |
| <i>“Successful” Aging and “Unsuccessful” Aging</i> .....                     | 19   |
| <i>City of Green Benches</i> .....                                           | 21   |
| <i>Background</i> .....                                                      | 24   |
| <i>Social Isolation and the Older Person</i> .....                           | 27   |
| <i>The Anthropology of Urban Places and Older People</i> .....               | 27   |
| <i>Deviance, Disorder, Isolation, and Urban Anthropology</i> .....           | 27   |
| <i>Urban inquiry at the turn of the century: Power and Placemaking</i> ..... | 29   |
| <i>Space and Place</i> .....                                                 | 30   |
| <i>The Anthropology of Aging</i> .....                                       | 31   |
| <i>The Anthropology of Aging and Urban Ethnography</i> .....                 | 32   |
| <i>Personhood, Successful Aging, Places, and Relationships</i> .....         | 33   |
| <i>Argument</i> .....                                                        | 35   |
| <i>Outline of the Dissertation</i> .....                                     | 38   |



|                                                                     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework.....                               | 40 |
| <i>Kinship and Anthropology</i> .....                               | 40 |
| <i>Theoretical Framework of this Dissertation</i> .....             | 43 |
| Chapter 3: Project Overview.....                                    | 47 |
| <i>Methods</i> .....                                                | 47 |
| <i>Origin of the Project</i> .....                                  | 47 |
| <i>Dissertation Project</i> .....                                   | 48 |
| <i>Research Phases</i> .....                                        | 48 |
| <i>Phase 1</i> .....                                                | 48 |
| <i>Phase 2</i> .....                                                | 50 |
| <i>Phase 3</i> .....                                                | 51 |
| <i>Dissertation Study Characteristics</i> .....                     | 51 |
| <i>Recruitment</i> .....                                            | 51 |
| <i>Inclusion</i> .....                                              | 52 |
| <i>Exclusion</i> .....                                              | 52 |
| <i>Design</i> .....                                                 | 52 |
| <i>Research</i> .....                                               | 53 |
| <i>Interviews</i> .....                                             | 53 |
| <i>Co-Constructed narratives of autobiographical memories</i> ..... | 54 |
| <i>Participant Observations</i> .....                               | 55 |
| <i>Confidentiality and Consent</i> .....                            | 56 |
| <i>Dissertation Sample of Older Adults</i> .....                    | 57 |

|                                                       |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Neighborhood Affiliation</i> .....                 | 58  |
| <i>Employment</i> .....                               | 58  |
| <i>Ethnicity/Race</i> .....                           | 59  |
| <i>Age</i> .....                                      | 61  |
| <i>Analysis</i> .....                                 | 63  |
| Chapter 4: Setting.....                               | 65  |
| <i>The Wrong Person</i> .....                         | 65  |
| <i>The Origins of a ‘Bad’ City</i> .....              | 66  |
| <i>Aging in Detroit</i> .....                         | 69  |
| <i>Neighborhoods</i> .....                            | 72  |
| <i>Corktown</i> .....                                 | 72  |
| <i>Contemporary Corktown</i> .....                    | 76  |
| <i>Lafayette Park</i> .....                           | 81  |
| <i>Origins: Black Bottoms</i> .....                   | 81  |
| <i>The Development of Lafayette Park</i> .....        | 82  |
| <i>Conclusion</i> .....                               | 86  |
| Chapter 5: Spaces to Age.....                         | 88  |
| <i>Places to age: Three Scenes</i> .....              | 88  |
| <i>Aging in and out of place</i> .....                | 93  |
| <i>Residential Histories</i> .....                    | 95  |
| <i>Aging in Place in Detroit</i> .....                | 96  |
| <i>Imagined Futures and Alternate Realities</i> ..... | 96  |
| <i>Housing Stock and Finances</i> .....               | 101 |

|                                                               |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>The Political Economy of Old Age in Detroit</i> .....      | 105 |
| <i>Paid and Unpaid Help</i> .....                             | 107 |
| <i>Aging in Place in Detroit: Reflections</i> .....           | 114 |
| <i>Aging Out of Place</i> .....                               | 115 |
| <i>Making New Place and Place-making in Old Age</i> .....     | 124 |
| <i>Joanne and Dave: New places to age</i> .....               | 125 |
| <i>Creating new place: Reflections</i> .....                  | 132 |
| <i>Discussion</i> .....                                       | 133 |
| Chapter 6: Making and Remaking Kinship.....                   | 139 |
| <i>Maintaining Relationships and Returning to Place</i> ..... | 144 |
| <i>Eddie</i> .....                                            | 145 |
| <i>Joe</i> .....                                              | 148 |
| <i>Processes and Places for maintaining connections</i> ..... | 150 |
| <i>Recreating Relationships</i> .....                         | 152 |
| <i>Growing up together</i> .....                              | 154 |
| <i>Separation and Reconnection</i> .....                      | 155 |
| <i>Creating New</i> .....                                     | 161 |
| <i>Discussion</i> .....                                       | 166 |
| Chapter 7: Detroit Narratives.....                            | 168 |
| <i>The City as Identity</i> .....                             | 169 |
| <i>Not suburbanites and “urban pioneers”</i> .....            | 172 |
| <i>Say nice things about Detroit</i> .....                    | 177 |
| <i>Revitalization Narratives</i> .....                        | 181 |

|                                                             |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Personal Detroit Histories and Critical Events</i> ..... | 184 |
| <i>Bankruptcy</i> .....                                     | 189 |
| <i>Home and Identity as a Detroiter</i> .....               | 193 |
| <i>Ruth's basement</i> .....                                | 195 |
| <i>Discussion</i> .....                                     | 200 |
| Chapter 8: Conclusion.....                                  | 202 |
| <i>Place affiliation is critical, but complicated</i> ..... | 206 |
| <i>Those who stay and those who leave</i> .....             | 211 |
| <i>The importance of place-based kinship</i> .....          | 216 |
| <i>Lives lived through space and time</i> .....             | 220 |
| <i>The Specific Locale of Detroit</i> .....                 | 223 |
| <i>Final Thoughts</i> .....                                 | 225 |
| Works Cited.....                                            | 228 |
| Abstract.....                                               | 249 |
| Autobiographical Statement.....                             | 251 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Table 1: Dissertation Sample..... | 62 |
|-----------------------------------|----|

## LIST OF MAPS

|                                                  |    |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|
| Map 1: Corktown and Lafayette Park, Detroit..... | 72 |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|

## PROLOGUE: VALUES IN PLACES

Sol and Dorothy's home is a unit in a cooperative housing community known as Chateaufort Place: sixty adjacent brick, low-rise units designed by famed architect Mies van der Rohe in the 1950s. The community sits in a park-like setting with tall trees and landscaped flowerbeds blocks away from downtown Detroit. The Chateaufort is one of several van der Rohe complexes in the Lafayette Park neighborhood, where low-rise communities like Chateaufort Place are interspersed with high-rise residential buildings and townhomes. From the streets that wind around the townhomes and low-rise complexes, passersby can catch only a glimpse of a residential area, as the mature trees and urban forest obscures the units. An early real estate brochure for the area read "Live in the suburbs in the city...Live in the city in a suburb," a sentiment that they both still echoed after living in the complex for more than 50 years.

Before I met Sol and Dorothy in their Chateaufort home, I spoke with Sol by phone who told me they would be happy to participate, as they had devoted their entire lives to helping students. Sol and Dorothy came to Detroit in the early 1960s when Sol took a job as an assistant professor of physics at Wayne State, and subsequently worked as a faculty member for five decades, only retiring at the age of 81 after a lengthy illness from contracting West Nile virus at an outdoor Shakespeare festival. Both natives of New York City boroughs, they knew that they wanted to live in the city and not commute from suburbs and chose Lafayette Park for both its proximity to the university and other cultural amenities, but also for the racially integrated nature of the community and because Dorothy believed at the time of their arrival the other people in the neighborhood were more progressive in terms of gender equality.

Sol greeted me at the door and invited me in before Dorothy joined us. When Dorothy came in, she began talking a mile a minute and stood behind Sol to help put his longer hair in a ponytail. She later showed me a poem written for them by a friend in which they were disguised as Cleopatra and Caesar visiting a college campus. The poem outlined their devotion to each other, but also made reference to Dorothy's acquiescence to the ponytail, something Sol had always wanted and she finally allowed him to grow in retirement. Dorothy spent another hour after the interview showing me around their home, their books, pictures, and artwork. Their home is a one level, three-bedroom co-op unit with a large basement. After Sol was ill for three years with West Nile virus, they had a number of the doorways widened to accommodate his walker and remodeled a bathroom to be handicap accessible. Two of the bedrooms are converted now into offices for the couple, but at one time housed their now-grown daughters. The house is decorated with a mix of midcentury furniture (some of which dates back to their wedding), books and collections from their travels. Much of the artwork is Detroit themed and there is an entire wall of Jewish themed art. They express that although they are secular Jews, they are very involved in the Jewish community in Detroit. While I was there, two women from a local Jewish community group came into the home and went into the basement. Sol and Dorothy explained that they allow people working for various groups to use their basement as an office.

Sol and Dorothy, at the ages of 84 and 77 respectively, are still actively involved in a number of community, religious, national, and social organizations. In addition to their identification as secular Jews, they identify as activists, part of the Wayne State community, social justice community, environmental activist community as they are very



active in climate change related work. Sol is a board member at the ACLU and a docent at the Michigan Science Center. They identify as part of the Lafayette Park Community, Detroiters, Michiganders, and global citizens. Their commitments take up much of their time and they often have trouble keeping their calendars straight.

While they are concerned with many global issues, much of Sol and Dorothy's activism is based within the city of Detroit and their own neighborhood of Lafayette Park. They are strongly committed to the neighborhood and feel that they get a lot out of participating as residents. Dorothy told me:

I would not leave Lafayette Park, I cannot think of anywhere else that I would want to live, it's my neighborhood, it's my kibbutz, my support structure and I think we have contributed to it as well. I would not leave Detroit, although there are times when I am absolutely worn out and overwhelmed by the difficulties and the problems that it has, but I have a strong belief that I have a responsibility to participate in doing what I can to improve it.

She furthered that what overwhelms her about Detroit is not the poverty, but mainly the complications involved in attempts to bring about change and create improvement, namely institutionalized racism and lack of regional cooperation in the area. Despite the challenges that working in the city has presented Dorothy believes that, "I have been very lucky, I can touch and feel the changes that I helped make in the city." Specifically, she feels pride about the changes and improvements along the Detroit Riverfront and the creation of the Riverfront park system, as she worked on a number of these initiatives and saw them through to completions. "I can see my values in places, but it gets overwhelming because as hard as you try, you take three steps forward and sometimes it is two steps back and sometimes it's five steps back."

While Dorothy believes she can see her values in places and in the changes that occur in the city, she acknowledges that it is not simply her values that matter. She

references the recent debate over Belle Isle Park, an almost 1000-acre island park on the Detroit River. The park is owned by the city, but in the midst of the city bankruptcy was negotiated to be managed as a state park in a 30-year lease with the Michigan Department of Natural resources. The initiation of the lease was not without controversy, as the City Council was reluctant to hand over control of the resource to the state, and many feared that the visitation fee imposed on Michigan State Parks would exclude Detroit residents of limited financial means. The State of Michigan took over the park in February of 2014 and immediately began work on some of the physical structures and the grounds. Six months after the transfer, which saves the city between four and six million dollars per year in upkeep, Detroit Free Press columnist John Gallagher noted that, "As a result of state control, Belle Isle has been cleaner, less rowdy, and probably safer this summer than at any time in years." He also noted, however, that despite the improvements, attendance was down at the park, which was attributed by some as a result of the increased police presence on the island, which they feared kept many local African-American residents away.

Dorothy, as a Detroit resident, recreational user of the park, and someone who over the course of her career raised over a million dollars in grants for Detroit recreational spaces, supported the transfer of the island to the state, although she would have liked for the lease to be 10 years instead of the 30 quoting her friend and former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, "You don't give away a jewel for the price of polishing, however if the prongs of the ring are broken you need to put it in a new setting." Dorothy believes that although the island has seen some limited improvements and ultimately she sees many of her values in the changes in the space, she understands that what is important to her

is often contrary to the value systems of other residents who also need the opportunity to be included.

On the other hand, some people say it's looking a lot better. I would have to say, having bicycled and walked it all of the time, it was rarely as bad as people thought, it was those who didn't come there that said that. Yes, Mondays were terrible to look at, over the weekend you have 100,000 people coming in. Yes, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon you had a piece of the island, which I hated to hear all the radios of the cars going through, but that's not my value system and that's stopped.

If you are coming from the approach that rap music is good and have your kids drink a Coke or a beer next to the other cars on the island because it's safe and nothing bad is happening and that's gone, I understand why people feel it's been taken from them. Nevertheless, I am saying, yes it is better than it was, and yes the state is putting in money, but they could have done this in perhaps a different structure.

Dorothy furthered that, "one of the things that cities like ours need are places that I call 'neutral turf.'" Dorothy's concept of 'neutral turf' she describes as "a place where black and white, young and old, visitors and residents feel comfortable. It's not perfect, but that was one of my values that I worked towards, every project that I worked towards creating this concept I call neutral turf." Dorothy's values about community are expressed in her idealized visions of space, where all Detroiters feel welcome and that they are equally welcome and comfortable within those places.

Their long-time commitment to their city, neighborhood, and social issues has kept Sol and Dorothy rooted in place in Lafayette Park since the 1960s. They are not interested in relocating outside of the city or their neighborhood. Dorothy told me

But I don't know where else I would want to go, I would hate to go to Florida...I can't think of not being directly involved, although I would like it to be a little less than I am now, those 8 o'clock meetings drive me crazy. I still have them. I don't know where I would find a Lafayette Park Community with a lot of work.

I see life as a spiral of obligations. I give it to other people, so they can give it to other people, but it also comes back...it can come back bad if you don't do it right.

Sol furthered many of Dorothy's sentiments that it was their commitment to other people that kept them connected to a place where they could live their values. He told me that a lot of his activism was rooted in the way that he was raised, but furthered that he felt a deep connection to humankind beyond his own family that inspired his activist values and endeavors.

I am part of the chain, the chain stretches way back into antiquity and hopefully it will continue after me, and I have to be a strong link in that chain. Some people can say, 'Well, I have done my job and I have raised two good kids and that's it.' That's not been enough. I mean, I don't see my grandkids as part of that chain, so it has to be a more generalized chain.

But it's part of... I said we were Jewish, but not religious. So what does that mean? Religious means that there is a God and he's listening in and telling you what to do and saying 'nice boy and nice girl, or bad boy and bad girl.' I don't believe that.

But there is a continuity of people and there is a continuity with the world and I suppose you have the choice of leaving the world better off than when you arrived or worse off than you arrived. You do have that choice, whether it is genetic or cultural, I don't know, but we have chosen to make the first choice. There's an old rabbinic statement which goes back to 100 BC or so, to the effect, I don't have the exact words, 'you can't be sure that you will complete the task, but you are obligated to start.'

He closed by paraphrasing a quote from the Jewish religious leader Hillel the Elder that reaffirmed his commitment to other people. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?"

I open this dissertation with the narratives of Sol and Dorothy and their expressions of "values in places" it emphasizes much of the core nature of the older person's relationship with both the City of Detroit and the other residents. For Sol and Dorothy both the place and the people are "intrinsic to one another's existence." They derive much satisfaction from their place-based work and are driven by a commitment to other people. Al's metaphor of the "chain" implies the connection he has to other people and

its strength, but his assertion that his biological children are not a direct link in that chain highlights the importance of his non-biological connections and strongly felt obligations to other people.

Sol and Dorothy's narratives and their lives as older persons in Detroit underscore the primary focus of this dissertation on understanding the relationship between spaces, aging, and people. Throughout our conversation, Sol and Dorothy talked about their community and the physical spaces they inhabited, but most importantly the relationships with other people that allowed aging in that space to be both possible and enjoyable. Moreover, they both directed the conversation in a way that revealed their values about their relationships to others.

Dorothy's discussion of her neighborhood and community as being distinct from other Detroit neighborhoods provided important insight into both individual metrics for aging well and how larger structural issues affect spaces and aging experiences. Cultural expectations about what it means to age successfully in the contemporary United States are closely aligned with neoliberal political agendas that place the emphasis on the individual as the driver of aging successfully. Dorothy's narrative, and the narratives of many others, emphasizes communities, friends, and neighbors as critical to the spaces they inhabit and their individually metered experiences of aging well.

As will be discussed throughout this dissertation, aging "successfully" varies by individual and can occur in a variety of environments that are specific to the individual, including spaces, like Detroit, that are deemed unsuccessful by outsiders. As indicated by Dorothy in her narrative, pride as a Detroiter and longtime commitments to actively engaging with the city, have not left older Detroiters blind to the problems that plague the

city. Their frequent attempts to booster the image of the city to outsiders are not unexamined considerations of the city, but instead often a reminder that Detroit is not a shell of a city, but full of people who face challenges and rely on one another.

When met with Sol and Dorothy I was closing in on completing data collection for my dissertation research about older adults in Detroit. While this dissertation is the culmination of years of formal graduate training in issues related to aging, it is at the same time a long held personal interest that I have been grappling with over the past decade and the beginnings of a career in gerontology. Before returning to graduate school, I was employed professionally as an anthropologist on a large ethnographic study. I was tasked with interviewing older people in their homes about their health care. At the same time that I was traveling through the Midwest collecting personal narratives, many filled with concern about their health in final years, I was also struggling with the deaths of two of my grandparents. Although both of these grandparents were in their ninth decades, and had been experiencing slow declines for a number of years, their sudden illnesses and the subsequent experience of their deaths and last days left me stunned and personally fearful of growing older. In hindsight, it is clear to me that my professional interest and return to graduate school to focus on the anthropology of aging was rooted in these fears and concerns. My interest and return to academia was ambitious multi-faceted attempt both to face my fears head on and perhaps also ultimately hoping to “game” the process and secure a “successful” old age for myself, while at the same time working to address large scale structural issues that affected older adults in the United States.

Although I was aware at the time that structural level forces beyond the agency of individuals influenced the aging experience, I know now that I had not fully grasped the

pervasiveness of successful aging rhetoric in American culture and the neoliberal political milieu under which it was conceived. It was with this in mind that I sought out a population of older adults for my research, eager to position the narratives of individual lives within the larger social context. While the experiences of the older persons in this study do resonate more broadly with concerns about aging in the United States, this dissertation also reiterates the importance of local context and the entanglement of individual lives within the larger social structures in which they are lived. While I still plan to engage in work that addresses the social challenges faced by aging Americans and on a personal level want to be happy and comfortable as my life progresses, I have come to understand through this research that my previously held considerations of what that would look like, and where it might take place, have changed and will likely continue to evolve throughout my life, as successful aging is an individual metric.

At the same time that I beginning to consider what a good old age might look like, I was also exploring different regions of the United States as potential places to live and work. Having grown up in the West (Colorado), attended college in the Southwest (New Mexico), and worked and attended graduate school in the South (Tennessee), I had experienced different parts of the country before I landed in Detroit in the summer of 2007. I did not make the connection at the time, but many of the reactions to my move to Detroit and perceptions about the city, would later parallel reactions to my interest in studying older adults. As I complete this dissertation research, I can now recall where these types of considerations began to intersect for me in conversations with others.

On a business trip to Indianapolis in the fall of 2008, I dined with friends of a colleague, during which I sparred with one of their acquaintances, a physician who after

inquiring about our research project, treated me to a lengthy diatribe about his lack of sympathy for older people who both failed to care for themselves properly or save enough money allowing them to enjoy a healthy and comfortable old age. In a separate rant, he insisted that the Detroit was responsible for its own decline, as the region had failed to diversify business interests beyond manufacturing. As frustrated and annoyed as I was at the time, I can now appreciate this conversation, as it planted the seeds for many of the themes I explore in this dissertation about the intersection of “successful” aging and “good” spaces, rooted in both traditional structural anthropological considerations of binary oppositions and of contemporary neoliberal reflections on independence, success, and failure, and how these types of conversations are lived in individual narratives.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### *Welcome to Detroit*

In the summer of 2007, I accepted a temporary six-month job conducting research with a team of anthropologists for an American automaker and moved to the Detroit area without ever having visited. In the brief weeks between accepting the job and actually moving, friend and acquaintances inundated me with opinions about the city and warnings to be careful. Most of the comments could be summed up with one statement by a classmate from my master's program, "Detroit....it just *sounds* dirty." By the estimation of those around me, I was moving to a "bad" city. The comments from outsiders unfamiliar with the city did not cease during my time in Detroit. One year I sent out Christmas cards with a picture of myself, my husband, and our dog standing on the edge of the Detroit Riverfront. I received one in response from an older family member thanking me for the card, telling me what a great picture it was, and complimenting me because, contrary to most of the representations she had seen in the news, I had even "managed to make Detroit look nice." The few family members and friends who visited me during the four years I resided within the city limits, conceded that they enjoyed it, my neighborhood was nice, and it was not what they were expecting. A friend from Taiwan, who lived in Chicago at the time, told me she was happy she made the trip because it totally changed her perception of Detroit; it was not the place she saw on TV.

The comments about perceptions of Detroit I routinely heard related to news images and national rankings of "worst cities," "most dangerous cities," and "most miserable." In spite of this, a number of my outside visitors had admitted to reading articles about "revival" in Detroit, the introduction of the new Whole Foods, "hip" pocket

neighborhoods, and artist colonies of \$500 houses. It was clear to me that although people gleaned information from the media, there was a deeper foundation for ideas about what makes a “bad” city or a “good” city. My visitors often cited their knowledge of the city filing for bankruptcy in 2013, blighted houses, safety, and corrupt government officials as “bad” elements of Detroit, while reinforcing the “good” elements of the city as new development, the safety of the Wayne State University area and Midtown neighborhood, museums, independent stores and restaurants, all while retaining a certain “authenticity” of “gritty” and “hard-working.”

Major news media in the United States reinforce negative perceptions of urban settings by focusing solely on sensationalizing problems in urban areas, without attention to grassroots and government efforts to mitigate problems (Dreier 2005). In contrast to negative media representations of urban areas narratives of gentrification, development, and revival of once blighted areas are also popular fodder for journalists. Sharon Zukin (2009) argues that over the past 30 years media narratives of “good cities” have established a strong relationship between consumers, investors, and government. She asserts that media glorify narratives that support the displacement of poorer residents and are replaced with wealthier residents who “revive” neighborhoods to reflect and reinforce middle-class tastes and aesthetics, while at the same time journalists lament and romanticize the loss of the city’s “authentic” and “gritty” past. Although I found these two types of narratives present in many of my interactions with outsiders when discussing the city, concerns about media representations did not really get to the core of my curiosity about what makes a space “good” for individuals or more specifically, what makes a space a good place for individuals to grow older.

### *Cities in the Neoliberal Era*

As my time and research in Detroit continued, it became increasingly clear to me that many believed the responsibility for Detroit's demise rested squarely on the shoulders of the city itself. The city, although recognized as a state and geographic entity was anthropomorphized to take on the characterization of an unsuccessful person in the neoliberal era; lazy, greedy, undeserving, corrupt, and declining. Jason Hackworth (2007) argues that American cities have experienced certain political, physical, and geographic changes due to the neoliberal policies since the 1980s. He traces the neoliberal political climate that evolved to allow the contemporary situation where "good" city governments are now largely defined as such by their ability to aide, operate, and perform like corporate bodies and this has become normalized as the only option available for contemporary American cities.

Neoliberalism is an important framework for understanding how cities become as "good" or "bad." Ganti (2014) reviews the history of the use of the term neoliberalism within anthropology and concludes that, although the term has come to have multiple meanings, anthropologists understand it in two main ways. The first considers the effects of macroeconomic policies and how they shape an individual's life-chances, and the "second emerges from a Foucauldian framework that focuses on technologies of self and governmentality whereby subjectivities are formed or refashioned in alignment with values of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and market competition" (Ganti 2014: 94). The term, used widely outside of anthropology, it is argued that neoliberalism has come to dominate American ideology. In his 2005 book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey argues that neoliberalism has become "hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has

pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (2005: 3). Key terms used to define this rhetoric surrounding neoliberalism often involve “privatization” and “personal responsibility.” When these terms are used to consider urban spaces, particularly Detroit and other post-industrial Rust-Belt Cities, we can come to understand how cities become seen as “good” or “bad” in popular consideration depending on their success to both sustain themselves and attract business and residents in order to grow and accumulate capital. In other words, Detroit is understood in a neoliberal context as being “bad” and “unsuccessful” for its failure to accomplish these very tasks.

In July of 2013, the middle of my first summer of fieldwork for this dissertation, the City of Detroit filed for the largest municipal bankruptcy in United States history. Throughout American history filing for personal bankruptcy has carried the stigma of failure and been seen as a deviation from traditional moral norms (Efrat 2006; Frade 2012). In late September 2014 my aunt, an English professor in Chicago, posted on Facebook a link to a piece of non-fiction published by a colleague of hers in an online writing magazine called the Prague Revue. The piece by Toni Nealie was titled “The Palace of Regret” featured a picture of the abandoned Michigan Central Station in Corktown. I mistakenly assumed that it would be a piece about a visit to decaying structures in Detroit (as I know the author to be a Chicago-area resident). I was surprised upon reading it however, that the piece had nothing to do with either the train station building or Detroit, but instead about a summer when the author was twenty years old, working as a camp counselor in her native New Zealand, and her failure to act when a

nine-year old camper confided that she was being raped by relatives and did not want to return home at the end of the summer. The author travels through her “palace of regrets” and recalls that the “rooms are mostly filled with minor wrongs” and revisits her biggest regret of failing to protect a child who sought her help. This regret is unable to be fixed, even later in her life when she encounters a similar situation and acts to get the child help. I was struck by choice of photograph of massive vacant structure to accompany the piece chosen to represent the “palace of regrets” and the colossal remorse that an individual feels at an irreversible past moral failure. The abandoned buildings of Detroit had come to stand for moral failure in popular discourse, beyond just the individual failure of personal bankruptcy.

Although curious about the bankruptcy and certain horror stories they had heard about the city, my outside visitors, and often former residents who were study participants, frequently pointed to positive things that were happening in Detroit, mainly revitalization effort in certain areas of the city. There was, however, still a certain moral underpinning of “good” and “bad” spaces that intrigues me as an anthropologist and displayed the roots of classic structural anthropological classification systems in which cultures engage with binary oppositions to cement cultural norms (Levi-Strauss 1973). Nevertheless, it was more complicated than those simple binary classifications. It was clear through interacting with some older persons, who no longer lived in the city, that many of them, although there were of course exceptions, did not see the city necessarily as a “bad” place, but instead as a “good” place for younger and more adventurous people, “people like you” they would often say to me. It was not necessarily a “bad” city, but it was not a “good” city to be an older person. Throughout my discussions with former residents, they often

listed the amenities they perceived as central to a positive or “successful” aging experience and doubted that those could be found within the city.

### *“Good” Cities and “Bad” Cities*

The designations of “good” and “bad” spaces are rooted in the concept of moral geographies, or the implicit and assumed ideas about the geographic ordering of the world. Moral geography is, “the idea that certain people, things, and practices belong in certain spaces, places, and landscapes and not others” (Creswell 2005). This concept relies upon the interdependence of people and places, and the power structures within which they reside. With origins in the Chicago School’s early ethnographies on moral order and deviance, Goffman’s work on stigma (1963), and Bourdieu concept of habitus (1990) those who do not fit into certain spaces are regarded as deviant and the other. Metaphors of disease (Foucault 1979; Canguilhem 2012) with regard to “good” and “bad” are frequently used to engage with metaphors about space.

Identities are produced relative to specific spaces (Keith & Pile 2004) and in turn the characterizations of spaces are created through their associations with inhabitants. Just as persons are intertwined with places, geographic locations and race/ethnicity are inextricable from one another with non-white people consistently characterized as the “other” and white spaces serving as idealized or normalized spaces. Whiteness is often depicted as an aspirational position and a symbol of modernity, tied to specific consumption behaviors with space and residence as one component (Bonnett 2005). It is not necessary that white spaces are termed “good” and non-white spaces as “bad,” but that white spaces are only visible in their relationship to non-white spaces (Shaw 2001). It is this visibility that allows both for white-spaces to be designated as normative or

aspirational, and non-white spaces as places to leave behind or escape. With regard to Detroit, current efforts to rebrand or reimagine the city function to displace current representations of the city as black, crime-ridden, disordered, with visions of a narratively white city; hip, innovative, vibrant, and technologically forward (Pedroni 2011).

For Detroit, it is not just the neoliberal political and financial considerations that solidify its label of “bad” city, but with an African-American population of greater than 80% (U.S Census Bureau 2010) it is excluded from normative white narratives of a “good” city. However, the majority my participants hailed from two neighborhoods within the city, Corktown and Lafayette Park, which tend to be considered “good” neighborhoods. A very candid Corktown resident told me he believed one of the attractions of his neighborhood was the lack of black residents. Just as white spaces become visible in their relationship to non-white spaces (Shaw 2001), John Hartigan (1999; 2000) argues that in a city of majority black residents, whiteness becomes a visible category subject to classifications. This study features a majority white sample population, who like Hartigan’s white participants in the early 1990s distinguish themselves from other white persons in a variety of ways, some by city, neighborhood, religious, ethnic, political, and economic affiliations. Participants in this study are also marked by their chronological age and generational affiliations. Media narratives of white Detroiters often feature younger residents who have relocated to the city and the limited depictions of older residents trapped in an environment hostile to aging in place.

It is with this in mind that I turn to consider conversations about “successful aging” and the older person and how they often mirror conversations and media representations of “good cities” (Zukin 2009) that are responsible for their own individual health and

maintenance. Under the gaze of a neoliberal ideology society is not responsible for bankrupt, declining cities who fail to attract business with their lack of corporate friendliness, unionized workforce, nor residents and visitors with their charm and cultural amenities. Through the same gaze of neoliberal “successful” aging, society is not responsible for older individuals who fail to maintain their own finances, physical health, or personal happiness. This is particularly critical for understanding place-based identities and ideas of personhood in old age. Elana Buch (2013) writes, “In the United States, where the dead do not share similar standing as social persons, individuals typically resist the social and physical transformations associated with bodily aging and public praise is reserved for those who seem to be avoiding aging altogether.”

The personal narratives in this dissertation are punctuated and shaped by critical events (Das 1995) at both the local and global levels that include, but are not limited to; patterns of migration, global financial markets, wars, municipal bankruptcy, civil unrest, labor movements, social movements such as civil rights and feminism, religious movements, and politics. As places and people evolve, they are also subjected to judgments and perceptions rooted in neoliberal agendas that emphasize individual accountability for success, while ignoring these critical events and the ways that they shape both individual lives and spaces. The critical disjuncture when considering older people in the United States is best expressed by the ways in which the older population is presented as a challenge to the nation as a whole, while at the same time maintaining an emphasis on individual personal responsibility to secure thriving and healthy final years. Through this ethnography, that focuses both on aging and urban spaces; I expand on the ways these forces shape the integration of lives within cities.



### *“Successful” Aging and “Unsuccessful” Aging*

Gerontology related research in the contemporary United States focuses on aging well and threats to aging well, with social isolation as a critical component of aging experiences deemed unsatisfactory. The MacArthur Foundation has founded a multidisciplinary research network dedicated to the aging society of the United States (MacArthur Foundation 2015). The essential tenet that guides this research is the idea of “successful aging” first put forth by Rowe and Kahn (1987) and further expanded in later work (1998). Successful aging (SA) differs from “usual” or expected ideas about aging that focus on decline and loss function. Rowe and Kahn (1998:433) outline the three components of their paradigm as; low probability of disease; high cognitive and physical capacity; and active engagement with life. They assert that this concept of successful aging “can be attained through individual choice and effort” (1998: 37). Despite the many who subsequently disagree with Rowe and Kahn’s focus on individual agency in old age, it is clear that their initial intent was to breakdown longstanding stereotypes about the aged and old age as a time of decline and passivity. Despite the fact that the successful aging model has been widely critiqued, it continues as the dominant conceptual framework in gerontology (Lamb 2014).

This effort to rebrand the aging experience as something to be controlled through individual agency has been heavily refuted and critiqued for a variety of reasons namely; failure to address individual biography, background, and experiences (Brandt, Deindl, and Hank 2012; Schafer and Ferraro 2012; Britton et al 2008); lack of attention to the political and cultural context under which the concept was developed (Estes and Binney 1989; Holstein and Minkler 2003; Dillaway and Byrnes 2009); failure to include a social means

or system to address challenges to aging, beyond individual agency (Calero 2009); and lastly lack of attention to “structural factors that enable successful aging” (McLaughlin et al 2010: 216), as per the Rowe and Kahn criteria, only 12% of older adults age successfully in any one given year in the United States.

Though a variety of concerns have been raised about the successful aging concept, most seem to center on the troubling nature of the concepts focus on individual effort. Harry Moody (2009) argues that assumptions that regard “normal” aging as a negative experience to avoid through personal endeavor are both ageist and damaging. He asserts that the American focus on “successful aging” has become “an uncritical kind of cultural bias (a kind of ethnocentrism) that will not be overcome by empirical investigation by itself” (70). Moody continues that “successful aging” disregards the cultural context in which lives are lived and that aging is better understood through examination of an individual’s own personal satisfaction within a specific locale.

Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) take the focus on individual agency a step further and link the concept of successful aging to the neoliberal political milieu under which it was conceived. Rubinstein and de Medeiros assert that two of the main faults of the successful aging paradigm, the emphasis on individual agency and the failure to consider specific policy agendas to create the social changes necessary for those without resources to age successfully, are consistent with the emergence of neoliberal models that focus on the elevation rise of the individual as agent and responsible for their own health and maintenance. They consider the impacts of this association, which suggest that society is not responsible for offering assistance to those who “unsuccessfully” age and that the SA model is exclusionary in nature. For Rubinstein and de Medeiros, the SA

model has created two classes of older people, those who are “successful” at aging, and those who are “unsuccessful” and they argue that the inherent implication is that those who “unsuccessfully” age have done so through their own fault.

The positioning of aging as a problem subject to intervention has long-standing origins within the field of gerontology. Contrary to belief there was never a golden age for older persons in pre-industrial societies, where they were cared for by extended kin. Aging was first deemed a problem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was “uncovered” along with a host of other social ills (Quadagno 1982). As a “problem” it was then subject to interventions allowing gerontology to develop as a science. However, gerontology is riddled with concerns about aging that render it split into two camps; normal and pathological aging. If aging is a normal process, what are the essential qualities of the experience and how can social acceptance and integration of older persons be encouraged? If aging is a pathological, is it possible to intervene medically, technologically, or socially (Achenbaum 1995)? This research seeks to integrate the two perspectives, by arguing that while aging is not a pathological process, or deviation from a normative vision of successful aging, it may still be subject to interventions that seek to lessen the challenges associated with old age such as social isolation. The binary within gerontology research can be further considered by integrated Didier Fassin’s (2009) designation of “life as such,” or the course of events from birth to death that are shaped by macro-level social factors and lived through participation in society, but also as an individual body. It is important to understand not only how external forces shape and control life, but also how meaning and value is assigned to individual lives.

*City of Green Benches*

When reflecting on these types of questions about stereotypes, older persons, spaces, and the attractiveness of urban spaces, I am indebted to Vesperi's ethnography *The City of Green Benches* about elderly persons in St. Petersburg, Florida. The city had once been home to 3000 "green benches" utilized as resting or congregating places for the elderly. Beginning in the 1960s, the benches were removed in an effort for the city to appear younger and attract businesses residents, like a "good" neoliberal city, thereby leaving the elderly without a place to sit and meet their friends. Both the space and the inhabitants had been negatively stereotyped.

Vesperi examines popular conceptions about St. Petersburg as a space for the elderly and questions how culturally bound stereotypes about the aged affect the services provided to and well-being of individual elderly persons. In the *City of Green Benches* the experience of being older is inextricably tied up with the urban setting where the older person resides. Vesperi argues that older people are subject to cultural constructions of old age as rooted in the past, keepers of a city as it was in a different time, but like their younger counterparts, "older people continue to experience life fully in the ongoing present as well" (24). While Vesperi presents a narrative that critically links the lived experience of the older person to that of their environment, she does so with the belief that isolation is not the natural state of old age and is constructed through both stereotypes and policies such as the removal of the benches. Like Vesperi's ethnography that binds the older person's identity to a sense of place, this dissertation conveys an account of an intricate relationship between older persons, neoliberal conceptualizations of both space and aging, processes of place-making, and identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century Detroit.

Though sophisticated in her linkage of macro-social issues and ethnographic data,

Vesperi relies primarily on social psychological frameworks of analysis. Focused on the city's relationship with the elderly, Vesperi uncovers a contradiction between how the city and larger population views them, versus how they see themselves. My own work builds on Vesperi's work about stereotyped spaces and their relationship to isolation in old age by considering spaces as both psychic and physical spaces to organize around. As opposed to focusing on the city's relationship with older persons, I focus on the older person's relationship with the city and older persons as active agents in shaping the spaces and making the places around them. I do this through a theoretical lens of kinship, which allows me to examine both how place centered relationships engender connections with other people, but also work to stimulate a relationship between the older person and the city. It is this kinship with the city that allows for the older people to not only retain affiliation as a Detroiter, but to assess and reassess the meaning of that relationship throughout their own life course.

Beyond my initial observations that consider how both cities and older persons suffer from negative stereotypes similarly divided into dichotomies, what is it that links critiques of "successful" aging and this exploration of people aging in Detroit? Through the ethnographic data presented in this dissertation I examine the interwoven experiences of both persons and place and assert that it is difficult to disentangle the experience of aging and relationships from the places, both physical and psychic, that are central to the older person's lives and identities and the relationships that they maintain and create rooted in their sense of place. Just as this extricating is unworkable, I reflect on the lack of stagnancy in both cities and individual lives, considering both as dynamic processes. I challenge assumptions about the natural state of the older person as socially isolated

and urban Detroit resident as disconnected, and additionally about the role of the older person in the “unsuccessful” city. Older persons, in addition to frequently being misperceived as lonely and isolated, are often cast in the role of “memory keeper” for the past of a city that no longer exists, and in fact may have never existed in the form that it is idealized and collectively remembered. Through an examination of the relationship of the older person to the city and a consideration of their identity as part of a place based group, I illuminate the complexity of labeling both spaces and individual lives and what this means for both cities and older persons.

### Background

#### *Social Isolation and the Older Person*

As I was in the final stages of collecting the data for this dissertation, a family member at an event asked me what I was researching. After I responded, “Older people in Detroit neighborhoods,” she looked at me and asked, “Is that as bleak as it sounds?” In her mind, I was examining the intersection two miserable topics, both focused on despair, decline, and isolation. She looked surprised when I assured her, that at least for my study participants, it was not as bleak as it sounded. “What could make aging in Detroit good?” she asked me. She was further surprised when I explained that it was their social networks, friendships, and participation in community service organizations that made Detroit a good place to be an older person. These were not the older, lonely, isolated, urban residents in the decaying city that she was imagining.

It was not surprisingly that many people I spoke with had similar reactions and questions for me about my research. Older people are frequently stereotyped and misperceived as a lonely group (Tornstam 2007) and my training in urban ethnography

gave me a good grasp of how historically social science research in urban settings portrayed residents as disenfranchised and isolated from the rest of American society, a stereotype that is still pervasive. At the beginning of my fieldwork and data collection, I expressed to an acquaintance some trepidation about having to cold-call strangers and ask them if they would like to participate in my study. Their suggestion was to imagine a lonely older person answering the phone and how my phone call might be the highlight of their day. To the contrary, I found that most people I called, although agreeable and often eager to participate, were busy people with schedules, families, friends, and activities, and not spending endless lonely hours hoping for a call from a graduate student researcher. As the following literature demonstrates, social isolation is indeed a real threat to the health and well-being of older adults. However, like early urban ethnographers who paid little attention to the integration of their subject with the world outside of their neighborhood, researchers who focus on social isolation in old age have focused little on how older adults resist this isolation and engage with the world around it to shape their own experiences.

The relationship between social isolation and negative health outcomes is demonstrated consistently across the lifespan (McCulloch 2001) and many studies suggest that the health of older adults is particularly vulnerable to increased social isolation. Socially isolated people are more likely to be older, to live alone, to have lower income, to be female, and to report poorer health. Geography and residential tenure also play an important role in the relationship between older adults and perceived social isolation. Older adults who relocate later in life or who have spent less time in a community are more likely to be social isolated (Kobayashi et al 2009: 387-8). In a study

from the U.K., older people who were socially isolated reported worse self-rated health than the general public, with those who reported “severe social isolation” reporting the worst self-rated health. Additionally, older adults who were simply “at risk for social isolation” reported lower self-rated health than the general public (Hawton et al 2011). Self-reports of perceived low social support are a risk factor for poorer health status for older persons (White 2009: 1875). Moreover, the type of social support received by older adults influences health outcomes. Older adults who rely solely on family members for social support are more likely to report poorer health than older adults with social networks that extend beyond family (White et al 2009: 1876). In older adults, social isolation and loneliness are linked with greater health-risk behaviors, like smoking and lack of physical activity (Shankar et al 2011). In addition to the aforementioned health risks, a number of studies suggest that there is an increased risk of mortality associated with perceived isolation and loneliness. A 2010 meta-analysis of longitudinal studies by Holt-Lunstad suggests that perceived loneliness produces mortality and disease rates comparable to smoking. In a 2014 study Cacioppo and Cacioppo assert that perceived loneliness in old age is associated with mortality and disease rates nearly as high as those linked with poverty and twice as high as those correlated with obesity. Interestingly, this study indicates that while loneliness and isolation in old ages amplifies vulnerability to social risks, it also motivates the renewal of social connections. Research clearly demonstrates that social isolation is a threat to aging well.

Policy makers and researchers have attempted to understand this issue and address it by focusing on variables that are both associated with and predict social isolation in older adults. Although the research focus is primarily on risk factors and



variables, the literature suggests that social isolation is not simply a disorder or independent variable to be treated, but instead is part of complex force of psychosocial factors that work together to result in negative morbidity and mortality outcomes for older adults (Nicholson 2012). While much of the psycho-social research focuses on the negative outcomes of social isolation and suggests that policies should be oriented to allow older adults to remain socially connected, very little research engages with ideas of how older adults actively resist social isolation and strive to make connections. Psychosocial research on social isolation is a decontextualized approach to understanding successful aging. In this project, I argue that research about social isolation and older adults must move beyond simply correlating risk factors for and variables associated with social isolation, to develop an increased understanding of the processes by which older adults actively strive to resist social isolation and maintain and renew connections to both people and places.

### The Anthropology of Urban Places and Older People

In order to situate this dissertation as an explicitly anthropological endeavor, it is important to consider the traditions of urban anthropology and the anthropology of aging and their relationship to social isolation.

#### *Deviance, Disorder, Isolation, and Urban Anthropology*

The emergence of the discipline of urban anthropology over the last century is strongly rooted in social isolation and deviance. Differing from research that considers social isolation with regard to age or life stage, considerations of isolation throughout the history of urban ethnography tend to focus on isolation with regard to socioeconomic status. However, like older persons, urban inhabitants were frequently mischaracterized

as passive recipients and not active agents of the world around them.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century social science at University of Chicago, often considered the birthplace of urban ethnography, set the groundwork for the trajectory of urban ethnography over the next half century. This early ethnographic work laid the foundation for a focus on the supposed isolation of socially disorganized urban residents, (Parker 2004). Mid-century urban ethnography, influenced by predecessors still tended to focus heavily on neighborhoods as the unit of analysis, social disorganization, and ethnicity. In the post WWII-era, urban anthropology tended to focus on the plight of the urban poor with a focus on ethnicity and the neighborhood as the unit of analysis (Mullings 1987). Urban ethnography in the mid-20th century concentrated on themes of romantic visions of the city, bounded ethnic neighborhoods, and studies that considered urban disorganization and poverty, mostly portraying their participants as isolated urban residents.

Perhaps the most well-known, and often misappropriated, mischaracterization of urban residents as socially isolated from the rest of society is that of the “culture of poverty” (Lewis 2010: [1966]). An outgrowth of the early Chicago School focus on urban disorganization, the “culture of poverty” focuses on deviance and argues continual poverty creates a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that function to keep impoverished persons poor and that these values and behaviors would remain even if the structural constraints initially responsible for the poverty were removed.

Although critiques began to emerge in the early 1970s that recognized that the neighborhoods or ethnic groups were seldom examined in relationship to larger social structures, it was not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that urban ethnography began to

include the linking of individual lives in neighborhoods to overarching social structures and policies that affect urban dwellers and paid attention to the agency of individuals, who were now less likely to be seen as passive players, but actors who engaged in shaping the world around them (Mullings 1987).

*Urban inquiry at the turn of the century: Power and Place-making*

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st urban anthropology continues to attempt to grapple with integrating the individual experiences of life within a city while devoting considerable attention to the macro-level social issues that shape those lives. However, it is noted that places, connections, and networks, although always fluid and overlapping have changed drastically since Mullings was writing in the 1980s. Gupta and Ferguson note that as anthropology is moving away from a “peoples and cultures” orientation, leaving room for a host of new challenges and debates about ethnographic work. They argue that increasingly cultural differences are becoming less bounded by geography due to mass media, globalization, and migration and because of this there is a new attention to the relationship between space and culture. For Gupta and Ferguson, both ethnic neighborhoods and national borders, are understood as multifaceted and ongoing processes. They argue that opposed to peoples and places, it is these processes that require examination.

One of the processes that Gupta and Ferguson argue should fall under the study of anthropology of spaces is that of place-making. In this context place-making refers to how experiences are lived and formed. Gupta and Ferguson emphasize that anthropologists have long been interested in the relationship between local experiences and global structures, but express concern that often the “local” is a concept that is

romanticized and taken for granted as “real” or “authentic.” They argue that only by examining the non-fixed process of place-making and understanding that places are constantly under construction and being renegotiated, can places be truly understood without surrendering to nostalgia for an “authentic” past that may have never existed. They argue that, “identity neither ‘grows out’ of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead, a mobile, often unstable relationship of difference” (1997: 13). Although there has been a clear shift from a focus on people and places to those of processes, contemporary urban ethnography retains indications of its historical roots.

### *Space and Place*

The previous section considered critiques of places as bounded and stationary (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) and the turn towards understanding the processes which engender spaces. In this next section I consider the terms “space” and “place” and outline how the term place is used in this dissertation. While spaces have always been crucial to ethnographic work, it is only within the last thirty years that they have evolved simply from setting where lives are lived to critical component of understanding social relationships, as places are intricately tied up with power relationships and serve as sites where class and race relations are spatially replicated (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003) and cultural practices are positioned by persons within spaces (Escobar 2001: 143). My discussion of Detroit within the lives of older person is framed by Thomas Thornton’s (2008) work on the Tlingit peoples in Alaska. Thornton argues that, “place not as an object or geographic given, but as a set of phenomenal and cultural processes consisting of three elemental dimensions – space, time, and experience (34).” He furthers that most work on places

tends to emphasize one of these dimensions, whereas a holistic anthropological perspective will unite all three. For Thornton, spaces cannot be understood without examining the people who inhabit them. The terms space and place are often used interchangeably, but for the purposed of my own work, I utilize Thornton's distinction, "A place is a framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time (10)." Thornton argues that these spaces become meaningful to individuals through experiences as members of a group. It the processes of living and interacting with an environment that work to shape the place and imbue meaning.

### The Anthropology of Aging

In the last section, I examined the place of urban residents within the anthropological canon. I now turn to explore the place of the older person within anthropology and the overlap of the older person and the urban resident. In the pre-1970s anthropological literature, older people were usually considered in their relationship to the kinship structure of the society. When aging first became a specific focus of inquiry in anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists focused on the status of the aged around in the world in cross-cultural studies that asked questions about the relationship between older adults, the rest of their families, and communities. In the 1980s as anthropologists began to work more in the United States, the nursing home became a primary site of inquiry. In the 1980s, an interpretive perspective also was included in the anthropology of aging, as and care giving have continued to dominate the field, as the term "successful aging" entered into the dominant American narratives about aging (Ikels and Beall 2001). Anthropological studies of aging often take questions asked by other disciplines and situate them within cultural context (Fry 2009).

Cohen (1994) asserts that contemporary anthropological theory is not often engaged in the anthropology of the aged. He furthers that gero-anthropology has narrowly focused on culture and chosen this as “disciplinary icon.” Cohen notes critically that while many ethnographies of aging explore complex questions of the experience of the elderly, they often construct an ambiguous ethnographic present, “in which the everyday relevance of the macrosocial world is sidelined to give way to the morality play of old age in triumph and pathos” (145). He further offers three directions where he believes that anthropologists have critically engaged with gero-anthropology as opposed to relying solely on questioning the lack of writing or relying heavily on culture as a disciplinary icon; phenomenological focuses on experience, embodiment, and identity; a critical focus on the hegemonies that structure representations of the aging experience; and an interpretive focus that considers the position of the ethnographer and their own age with relationship to how knowledge is produced. Although Cohen wrote this piece twenty years prior, use of the concept of “culture” as the “disciplinary icon” is all too frequently a common trope for anthropologists working in the field of aging. Anthropologists tend to rely on answering questions of aging with the conclusion that, “culture influences aging.”

#### *Anthropology of Aging and Urban Ethnography*

Since the development of a specific “anthropology of aging” focus in the 1970s, there has been a consistent inquiry into the lives of older people in urban settings. However, rarely does the city appear as more than a backdrop, overshadowed by other questions and concerns. Urban elders are present in a variety of ethnographies beginning in the 1970s and focusing on a diversity of topics; older Jewish immigrants in

Venice, CA Myerhoff (1978); life in a retirement home in Chicago (Teski 1979); itinerant elderly hotel dwellers in San Diego (Eckhert 1980); adapting to old age in industrial cities in the United States and England (Francis 1984); personal reflections on growing older in urban California (Kaufmann 1986); older single men in Philadelphia who visit senior centers or live in senior-only complexes (Rubinstein 1986); survival strategies of older homeless men in New York City (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989); life in a nursing home in the urban northeastern United States; (Shield 1989); elders living alone in Philadelphia; (Rubinstein 1992); cross cultural experiences of menopause in Japan and the United States (Lock 1993). Although set in urban centers, these ethnographies are often about the social experience of being old, either by examining personal networks, reflections on old age, or biological processes associated with aging bodies, they are not explicitly centered on the relationship between the older person and their city. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there has been some limited attention to the experience of aging as it relates to the urban milieu and how older people age in changing cities (Iris 2009) and the engagement of older people in urban gardening (Sokolovsky 2009). One notable exception in the pre-21<sup>st</sup> century ethnographies of aging in urban settings is the Maria Vesperi's (1985) ethnography, which examines the experience of elderly in the downtown of St. Petersburg, Florida, and like this study presents the experiences of the elderly as inextricable from their environment.

*Personhood, Successful Aging, Places, and Relationships*

The concept of personhood is critical to understanding the relationship between successful aging, urban spaces, and non-biological kinship relationships in Detroit. Within anthropology the “person” is conceived of as both an analytical site for inquiry and

a social construct. Personhood is a social and fluid concept (Mauss 1979) and is negotiated in response to the world around the individual (Strathern 1988). It is well established in the literature that who achieves the status of full personhood is culturally constructed (Hallowell 1955; Geertz 1973; Shweder and Bourne 1984) and that personhood status is flexible and can be achieved and later rescinded (Fortes 1973; Luborsky 1994).

Sarah Lamb's critique of the concept of successful aging (2014) contends that in addition to individual agency one of the main focuses of the successful aging paradigm is the idea of permanent personhood, whereby not only does the ideal person not age, but maintains an image of their earlier self without any signs of decline. For Lamb the SA model relies on a "vision of personhood emphasizing the power of individual agency and the individual self as project," resonating with North American cultural ideals that position personhood in its relationship to independence. She argues that the "scientific model of successful aging would be enhanced—more productive, helpful, realistic and perhaps even inspiring—if it were to incorporate the realities of change, decline and mortality." Lamb suggests that the dominant successful aging paradigm is not only a particular cultural and biopolitical model and in spite of its inspirational aspirations, it is damaging to the personhood of the older person, as it does allow for a model of making sense of meaningful terms with changes or decline late in life, and results in the loss of personhood for those who fail to meet the standards set forth by the SA model. Additionally, as conceptualizations of personhood in old age rely heavily on independence the need for care is seen as a threat to a person's social personhood (Kauffman 1994; Lamb 2014) with an individual's independence in old age often tied directly to their access to resources



(Buch 2013; 2015).

Analysis of the relationship between successful aging and personhood is deepened by the inclusion of places, as places are both constructed by persons and in turn construct their personhood. The home of the older person is not only about memories, but critical to maintaining their personhood. If successful aging relies on independence as a marker of personhood, consequently threat of removal from a home is also a threat to personhood (Buch 2015). Hoey (2010) argues that individuals have the desire to root their personhood in cultivated sense of place. This embodied experience provides them with meaningful connections place and stability for the sense of self. By contrast Desjarlais, (1999) demonstrates how the homeless person's designation of personhood is rescinded when without an affiliation to place. Central to understanding personhood, successful aging, and places is the social world around the individual, as conceptualizations of personhood are constructed internally and externally, designated and rescinded based on abilities and affiliations, and cultural constructions of the milieu in which they are conceived.

### *Argument*

The central focus of this dissertation is to examine the inextricable link between persons, their social worlds, and their environments. I do this through an ethnographic study of senior members of non-biologically based kinship groups with an affiliation to place. Critical to this examination is the city of Detroit itself, as members of these groups ultimately collectively identify as Detroiters through space and time. It is this collective identity, strengthened mostly through their defense of an outsider deemed unsuccessful city, that renders Detroit a good place for the older person to maintain connections,

participate socially and civically, and to organize around as both a physical and psychic space. My ethnographic study of growing older in Detroit allows me to examine the neoliberal considerations of both aging and cities in a local context from which I can make important contributions related to literature in gerontology and the anthropology of urban aging.

Firstly, I argue that linking urban spaces, old age, and social connections allows for individuals to construct a view of old age that is shaped by both structural factors, but also as Fassin (2009) suggests, imbued with meaning and values, in a way that gerontological discourse on successful aging does not account for. This is an important challenge to the scholarship on successful aging, which as my background research demonstrates is narrowly focused on personal responsibility without attention to individual metrics for aging or satisfaction based on personal meaning and values.

Second, and to further the linkage of old age, urban spaces, and social connections, I demonstrate that urban spaces are not just the backdrop where persons grow older and both cities and lives emerge as intertwined processes. For the older person in Detroit, their neighborhood, or former neighborhood is linked to their sense of identity. My work extends Maria Vesperi's ethnography which considers *the city's relationship with the older person*. In turn, I expose the *older person's relationship with the city*, where older persons are positioned as active agents who shape the spaces around them, but who also cultivate a relationship with those spaces. The inextricable link between persons, their place-based connections, and environments emerges not only as form of non-biologically based kinship, but reveals space as a critical component of these relationships.

I construct my arguments through a theoretical lens of kinship, which allows me to examine both how place centered relationships engender connections with other people, but also work to stimulate a relationship between the older person and the city. I chose to frame this research with a theoretical lens of kinship because the common nature of both kinship and aging and the complex link between the two, or as Fry (1999: 283) states “Kinship, like age is a universal. Families are age-heterogeneous grouping in which, and through which, people live all or important parts of their lives (Fry 1999; 283).” Exploring aging, connections, and environments has important implications for those who seek to design interventions to mitigate social isolation in old age, as they should consider the role that environments play in the process, beyond simply a backdrop where lives are lived, but the meaning that relationships with and based around these spaces provide the individual as they age.

I chose Sol and Dorothy as an opening to this ethnography because their comments about “values in places” capture several of the critical themes of this dissertation and illustrates the connections between social world, identity, and environment in old age. First, their language is a clear representation of the link between identity and place. Dorothy refers to her neighborhood as her “kibbutz” asserting how both her secular Jewish identity and values about communal spaces are tied up with her current physical space. Further, Sol and Dorothy claim that their choice of space is part of their desire to lead an “integrated” life, indicating that while they are white residents of a majority black city, they view themselves as distinctly different than their white suburban counterparts. Their collective identity with their community is further strengthened by not only this distinction, but through their defense of the city to outsiders and the strategies

by which they engage as residents who are, like Vesperi's older St. Petersburg residents, shaped by their environment, but also who actively live their values by shaping the city around them.

### *Outline of the Dissertation*

Like Vesperi's earlier work, this dissertation is an ethnography of both the experience of growing older and an ethnography of place. I believe that there is much to learn from older people in Detroit about both older persons' personal relationships to places and the experience of "successful aging" and how their individual experiences mirror broader patterns of cities in the neoliberal era. I begin in Chapter 2 by outlining the theoretical background that provides the framework for my examination of older lives, which draws on recent literature about non-biological considerations of kinship and its utility for considering social relationships and spaces in old age. In Chapter 3, I discuss the origins and scope of the project, the research phases and project design, methods for data collection and analysis, and the demographic makeup of the participant sample. Chapter 4 positions this dissertation research within the cultural and historical context of the city of Detroit, Michigan. I explore the origins of the branding of Detroit as a "bad" city, representations of older Detroiters, the lack of inclusion of longtime residents in narratives about rebirth and revitalization of the city, and I conclude with portraits of the two neighborhoods where the majority of my participants resided within Detroit, Corktown and Lafayette Park. In Chapter 5, I explore different spaces to age and how relationships or lack of relationships are central to an individual's experience of aging in that space. Chapter 6 expands on the previous chapter by examining the processes by which older adults create, recreate, and maintain social relationships based on place. In Chapter 7, I

examine the older person's relationship with the City of Detroit and how that relationship is a key component of establishing their identity as a Detroiter, which marks them as part of a distinct group in both space and time. In Chapter 8, I return to my central question: what is the relationship between connection to space, sociality, and "successful" aging and consider the central themes that emerged from this research and interpretations of my findings.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section provides the background information on kinship studies in anthropology, which is the main theoretical trajectory used to examine the ethnographic findings about older people, social relationships, and “successful aging.” Anthropological conceptualizations of what constitutes kinship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are utilized to explore the research question: What is the relationship between connection to space, sociality, and “successful” aging? More explicitly my specific aims are: 1) Determine how shared urban environments traverse the boundaries of non-biological kinship derived socialities of older urban residents through an in-depth ethnographic study of a specific locale; 2) Identify and describe the role of urban neighborhoods in organizing non- biological kinship derived socialities in old age to determine how these ethnographic examples extend and confront dominant psychosocial models of “successful aging”; 3) Compare and contrast the processes that shape old age, cities and kinship relationships to determine how older people create their own narratives about Detroit as a place to grow old. The primary goal of this dissertation research is to identify and describe the intersection of the processes of aging, relationships, and places.

### *Kinship and Anthropology*

Kinship, at its core, is about social relationships and organization. With the exception of a brief period in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, kinship has always been significant to anthropological questions, theory, and practice. Parkin and Stone (2004) trace the broad theoretical trajectory of kinship research in anthropology and argue that kinship is central to many of the major developments within anthropology, and exists as one of the few focus areas where the discipline can claim ownership. The central focus of kinship is

relationships, and throughout much of anthropological history, this has referred to biological relationships established through birth, sex, death and marriage (although the absence of blood ties has frequently singled marriage out as a separate analytical category).

The study of kinship is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century development of the discipline of anthropology. Lewis Henry Morgan conceived the first extensive theory of kinship in anthropology from his studies of Iroquois Indians and what he established as their differing kinship models and categorization systems from “white civilization.” Morgan was primarily occupied with the relationship between kinship terminology and social organization. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the focus shifted to interpreting kinship terms emically as systems of classification (McLennan), as opposed to an external focus on social organization and on evolutionary theories (Maine) that centered on clan versus family dynamics to determine when and why the familial unit emerged within clan groups as a distinct element.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Malinowski led the turn away from evolutionary focused understandings of kinship to functionalist approach. Dismissing kinship terminology, Malinowski argued that the nuclear family is the primary element in society as society exists to fulfill human needs; the nuclear family is the major locus for the actualization of those needs. Radcliffe-Brown (1941), Fortes (1953), and Evans-Pritchard (1940), also utilizing functionalist approaches, focused on descent groups as the unit of analysis for understanding social organization, as opposed to the nuclear family. It was not until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when Levi-Strauss led kinship studies away from this functionalist turn and examined kinship through a more structuralist lens focusing on the relationship of

descent groups through marriage, or more specifically the exchange of women. This exchange formed a system where descent groups were obligated to one another and in addition to exchanging women, they exchanged property, rituals, and services, thereby further reinforcing the social order of societies (Parkin and Stone 2004).

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century kinship as an anthropological topic area went in decline and experienced revitalization. In the late 1960s, studies of kinship were moving away from social organization and shifting towards a focus on meaning and symbols centered approaches. The growing dissatisfaction with the trajectory in kinship studies was the previous focus on comparisons between “primitive” and “advanced” societies, which was rapidly losing appeal, and the turn in social science research from focusing on the stability of social organization to an interest in conflict and change (Parkin and Stone 2004).

David Schneider, who argued anthropological ideas about kinship are based on Western conceptualizations of biological reproduction, led the charge in the temporary demise of kinship studies in anthropology. In his 1968 book “American Kinship: A Cultural Account,” Schneider argues that kinship is a cultural system not a biological set of relationships. At the core of this system is the culturally constructed concept of love. Schneider later took it a step further by arguing that kinship “does not exist in any culture known to man” (1972: 59). Schneider posited that kinship was culturally relativist, rooted in Western notions of biology, and not a suitable analytic tool for cross-cultural comparisons. Central to Schneider’s critique of anthropological kinship studies was their grounding in biological connections and this is what ultimately led him to declare, “Robbed of grounding in biology, kinship is nothing” (1984: 112). Though Schneider’s fervent



charge and arguments led to a temporary lapse in the anthropological study of kinship, his work also paved the way for later studies of kinship that focused not on social organization and biologically based relationships, but to a new form of kinship studies in anthropology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century focused on agency, process, and culture. Although kinship was not a major focus of anthropological inquiry for two decades, it saw a resurrection at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kinship was no longer tied to biology, thus making it more appealing to a number of anthropologists, specifically those interested in feminist inquiries. Additionally, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, understandings of family creation and life were undergoing large-scale changes and anthropologists investigated many of these changes, new reproductive technologies, adoption trends, and lesbian and gay relationships, with respect to kinship (Parkin & Stone 2004).

#### *Theoretical Framework of this Dissertation*

One of the main actors who appeared to revive kinship studies in anthropology in the 1990s was Janet Carsten. Like Schneider, Carsten eschewed kinship's associations with biology and insisted that understandings must be rooted in emic knowledge of the ways other people experience the world and relationships. In her examination of Malay culture, Carsten (1995) coined the term relatedness "to indicate indigenous ways of acting out and conceptualizing relations between people, as distinct from notions derived from anthropological theory." Carsten asserts that Malay persons do not have kinship as defined by anthropological conceptualizations, but instead the Malay construct their "relatedness" through food, both giving and receiving, and shared spaces and homes. Carsten asserts through these ethnographic examples that kinship is a process. A Malay person is not born into a kinship designation, but instead their relatedness is constructed

throughout their lives through the acts that they perform. For Carsten kinship is a process that is acquired through human agency. Carsten sought to expand her concept in further work (2000) to examine the utility of the concept of relatedness for cross cultural comparisons. She addresses her critics, who suggest that her broad use of the term rendered kinship studies no longer a distinct subject of inquiry, by noting that the term was not designed to provide “neat” solutions to problems of kinship. “Relatedness makes possible comparisons between Iñupiat and English or Nuer ways of being related without relying on an arbitrary distinction between biology and culture and without presupposing what constitutes kinship” (2000:5).

In his short volume “What is Kinship – and is not,” Marshall Sahlins introduced the phrase “mutuality of being” as a particular element of kinship in an attempt to encompass the large range of kinship experiences in both the ethnographic record and in life. For Sahlins “mutuality of being” is “persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence; they are members of one another” (2013: xi). In his two-part book, Sahlins first describes what kinship is (culture) and what kinship is not (biology). Although making the same distinction between culture and biology as many of his predecessors, Sahlins asserts that this is because the distinction is not fruitful, as understandings of biological kinship are already encompassed under his umbrella of “mutuality of being” and also because, “the relations of birth are reflexes of the greater kinship order and conceived within that order” (2013: 65). Sahlins asserts that the value added of his concept of “mutuality of being” is its inclusive nature, which allows for a wide variety of means through which to understand kinship relationships as they are locally defined. Kinship should not be understood simply through procreation, but also other avenues through

which life is transmitted, such as sharing food, love, care, support, land, residence, and work (2013: 28-29) and argues that “all means of constituting kinship are in essence the same.” For Sahlins, these continuously evolving processes constitute kinship.

A contemporary kinship approach to understanding both aging and places is fruitful for a discussion centered on challenging stereotypes about aging successfully. Although the connection between the three concepts of space, aging, and kinship is not immediately apparent, this dissertation asserts that they are linked and inextricable from one another when considering the lives of older adults in Detroit. Kinship, as asserted by Carsten and Sahlins, is a process, just like aging and cities as demonstrated in the previous section. Carsten affirms this with her concept of relatedness and Sahlins with his “mutuality of being.” The ethnographic narratives presented in this dissertation underscore the importance of place as both a psychic and physical space where relationships in old age are enacted. Places provide both a tangible environment to provoke relationships, but also an intangible space to organize around, as members of a group linked by collective memories and current experiences.

Moreover, it is not just relationships with other people engendered by these spaces, but relationships with the space as well. The city is not simply a backdrop for the life of the older person. Identifying as a Detroiter allows for the older person to identify as both a member of a kinship group, but also the city as well, by which the residents are not only intrinsic to one another’s existence, but the city and the residents are intrinsic to one another’s existence. A kinship with the city often provides the older person with an affiliation, one strengthened through the collective defense of their “unsuccessful” city to outsiders. In contrast to neoliberal ideas about “good” spaces and “successful” aging, the

individuals in this study present individual metrics for successful old age and where that stage of life occurs. They actively balance both spaces and relationships, and their experiences are shaped through a blend of both agency and chance.

As this dissertation seeks to extend psychosocial research that focuses primarily on counting the number of connections and relationships with other people as a measure of well-being, a kinship lens is important for this endeavor. A kinship approach is important to framing research on social isolation as relationships are at the core of understanding the affiliations and connections of individuals. I focus on the specific experiences of older persons in a particular location to elucidate the nature and practices of relationships in old age. The ethnographic data in this study highlight relationships with both others and spaces as key for shaping the experience of old age in a specific environment. Participants emerge as having negotiated a set of practices to pursue, maintain, and create place-based relationships and spaces are reconsidered as to how they meet differing needs of an individual, both socially and physically.

## CHAPTER 3: PROJECT OVERVIEW

### *Methods*

An ethnographic approach was used to study the processes of social networks and relationships in urban neighborhoods during old age. This dissertation research consisted of primary data collected from interviews of older current and former Detroit residents (n=32), observations of a local neighborhood group, and informal observations of the neighborhoods and social interactions with participants. This dissertation research project was rooted in my own academic and personal interests in aging well and experiences of living in the city of Detroit. As a result, the focus, research questions, and themes for analysis all emerged from my intellectual interests about aging in cities and my own lived experiences of those of my participants.

### *The Origin of the Project*

The pilot research for this project, completed during the summer of 2013, was sparked by an archaeological dig undertaken by members of the Wayne State University Anthropology Department in the Corktown neighborhood. Although this dissertation project was not archaeological in nature, cultural anthropology and archaeology share the common goal of understanding what it means to be human, and with that comes a dedication to building knowledge about life span and life course issues. This dig got a lot of attention from both local media and passersby. Because of the visibility of the archaeological dig, a number of older adults who had grown up in the neighborhood reached out to the Anthropology Department, wanting to share memories and experiences of growing up in the neighborhood. Although none of the initial parties who contacted the department responded to my requests for interviews, it was their interest in

sharing their stories that initiated this research project.

### *Dissertation Project*

This dissertation research project took place over a period of three years. The initial pilot research was conceived in February 2013 and I began my initial volunteer work with the Corktown Historical Society. The Wayne State Institutional Review Board approved the pilot study in late March 2013. Initial recruitment of pilot research participants began in June of 2013 and interviews for the pilot research were conducted in July and August of 2013, and transcribed and analyzed during the fall of 2013. For the second phase of this project, participants were recruited and interviewed between April and December of 2014. Interviews were transcribed between May 2014 and January 2015. Although analysis was on-going throughout the entire project, the majority of analysis and writing took place from January 2015 to March 2016.

### *Research Phases*

This research project consisted of three main phases: (1) a pilot project with former members of the Corktown neighborhood to test feasibility; (2) a follow-up project with older adults who currently reside in the Corktown neighborhood; and (3) a final confirmatory phase of research that engaged older adults from other Detroit neighborhoods, predominantly Lafayette Park, to corroborate and compare findings.

#### *Phase 1*

During the summer of 2013, I initiated pilot research to test the feasibility of a research project involving older people and urban neighborhoods. As I previously mentioned, none of the initial individuals who contacted the department after the November 2012 Detroit News article responded to requests to participate, several

individuals approached members of the WSU Anthropology Department at their Corktown Home and Garden Tour exhibit in June of 2013, where I was also stationed as a volunteer, having been volunteering with the Corktown Historical Society since the previous winter, and as a representative of the WSU Anthropology Department. At that event I was fortunate enough to encounter one of my earliest participants, who was not only eager to answer my questions, but put me in touch with a number of her friends and classmates who had grown up in the neighborhood. During July and August of 2013, I conducted eight ethnographic interviews and continued to build my connections within the Corktown Historical Society. After agreeing to be interviewed, I met with participants in their homes and other spaces of their choosing, often restaurants, for interviews that generally ranged between 40 minutes to 2 hours. Two participants took me on tours of the neighborhood (one walking and one driving), which set the stage for future tours with participants in my follow-up research. The sample for this pilot research consisted mainly of former Detroit residents (n=7) and only a single current Detroit resident.

Based on this preliminary data, I was able to develop concrete ideas about how to move forward with my research project. Specifically, my pilot research revealed that former residents create unanticipated new types of socialities focused not just on leaving or disruption, but also return to a space. Additionally, discussions about safety, and to a certain extent the deterioration and care of the neighborhood, reveal that former residents consider themselves a non-biologically based kinship group that is distinctly different from former residents of other Detroit neighborhoods. While this pilot research discovered that the urban setting in this particular case facilitated the creation of socialities, I planned to further investigate the circumstances that allow for this creation and maintenance of

support networks necessary to “successful” aging.

### *Phase 2*

The goal of Phase 2 was to move forward the dissertation research by collecting new data focused on relationships, communities, urban spaces, and growing older from current (n=8) and former (n=4) Corktown residents through semi-structured interviews. I was able to recruit three former residents during the 2014 Corktown Home and Garden Tour. I handed out a number of flyers and spoke to many former residents on the day of the tour. However, I found that no one who took my flyers ever contacted me, I was only able to interview the people who gave me their contact information on the day of the event, and later one of their brothers.

To connect with current residents, I began by reaching out to members of the Corktown Historical Society, both younger and older. Some of the older members agreed to interviews and many of the younger members were able to suggest friends and neighbors within the neighborhood that I had not yet met. From my initial volunteer networks, I employed a “snowball” or nominated expert sample and reached out to anyone referred to me. I usually reached out by phone, as I found I received a better response rate, but occasionally used email. Many of the people I contacted readily agreed to be interviewed, a number never returned messages, some agreed, but did not respond to follow-up messages, and a very small number declined, mostly due to health concerns, or travel and work constraints. During this time, while conducting interviews, I continued to volunteer with the CHS, spend time in the neighborhood for events (religious, civic, and community), frequent neighborhood businesses, and spend time with participants in more informal social settings other than interviews.



### *Phase 3*

In the fall of 2014 I conducted a number of interviews with older adults (n=12) who had strong connections to other Detroit neighborhoods, most commonly Lafayette Park (n=7). I initially reached out to a number of people who I had known from living in Detroit. An older friend and neighbor, who had taken an interest in my project and research, was able to connect me with four of her friends who are long-time peace and justice community activists in the city of Detroit. From there I employed the same nominated expert sampling technique, by asking for recommendations of other friends and neighbors to talk with. The majority of my sample for Phase 3 were current Detroit residents (n=9) and the remaining were former long-time residents (n=3). Seven of the participants currently resided in Lafayette Park, which proved to be an interesting comparison to Corktown for a number of reasons, most notably; racial makeup, proximity to Downtown, strong neighborhood organization and community groups, history of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century slum clearance, while in contrast a completely different type of housing stock. These twelve participants in Phase 3 also shared a long time commitment to volunteering to various social, political, and religious causes in the City of Detroit.

### *Dissertation Study Characteristics*

- a. Recruitment. For recruitment of research participants I utilized, a “snowball” or nominated expert sample. Recruitment initially began with participants who approached the Wayne State Anthropology Department exhibit at the June 2013 Corktown Home and Garden Tour. I asked early participants to nominate other potential participants who might be interested in participating in the study. Participants were later recruited at the 2014 Home and Garden Tour, as well as

through my social networks having volunteered for two consecutive years with the Corktown Home and Garden Tour and having lived for four years in the city of Detroit.

- b. Inclusion. This study included individuals who were current and former residents of the City of Detroit, age sixty and older at the time of interview.
- c. Exclusion. I found that I only had to exclude a limited number of participants who I was initially referred to for this research. One participant who was in her forties, but eager to talk to me because she had many family roots in the Corktown neighborhood was excluded due to her age. Another potential participant was excluded after a series of phone conversations revealed her to be both physically and cognitively impaired and residing in an around-the-clock care wing of a nursing home.

### *Design*

The narratives of the participants in this study were compared in an on-going data-analysis process known as constant case comparison. Constant case comparison is a data-analytic procedure rooted in grounded theory, in which findings are constantly compared to other findings as they emerge. This method is ongoing throughout data collection and continues until patterns are clear to the researcher (Parry 2004). I utilized this method to code initial transcripts and identify categories and relationships as they emerge within the data set. From there I continued to compare emerging categories with subsequent interviews and ethnographic data collected to determine emerging salient themes and patterns.

### *Research*

Between July 2013 and December 2014 I conducted interviews with older adults (n=32) in the Detroit-Metro area. I transcribed the majority of my audio tapes during this fieldwork period. This afforded me the opportunity to revise my questions based on new findings and follow-up on emerging themes. As a participant-observer, I spent time as a volunteer for the Corktown Historical Society from February 2013 to October 2014. I spent time in the Corktown neighborhood for various social, neighborhood, and religious festivals. Outside of formal interviews, I engaged in a number of social activities with many of my participants.

### *Interviews*

Although a small number of my participants were known to me through social networks or my volunteer work, the majority of my participants were strangers who I cold-called on the recommendation of other participants. I most frequently contacted potential participants by telephone, as I found it to get a much better response rate than email communication. After participants agreed to interviews with me, I met participants at a place of their choosing, most frequently their homes, occasionally restaurants, coffee shops, neighborhood parks, their places of business or volunteer work, and on two occasions my office at the Institute of Gerontology. My participants were generous with their time and resources, often arriving with scrapbooks or other memorabilia. I was struck by their generosity and their willingness to invite a total stranger into their homes and lives. Many were often eager to show off their homes (particularly in Corktown and Lafayette Park), and often offered to give me a tour of their space, which provided more insight into their lives. Others invited me to favorite restaurants or into their offices and

volunteer spaces. I met two participants in a park in Corktown, after having some difficulty agreeing upon a mutual space to meet. Both were reluctant to have me in their homes, not eager to meet in coffee shops or restaurants, or travel to my office. I suggested the Murphy Playlot on both occasions, having been previously warned by other participants that I would not be able to visit their homes due to the disrepair and disorder that resided behind the front doors.

I began each interview by asking the participants for a short life history and for them to tell me about themselves. Participants often gave the initial demographic information, such as birth date and place, but from there their narratives often diverged widely. It was in these divergences that it became clear to me what was important to these people in their own stories. One participant, Al, a former Wayne State professor focused his narrative entirely on his education and academic career. Other participants focused on families, relationships, activism, and personal interests. After gathering a life history from each participant, I continued with the semi-structured interview and asked a number of questions that evolved over the course of the study, taking time to follow up when I was unclear with exactly what a participant meant by a statement or following up for more information.

#### *Co-constructed narratives of autobiographical memories*

Narrative is a term is broadly in both everyday life and within social science research. In the context of this dissertation research, the term narrative refers to the co-constructed cases of participants' autobiographical memories. Autobiographical memories are memories related to the self (Pillermer 1998: Conway & Paleydeil-Pearce) that differ from simply recalling a sequence of events, as they focus on the meaning of

the events, not the recalling of information. Narratives are not necessary sequential retellings, but are frameworks that allow the individual to link distinct events across time that are related by theme (Fivush 2008). Further, in ethnographic research individual participants do not construct narratives solely as they are a result of the interactions between the ethnographer and subject. The interviewer plays a major role in the construction of the narrative as the instrument of data collection and ultimately the analyzer of that data (Riesmman 2008).

All narratives are in a fundamental sense are co-constructed. The audience whether physically present or not, exerts a critical influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining and so on. We now recognize that the personal account, in research interviews, which has always been seen as the expression of a single subjectivity, is in fact always a co-construction (Salmon & Riessman 2008).

What I refer to in this dissertation as participant narratives are co-constructed by participants and myself. The narratives presented in this work are composed of autobiographical memories designed for me specifically as the listener, shaped by our interactions and the questions that I asked, and ultimately what aspects of their autobiographical memories I chose to include, emphasize, or exclude from the final written account.

### *Participant Observations*

As a participant observer for this dissertation project I engaged in a variety of activities designed to help me gain rapport with participants and experiences the spaces they inhabited. My main activity as a participant observer was my volunteer work with the Corktown Historical Society from February 2013 to October 2014. In that capacity, I acted as liaison between the Anthropology Department at Wayne State and the CHS. I helped to organize and execute two annual Home and Garden Tours, was the co-chair of an

annual Halloween Pumpkin Festival for neighborhood children, and attended meetings throughout the year. I spent quite a bit of time in the neighborhood during 2013 and 2014, frequenting local businesses, attending local and community events, observing religious ceremonies and festivals at local churches, and visiting local ethnic clubs like the Gaelic League and Maltese Benevolent Society. Outside of the Corktown neighborhood, I was kindly welcomed into the Swords into Plowshares Peace Center and Gallery, adjacent to Comerica Park, where a number of my participants were active volunteers.

I engaged in a number of social activities with my participants during the fieldwork period. Participants graciously invited me to museum outings, concerts, restaurants, coffee shops, and birthday parties. In addition to formal interviews, several participants took me on walking and driving tours of their current and former neighborhoods. They eagerly shared memorabilia, such as scrapbooks, yearbooks, family photos, and old newspaper clippings. One woman in particular shared with me a fictional story that she wrote as adult set in her teenage memories of Corktown. I was graced with opportunity to spend time with these people in informal settings and I am grateful for the invitations to become a part of their worlds and lives.

#### *Confidentiality and Consent*

This fieldwork posed some minimal challenges to confidentiality. A handful of participants are well known in their communities and the City of Detroit for receiving media attention for their employment or volunteer work. I took care to make sure that participant's identities and narratives were disguised, beyond what was required by the IRB. When cold-calling potential participants I began by identifying myself as a PhD student from Wayne State University and immediately informed them of the acquaintance,

friend, or family member who gave me their contact information.

Occasionally, they were expecting my call, having already been briefed by a previous research participant. Often participants were eager to know who else I had talked to from the neighborhood, but in accordance with IRB I declined to divulge this information, other than the original source who had referred them to me. On one occasion, I was given the contact information for a neighbor of a participant, but told that I should not identify where I got their contact information, as there were some hostile feelings between the neighbors. In this case, I declined to contact the individual, although interestingly they appear often in the narratives of other participants.

In participant observation settings, including meetings, chatting with people in local businesses, ethnic or religious organizations, I was careful to introduce myself as a PhD student from Wayne State University, and let them know that I was doing research in the neighborhood.

#### *Dissertation Sample of Older Adults*

Thirty-two older adults participated in semi-structured interviews for this dissertation project. The participants ranged in age from 60 to 96 years old at the time of interview (mean age = 75). There were more than twice the amount of women (n=22) than men (n=10). The majority of participants had completed 4-year university degrees (n=13) or post-graduate degrees (n=7), three had completed trade school educations or associates degrees, 7 participants had high school diplomas or GED, and the education status of 2 participants is unknown.

### *Neighborhood affiliation*

While all participants lived in the Detroit-Metro area and had lived in the City of Detroit at some point in their lives, the majority were current Detroit residents (n=18), while the rest had relocated elsewhere in the metro-area during some point in their adult lives (n=14). All of the participants named a Detroit neighborhood that they felt a strong connection to whether they were current neighborhood residents, or had relocated. The most commonly represented neighborhood was Corktown (n=20), followed by Lafayette Park (n=7). A smaller number of participant identified with the Northwest Side of Detroit (n=3), the Morningside neighborhood (n=1), and Midtown (n=1). Though a number of participants who identified with Corktown were engaged with community or volunteer work, those who identified with other neighborhoods primarily identified themselves as “activists” in political, social, peace, justice, or religious movements.

### *Employment*

At the time of this research the majority of the participants in this study were retired (n=18), of those who were still working there was a mix of full-time work (n=7) and limited hours or part-time employment (n=6). One participant was currently not working due to disability status, but did not rule out returning to work in the future. All of the participants in this study had held paid employment during some point in their adult lives. Their professions and former professions were widely varied, and for many an important part of their life narratives. A number of participants were employed in the City of Detroit, or directly by the City of Detroit. Types of professions held by participants: Director of Consumer Affairs for City of Detroit, High School Teacher, School Administrator, Small Business Owner, Social Worker (x2), Telephone Company employee, Emeritus



University Professor, Architect, Funeral Home Owner, City of Detroit staff for Coleman Young Administration, Urban Relocation Specialist, Attorney (x2), Real Estate Broker, University Administrator, Real Estate Entrepreneur, Urban Consultant, Flight Attendant, Grant writer for the City of Detroit, Project Manager in construction industry, Legal Secretary, Co-working space and Art Studio Manager, Certified nursing assistant , Hairstylist, Reading Specialist, Nurse (x2), Bookkeeper for hair salon, Manager for fastener sales company, Union printworker/bookie, Teamster, Catholic School Athletic Director.

### *Ethnicity/Race*

Although I did not specifically ask about racial or ethnic makeup of participants, it figured prominently in a number of the narratives of my participants. The participants in this study were overwhelmingly white (n=30) with a very limited number of African-American participants (n=2). The majority of participants, many of whom were first generation Americans, noted where their families had originally come from and their ethnic background, with Maltese (n=6) being the mostly common ethnicity self-identified and Irish (n=5) the second most common. A limited number of participants identified themselves individually as; of Italian, Mexican-American, Ukranian, Polish, Scottish, and English-Scotch heritage. The remaining participants (n=13) did not self-identify an ethnic background.

In November of 2014, I presented a poster on some preliminary findings from this research at the Gerontological Society of American Annual Scientific Meeting. A researcher from a different department at Wayne State noted that I had left out the racial makeup of my sample and wondered if it was necessary given that all the participants must be African-American. Several researchers additionally approached me from other

universities and said to me “I also study older African-Americans.” I was met with looks of surprise on multiple occasions when I informed the interested party that this sample was made up of primarily Caucasian older people and they admitted that they had seen “Detroit” in the poster title and assumed that my sample must be entirely composed of older black people.

I initially struggled to include a more diverse sample of participants with regard to racial makeup, I ultimately came to conclude that the whiteness of my participants was an important feature of this study and not a hurdle to overcome. The two major neighborhoods for this research do fall into census tracts with predominantly African-American populations. Corktown, although having the highest white populations in the entire city of Detroit at 37.6%, had a 40% black population in 2010, and the area that encompasses Lafayette Park, an 88% black population (U.S Census 2010). In the Corktown neighborhood, my primary recruitment came through my volunteer networks and snowball sample. Participants I interviewed often talked about the diversity of the neighborhood, but were stumped to suggest African-American participants. Several confided that their neighborhood networks consisted mostly of community groups, like the Historical Society, and business organizations, like the Business Association, or Catholic religious organizations, like the Holy Trinity Church and School, and that is was their perception that the African-Americans in the neighborhood were clustered in low-income housing in Clement Kern Gardens or on the western side of Rosa Parks Boulevard in non-historic homes, were not business owners, and were not Catholic. Likewise, former Corktown residents were quick to tell me how diverse their upbringing and schooling was, noting that they had black classmates in the 1950s, but none were able to connect me

with any of these former classmates. Participants often spoke positively about “diversity” but seldom directly addressed the concept of blackness within Detroit. Most tellingly, it was the segregated social networks that participants occupied that provided insight into their relationships with the rest of the city.

In Lafayette Park I was able to interview two African-American residents, thanks to another participant who when I asked for names of neighbors who might be interested in participating, pulled out her address book and said, “I am going to give you mostly African-American names, because I know that they can be more difficult to recruit for research.” Like Corktown residents, Lafayette Park residents referred to their neighborhood as diverse and many told me that they specifically moved to Lafayette Park, as opposed to suburbs, to live in an integrated setting. However, many of them noted that their specific housing communities (Chateaufort Place Co-op and Mies Van der Rohe townhouses) did not reflect the racial or economic make-up of the broader neighborhood surrounding Lafayette Park. Although this is not a study of race specifically, my central question was about how people take advantage of communities to age, the racial makeup of the participants tempers these findings. This is not a sample that is representative of all older people in Detroit, but capturing a specific moment in time of a group of older persons.

### *Age*

The participants in this study feature a wide age span as they ranged in age from 60 to 96 years old at the time of interview (mean age = 75). Although participants in this study were old in different ways, with regard to both chronological age and spanned three generations (Greatest Generation, the Lucky Few, and Baby Boomers), they are old in a

very similar respect with regard to anthropology and kinship. Fry (2009: 280-1) asserts that “Relative time and the work of kinship places each person in a fixed web of relationships” and furthers that “as people pass through time and their social world they forever are learning and organizing their lives and groups in the process. This web of relationships is arranged by seniority. While the participants in this study did not necessarily share chronological ages or experience critical events through the same generational lens, they all positioned themselves in their webs of relationships (biological families, fictive kinship families, neighborhoods, and communities) as senior members of the group relative to more junior members.

**Table 1: Dissertation Sample**

| <b>Dissertation Sample n= 32</b>    |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Age Range (60-96, Mean 75)</b>   |    |
| The Greatest Generation (1909-1928) | 7  |
| The Lucky Few (1929-1945)           | 16 |
| Baby Boomers (1946-1960)            | 9  |
| <b>Residency</b>                    |    |
| Current Detroit Resident            | 18 |
| Former Detroit Resident             | 14 |
| <b>Gender</b>                       |    |
| Female                              | 22 |
| Male                                | 10 |
| <b>Degree Obtained</b>              |    |
| Post-graduate                       | 7  |
| 4-year university degree            | 13 |
| Associates or Trade School          | 3  |
| High School                         | 7  |
| Unknown                             | 2  |
| <b>Neighborhood Connection</b>      |    |
| Corktown                            | 20 |
| Lafayette Park                      | 7  |
| NW Detroit                          | 3  |
| Midtown                             | 1  |
| Morningside                         | 1  |

## *Analysis*

The analysis scheme for this dissertation data was adapted from Strauss and Corbin's (1998) techniques for analyzing qualitative data rooted in grounded theory. Utilizing Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, all interview transcripts and fieldnotes were reviewed and annotated in three separate passes, each with a distinct purpose. Sections of text were analyzed and open coded by linking the selected text to annotated notes using the "memo" function in Atlas.ti. The three phases of coding were a) micro-analysis b) theoretical analysis and c) processual analysis.

- a) Microanalysis is a line-by-line coding process that is used to determine initial categories for analysis and the relationship between these categories. For this phase of microanalysis, I attempted to observe not only what was being said by participants, but also how it was being said. This stage was meant to explore the range of plausibility of meanings in order to uncover the main concepts for analysis. I focused not only on what people were saying, but what did their words "seem" to mean, and also what "could" they mean. This initial exploratory phase of coding was useful to determine meaningful concepts useful later in the analysis.
- b) Theoretical coding – During this second phase of coding I focused more narrowly on my specific research questions to determine how the actors in my data related to my research interests. During this phase of coding I was attuned to not only who the actors in the narratives were, but also their issues, problems, and concerns, and how these were acted out. I questioned how the actors involved defined the situations at hand and what these situations meant

to them. I was able to link this to broader theoretical issues by considering the relationship among the emerging concepts, but also asking how the issues raised by participants related to larger structural issues.

- c) Processual Coding – In order to give a sense of life and movement to my data, and because my research interests were specifically about process, my final phase of coding looked specifically at actions and interactions that resulted in some kind of change or evolution, both structural and personal. In this last phase of coding, I was looking not for properties, but actions while noting how historical events took on personal significance for individuals.

In addition to my ongoing formal analysis, I presented research findings from this project at various stages at the Wayne State Institute of Gerontology Lifespan Alliance Graduate Research Day, The Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting, the Gerontological Society of America, and the Wayne State Annual Graduate Exhibition. These presentations provided me with the valuable opportunity to engage with scholars from a variety of academic disciplines about my project, and receive helpful comments and feedback about the work in progress.

## CHAPTER 4: SETTING

### *The wrong person*

I arrived at Gloria's Chateaufort home in Lafayette Park on Election Day in 2014, just as she and her daughter returned from the polls. At the age of 87, she moved carefully but confidently around her immaculate home with white marble floors, white carpet, and all-white furniture. She explained to me the importance of voting in person at the polls on Election Day, having grown up African-American in the Southern United States at a time when her family members were "discouraged" from voting. "Now, that may be real stupid at this time in my life, but I recognize what an effort it was to be able to do that, so for me it's very important. I guess people think now that I am blind...it should recess in my memory, but it sticks in my mind." I had been in her home for several minutes at this point and it was not until she told me that I was aware she was blind. Her sight had been slowly degenerating until she became completely blind in the last year. Gloria spent several hours telling me her life story, her childhood in Georgia, her education in Alabama, and her move to Detroit in the mid-1960s. She is an enthusiastic advocate for the city she adopted in adulthood.

W: What [do you think] about Detroit in general as a place to grow older

G: you talking to the wrong person.... you are talking to somebody who loves Detroit... I love Detroit...

W: So why do you say I am talking to the wrong person then?

G: Because the way people talk about Detroit, the media is so down on Detroit, everything is so bad in Detroit...my relatives 'you come see us, we aren't coming to see you!' I love Detroit... "Why do you live there?!?" Why do I live here, have you heard me say how lovely it is? I really do...

W: So what do you love about Detroit?

G: I love Detroit, I love the fact that Detroit has a lot of people who are compassionate and people who care for people and if you read the newspaper, you would think that all we are doing up here is killing each other!

Gloria's assertion that I was "talking to the wrong" person, underscored the sentiments of many Detroiters who indicated that they were often expected to condemn or criticize their own city to outsiders. She furthered that Detroit's bad reputation was not something that was expected just from outsiders, but reinforced through media stories about Detroit. Local journalist and author Charlie LeDuff (2013) appraised the situation in light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century recession, "Journalists parachuted into town. The subjects in my Detroit News stories started appearing in Rolling Stone and the Wall Street Journal, on NPR and PBS and CNN, but under someone else's byline. The reporters rarely, if ever, offered nuanced appraisals of the city and its place in the American landscape. They simply took a tour of the ruins, ripped off the local headlines, pronounced it awful here and left." All of my participants were in agreement that Detroit did have a bad reputation; however, they varied in their assessments of to what degree it was actually deserved.

### *The Origins of a "Bad" City*

The city of Detroit was founded in 1701 as a strategic outpost for fur trading as it was situated centrally to the network of Great Lakes. Due to location and the dominance of the automobile industry development and manufacturing, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Detroit had established itself as a major Midwestern City. The growth of the city fall into three stages; prior to 1900 a pre-automobile industry stage that saw a peak population of 250,000 people and was concentrated into a 12 square mile semi-circle delimited by the Detroit River on one side and Grand Boulevard on the other; a second stage, propelled by post-WWI industrial expansion and the growth of the automobile industry, that saw the



population increase to 1.5 million people; and a third stage from WWII to the late 1950s, when most of the vacant land within the city limits was filled in and the population peaked at an all-time high of 1,910,000 people. By 1960s, with suburbs continuing to rapidly expand, the population had already begun to drop and in 1960 it declined to 1,670,144 (Mowitz and Wright 1962). Throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the population of the city continued to decline, reaching an all-time low of 713,777. Additionally, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demographic changes had taken place with regard to the racial makeup of the city. Detroit is now comprised of a majority African-American population, nearing 83%, while bordering suburban cities, like Grosse Pointe with a 93% Caucasian population, have few African-American residents (U.S Census Bureau 2010).

The population decline of Detroit is frequently attributed to five days of rioting that occurred within the city in the summer of 1967. However, this is an incomplete narrative that ignores the great context of the city's already declining population due to relocation of jobs outside of the city, the rapid growth of suburbs, and the expansion of freeway system. This narrative serves to further racially divided geography of Metro-Detroit, that originated in 20<sup>th</sup> century housing policy. Thomas Sugrue (2005) utilizes Detroit as a case study to argue that inequality in the urban United States is a racialized political problem and contemporary economic, social, and racial problems are rooted in historical public policies that reinforced racially segregated neighborhoods and workplaces. Unavailable affordable housing for the WWII-era influx of African-Americans from the South, real estate redlining tactics, stalled public housing projects, segregated workplaces where African-Americans were relegated to the most dangerous and grimmest positions, led to a pattern of residential segregation, demarked by both race and class with a pattern that

worsened into the 1980s. Sugrue argues Detroit's black workers lacked the geographic mobility of their white counterparts, leaving them captive in a city without capital or resources.

Many of the people that I interviewed for this project were familiar with Sugrue's book and recommended it to me as relevant background material. In fact, some of them personally identified with the narrative presented by Sugrue. Bill, a retired urban renewal consultant asked, "Have you ever read the book by Sugrue? So when I read that, I could see myself in various scenarios where I could see that stuff happening around me." Many of the former residents also expressed pieces of the narrative articulated by Sugrue, such as the African-American population's inability to adapt to a deindustrialized changing labor market (2005: 262), but often in a decontextualized way that ignored racial, geographic, institutional and educational barriers faced by this population.

John, a 74-year-old attorney from West Bloomfield, spoke with me at length about the 2013 bankruptcy faced by the city and his belief that the city would never make a full recovery. He deemed it a multi-faceted problem related to mismanagement, infrastructure issues, but much of his reasoning for the unlikely revitalization of Detroit was that the majority of the population was "not employable" lacking both the technical skills and education to adapt to today's labor market. Much of his narrative centered on growing up relatively poor in Corktown, the child of a large immigrant family, his ability to rise out of the poverty and become a success in adulthood. He referred to many of the former residents of the neighborhood as "survivors" as they had done the same for themselves, at the same time indicating that current Detroit residents were unable or unwilling to engage in this kind of effort, but ignoring the racial barriers that inhibit current

Detroit residents from opportunities open to white residents.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through a variety of changes related to the transformation of geography (the introduction of freeways), post-industrial decline of manufacturing jobs and transition to knowledge and service based economy, and long-standing structural inequalities rooted in both race and class, Detroit had come to represent the fears of middle-class white Americans for their own cities; impoverished, crime-ridden, vacant, and mostly black residents. "Detroit used to stand for success, and now it stands for failure. In that sense, the city is not just a physical location; it is also a project, a projection of imaginary fears and desires (Herron 1993: 9). In an era of neo-liberal cities, it was easy to both make fun of Detroit and place the blame for its demise squarely on Detroit's own shoulders. However, this public blame and ridicule said little about the lives of the residents of the city, both long-term and newcomers.

### *Aging in Detroit*

Joanne: There are not a lot of old people in Detroit.

W: Why don't you think so?

J: I don't run into very many...[laughter] I think the population.... I read the statistics, I believe it's 10 or 13% of the population are senior citizens. I said, no wonder I have a hard time meeting people my age. We know all the young people; we just don't know anybody our own age.

Joanne was not far off in her estimation. In 2010, the Detroit population over the age of 65 hovered just above 11% compared with the overall United States over age 65 population of 14% while her own neighborhood of Corktown had a slightly lower over 65 population at 9%. The census tract that includes the Lafayette Park neighborhood had more than twice the proportion of over 65 persons at 20%, likely due to the housing stock of mostly apartments and townhomes, as opposed to older single family houses. While

the aged population in Detroit was not significantly lower than the rest of the United States, the aged in Detroit receive relatively little attention from national media narratives about Detroit. Representations of older Detroiters are often displayed as elderly forced out of their homes by foreclosure, city retirees on the verge of losing pensions in the bankruptcy proceedings, or victims of crimes. They are often lumped in with negative stories about the decline of Detroit, while stories about the alternative revitalization of Detroit tend to focus on young entrepreneurs.

The New York Times is a frequent purveyor of positive articles about Detroit revitalization that tend to heavily focus on specific neighborhoods (Midtown, Downtown, Corktown), specific endeavors (restaurants and retail), and specific age groups (20-40s) (Ryzik 2010; Conlin 2011; Conlin 2014; Cowley 2014). At the time of writing this dissertation the proliferation of revitalization articles about Detroit had reached such a level that many locals were fed up with both the characterization of the city as a gritty underdog and the suggestion that not only did Detroit need saving, but included ideas about who or what was going to save it. At the end of 2013, local journalist Aaron Foley posted a list on the blog Jalopnik of all the news stories and blog posts featuring purported Detroit saviors in the previous year. The list of 41 items included a diverse selection of local politicians, business persons, religious and political ideologies, sports teams, restaurants, urban farming, right-sizing, celebrities, an appointed emergency manager, and Millennials. Conspicuously absent from the 2013 essays about saving Detroit were long-term residents.

Furthermore, many expressed views that minority neighborhoods and specifically black residents were often excluded from revitalization efforts. In the year 2014 the city

saw in influx of 8,000 white residents, the highest since 1950. In 2016 after meeting with African-American community leaders, business owners, students, and residents, former mayor Dave Bing expressed that many felt excluded from Detroit's comeback. "African-American economic empowerment and neighborhood development must be an essential part of Detroit's resurgence. Diversity is about counting people. Inclusion is about making people count" (Ferretti 2016).

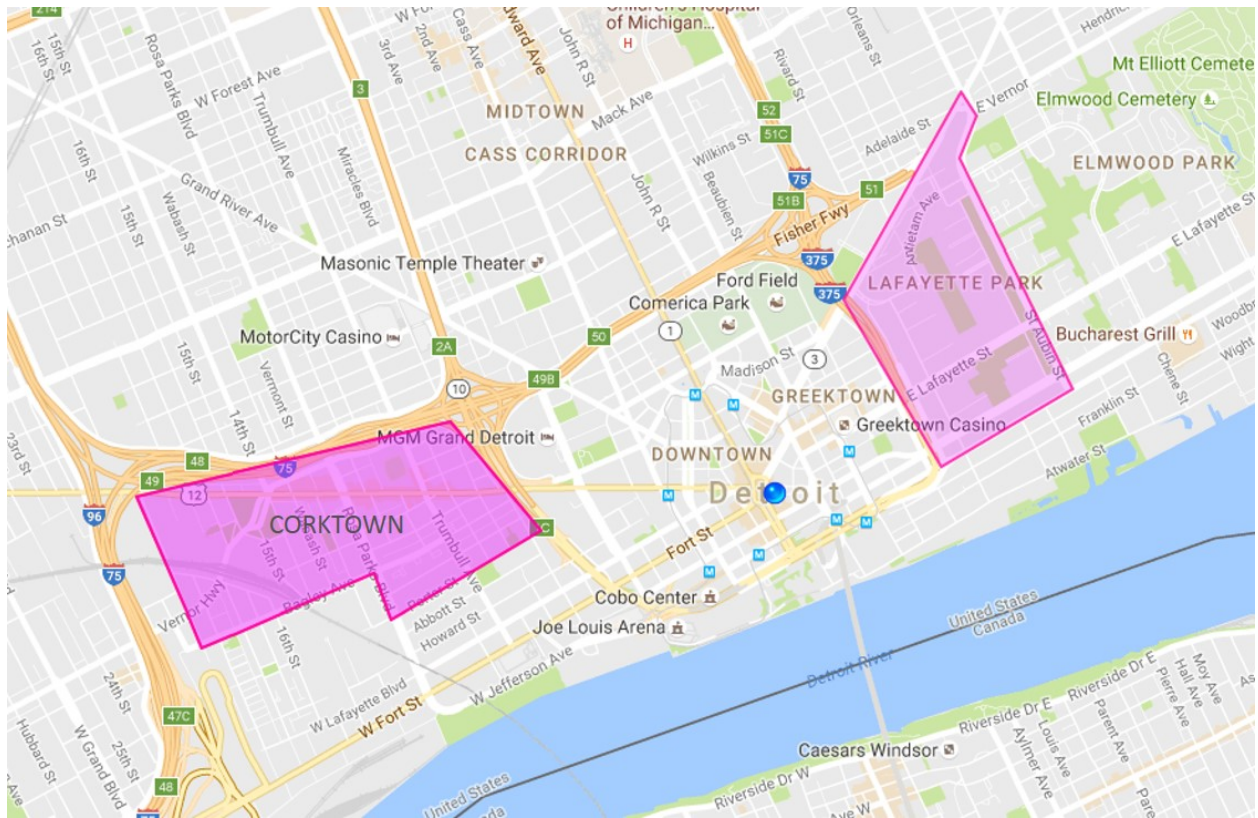
This did not go unnoticed by many of my participants either. Sandy, age 67 and a Lafayette Park resident, expressed, "The one thing that really honks me off, is when I hear something that seems to imply that's it's only when bringing in young white people to the city that the city is going to improve and the virtual abandonment of the people who have spent their entire lives here, the majority of whom are people of color. You talk about put my hackles up." Not long after I met with Sandy, I was sitting outside a Midtown, Detroit eavesdropping on a group of a dozen or so people in suits sitting at four adjacent tables. It became clear to me that they were a group of real estate investors from South Carolina who had come to tour Detroit neighborhoods and scout potential investment opportunities. One man in a gray suit stood as the others sat and described some of the neighborhoods they were going to see (Midtown, Corktown, Downtown) and reiterated several times that the neighborhood they were currently in (Midtown) was a neighborhood for young people. "You will see everywhere we go today is full of young people, young professionals especially," he told them before they climbed on their chartered bus to continue their tour. As cities are spaces where neoliberal ideologies are articulated (Brenner and Theodore 2002), the neoliberal reimagining of the cityscape positions "good" cities as places that are not only responsible for their own ability to attract visitors

and residents, but specific types of visitors and residents, namely young and professional (i.e. with money to spend), and ultimately ignores the long-term residents, many of whose efforts have resulted in spaces that are primed for neoliberal place-making.

### *Neighborhoods*

The two neighborhoods that the majority of my participants primarily identified with, Corktown (n=20) and Lafayette Park (n=7), are detailed in the section below.

### **Map 1: Corktown and Lafayette Park, Detroit**



### *Corktown*

The neighborhood “Corktown” just west of Downtown Detroit was home to Detroit’s first Irish settlers hailing from County Cork, Ireland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the year 1835 the neighborhood blocks and lots for homes were established. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the first home of the Detroit Tigers, Bennett Park, was established in the



neighborhood at Michigan and Trumbull Streets. Later as more land was acquired, the field expanded to Navin Field in 1912, Briggs Stadium in 1939, and finally Tiger Stadium, which remained the home of the team until they vacated in 1999 and it was demolished a decade later. Though the neighborhood retained the moniker Corktown, after the Civil War the neighborhood saw an influx of German immigrants. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most of the Irish population had disbursed throughout the city and a new arrival of Maltese and Mexican immigrants began to populate the neighborhood. Two still standing parishes, both established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Holy Trinity Catholic Church (1834) and St. Peter's Episcopal Church (1859) serve as anchors for the community (Marman 2001).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when most of my participants were in their childhood and teenage years, the Corktown was roughly defined as a 75-acre section of the city bounded by Michigan Ave, Fourth, Fourteenth, and Fort Streets. The Detroit Housing Commission began studies of the neighborhood as early as 1938, mostly with the goal of developing public housing. This early study determined that almost 60% of the dwellings were considered substandard and more than 80% renter occupied. The effort to develop public housing was met with resistance by both the Department of Public Works commissioner, who wanted to see the area developed into an improved residential district for downtown workers, and the City Planner who believed the area would be eventually be needed as a commercial district as the area along the Detroit River waterfront was developed and modernized. The plan to develop public housing was additionally opposed by groups of residents, then Mayor Jeffries, and the city council. Throughout the 1940s, there was little question by city officials that the area would eventually be redeveloped, but there

remained the question of if it was to be for residential or industrial purposes. Over the next decade the City Plan Commission continued to study the area. A group of consultants hired ultimately recommended that the area be slated for residential redevelopment, while at the same time the Plan Commission was lobbied by two private groups, the Detroit Real Estate Board and the Greater Detroit Board of Commerce, who wanted to see the area developed for industrial use.

As indecision about Corktown continued through the end of the late 1940s, residents seeking answers received little satisfaction about the future of their homes. Plan Commission staff member Donald Monson spent the latter half of the 1940s advocating that the area be slated for redeveloped residential and public housing use, a plan that was met with ire by many Commission members and local politicians opposed to public housing. Monson continued to argue that a residential district would allow people to live near Downtown employment. At the time many city council members were concerned about the departure of business and industry for the suburbs and sought solutions to keep industry in the city. With the election of public housing opponent Mayor Cobo in 1949, Monson's plan was effectively killed and the plan for Corktown to be established as an industrial site moved forward, now known as the West Side Industrial Project.

In the 1950s the Plan Commission began to document the condition of the neighbor as justification for "slum-clearance." The Detroit Housing Commission worked to develop plans for relocation of residents. During this time the City faced opposition from local organizations of residents who refused to consider their neighborhood a slum, and prevented redevelopment and relocation. While public hearings about redevelopment in other Detroit neighborhoods went mostly unattended, the Corktown



residents were well organized and vocal. Additionally, there were strong community organizations in place organized around ethnic, business, and religious affiliations. The Corktown Homeowners' Association, established by Ethel Claes, led the charge against redevelopment. Two local church leaders additionally played active roles in the debate; Father Clement Kern of Holy Trinity, who sought mostly to stimulate compromise and mitigate the effects of relocation, and Reverend John Magrum of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, who was an outspoken opponent of the industrial redevelopment. The residents actively resisted the designation of slum and began efforts to improve Corktown properties and spaces throughout the 1950s, insisting that most of the blighted properties were the work of absentee landlords. Ultimately the residents were unsuccessful in their efforts and by spring of 1959, 100 families had been relocated. The land was cleared and sold to private developers (Mowitz and Wright 1962: 84-134).

The classic urban neighborhood ethnography I found myself thinking of most frequently while researching was "The Urban Villagers," by sociologist Herbert Gans (1962). This ethnography is set in the 1950s in the West End neighborhood in Boston. The neighborhood is ethnically Italian and slated to be cleared for redevelopment. In this piece, Gans challenges notions that the problems of low-income individuals were driven by the neighborhoods where they lived. Gans concludes that the West End is not a "slum" as it has been designated by outsiders, but rather a low rent district, where often the inside of homes and stores are better maintained than the public outdoor fronts and a neighborhood where people faced challenges, but it was a decent place to live and a good place to be a member of the community. Like Gan's West End "village," Corktown was subject to slum clearance and redevelopment in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The

redevelopment focused on light industry and a number of residents chose to (or were able to) remain in the neighborhood, while many relocated elsewhere during this time period. Many of the current and former residents used terms like “village” to refer to the neighborhood and discussed how despite that categorization of the neighborhood as a slum by outsiders, it was a good place to live.

### *Contemporary Corktown*

By the time that anthropologist John Hartigan (1999) was conducting his research in Corktown in the early 1990s the area now comprised a smaller radius and blocks of homes that had been maintained or resurrected starting in the late 1970s. In addition to the reduction in size by the urban renewal in the 1960s, the neighborhood was further limited through the introduction of Lodge and Fisher freeways. What is often referred to as Corktown is the remaining residential section that was added to the National Register of Historic Places and is designated as a City of Detroit Historic District in 1978, bordered by the boundaries of the neighborhood are I-75, the Lodge Freeway, Porter Street, and Rosa Parks Boulevard. However, in the map above I have labeled the area where participants lived, previously lived, and identified as Corktown. As Corktown was not a planned community, the boundaries have shifted and changed over the last century. Areas no longer considered part of the Corktown neighborhood after the urban renewal schemes and freeway introduction have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century engaged in place-making efforts to reclaim affiliation and rebrand themselves with names like North Corktown and Corktown Shores. Participants in my study generally did not regard these areas as part of their own neighborhood, although they maintained it was not in an effort to be exclusionary in nature, but a concern that those areas faced a different set of issues than

their own neighborhood and should attempt to brand themselves as distinct entities.

The historic designation of Corktown was indeed a boon to some residents (both long-time residents and newcomers) and a concern to some other longtime residents who struggled to maintain their houses to the specifications required of such a neighborhood. This was apparent in a conversation a friend and I had with a bartender at the Maltese Club one fall afternoon. I had been forewarned by non-Maltese participants that the Maltese were “clannish” and that a membership was required to drink at the bar, so when the club was opened to non-Maltese on a Maltese festival day celebrating the birth of the Virgin Mary, I jumped at the chance to get an inside look.

We sat at the bar and ordered drinks from the bartender, Ninu, a Maltese man in his 70s. Ninu asked us if we were Maltese and before we could answer pointed at me and said “I know you are” like many of my Maltese participants who routinely and eagerly mistook me for Maltese. We explained no, that we had been at church and were interested in seeing the space and my friend was with the Corktown Historical Society. Ninu immediately took an interest and asked if the CHS had any money for fixing up houses. He has lived in a house a few blocks away for 36 years and has lacked the capital to winterize it. He wanted to replace the windows several times throughout the years, but because of the historic distinction of the house had to use a certain type of window that would have cost him \$35,000 to complete the entire house. He has resorted to covering the windows in plastic to keep the cold out in the winter and the heat out in the summer.

At the time of this research Corktown has generally come to stand as a sign of revitalization in Detroit. Once dotted by the few remaining long time businesses, the

storefronts on Michigan Ave have been mostly filled in and the neighborhood boasts a variety of newcomers both business and residential. In addition to long-standing restaurants, religious and ethnic organizations Corktown is now home to multiple destination eateries, a bike shop, brewery, craft whisky and vodka distilleries, a non-profit creative business incubator, several different redevelopment loft and condo options, and the newly opened Quicken Loans Tech Center. The former Tiger Stadium site is slated for mixed use commercial and residential redevelopment, while the grounds are currently maintained by a volunteer grounds crew. Corktown still stands in the shadow of the former Michigan Central Station, the behemoth long empty and neglected structure that was vacated when Amtrak terminated service to the stop in 1988. Curiously this structure has become something of a draw to the neighborhood. Multiple times I witnessed wedding parties posing for photos outside the station. Long-time resident Tom commented on the curiosity to see the train station.

T: You know, people used to come for the ball games, but now they come to look at us...

W: Sorry?

T: To look at us, you have people wandering around the streets on tours or whatever they are, the people who are so taken by the Train Station over there. Last night there were probably 25 people over in front of the Train Station for whatever reason, and they come by....it's become the trendy place obviously.

The fascination with the structure was widespread and I myself was often complicit to the gawking. I fulfilled requests from out-of-town guests for tours to see the station, while at the same time often feeling uneasy and ultimately, in a moment of self-righteousness, snapping at a weekend visitor who declared "Ruin porn is beautiful." Though many of the residents (and former residents) were eager to see the abandoned structure redeveloped

and maintained, many remarked that the Train Station was beautiful in its own way. On a tour of a remodeled Corktown home during a community meeting, the homeowner proudly displayed the view of the station from her bedroom window.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were relatively few who identified as Irish still living in the neighborhood, although for many the neighborhood still took on a primarily Irish significance. The Gaelic League and Irish American Club founded in 1920, had been its current location on Michigan Avenue since the 1950s and served as an anchor for the Irish community. Additionally, the neighborhood hosts the annual Detroit St. Patrick's Day Parade every March. Despite the proliferation of Latino and Maltese residents throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the newer influx of residents who do not identify with any of the three aforementioned ethnic groups, the Irish legacy of Corktown has been retained.

Hartigan (2000) details how that the influx of white residents in Corktown in the 1980s and 1990s, much like many of my participants who arrived in the neighborhood at that time, that it was history or historical homes that brought them to Corktown. Hartigan argues that a focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of the neighborhood and renovation of historic is a mode social engagement employed by newcomers that allows them to both distance themselves from the recent history of urban renewal, racial and economic changes in the city and distinguish themselves as different from long-time Maltese and Latino residents, who focus on home maintenance as opposed to restoration and renovation. Blokland (2009) explores a similar phenomenon in New Haven, Connecticut's Little Italy neighborhood, where a dominant ethnic narrative is held up and new residents are drawn to the neighborhood for the history and architecture, in turn stratifying access

to resources and ignoring narratives of long-term residents belonging to other ethnic and racial groups.

Corktown gets a lot of positive press, which most residents attribute to both the historical nature of the neighborhood, the architecture, and the influx of new businesses. Walt, an outspoken resident in his early 80s has other ideas about what makes Corktown attractive for outsiders to read about, visit, and move to. He claims that it is frequently written up because, "It's easy to write up and reporters are the laziest damn people in the world, watching the news is enough to make you vomit." He furthers that the attractiveness of Corktown for the media, outsiders, and new residents is the large white population.

Walt: The other thing about Corktown is that Corktown does not have a heavy black population. I don't think there's any exclusion like there is in the suburbs, but I wouldn't even say we are 25% black. Which makes the place very attractive to some people. I don't think I would want to live here if it was all black."

Wendy: Why not?

Walt: Because it's very hard to relate to black people! And I have black friends...but you can't relate to black people. They can't relate to you and you can't relate to them, because...they have their own agenda. I think that's one of the problems in the rest of Detroit...we call it white flight.

Although Walt was correct that the neighborhood did have a heavy white population, the largest in the entire city at 37.6%, he underestimated the black population by 15%, as the neighborhood has slightly more black residents than white residents at 40% (U.S Census 2010). Walt however, was likely not incorrect in his estimation that it was the large white population and the continuing Irish narrative of Corktown made it an easy write up, especially for the type of parachute journalism referenced by local reporter Charlie LeDuff that had been occurring in the city for the last decade. Although LeDuff referred

to parachute journalists as coming to the city briefly denouncing it as awful before airlifting out, the reverse was often true as well with a select few neighborhoods, particularly Corktown, being highlighted by national publications as places of revitalization to visit in Detroit.

### *Lafayette Park*

As considerably fewer of my participants identified with Lafayette Park I spent considerably less time there than in the Corktown neighborhood. Additionally, the absence of a central business district, like Corktown's Michigan Avenue, and cohesive religious community, like Corktown's dominant Catholic population, or ethnic organizations where I could observe, I often had to wait to be invited into the homes of participants to spend time in the neighborhood.

### *Origins: Black Bottom*

The area that currently houses the Lafayette Park complexes is a section of what was once known as a larger neighborhood called Black Bottom, bounded by Gratiot and Brush Streets, Vernor Highway, and the Grand Trunk Railroad. Prior to WWI the neighborhood was home to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Post WWI up until the 1950s, the neighborhood composition changed significantly and the neighborhood became a predominately African-American enclave and business district. Though many mistake the name Black Bottom as a racist slur, it was originally named for the type of soil present and not the residents. Due to rampant and unrestricted housing discrimination, the majority of the city's rapidly growing African-American population was limited to housing in Black Bottom and the adjacent neighborhood of Paradise Valley. The neighborhood suffered a great physical decline due to the Great Depression and riots that

occurred in the city in 1943. Business owners and residents struggled to slowly rebuild. In 1946 Mayor Jeffries and the Detroit Plan Commission slated the neighborhood for redevelopment and slum clearance and the eventual development of the Chrysler Freeway, which began in the late 1950s. After development of the initial plans, action was stalled for a decade and no aide was given to residents. The city did nothing to help with the relocation of residents or business owners, who were now reluctant to invest in, or upkeep the properties they were preparing to lose and the neighborhood declined further physically (Williams 2009).

### *The Development of Lafayette Park*

After almost a decade of stalled construction, the first new residential structures began to open in the newly named Lafayette Park in the late 1950s. The first was a high rise structure of rental units designed by Mies Van der Rohe named Lafayette Pavillion in 1958. The following year 186 low-rise co-op units in town-home style became available for sale. While the high-rise unit filled immediately, the low rise units sold slowly. By 1960, only 62 units had been filled and a team of sociologists set out to investigate why the original “pioneers” had come. By 1964, all of the units were filled and a follow-up study about neighborhood satisfaction was undertaken.

In the early 1960s the low-rise units were filled with middle-class professionals, most of whom had children. Many of them had come to Detroit from other places in the United States for work related reasons, had no traditional ties to East or West Side Detroit neighborhoods, and desired a location close to the city core as they disliked driving long distances regularly. For many of the low-rise residents ideology and values played a key role in their choice of Lafayette Park. Many came to Lafayette Park specifically for the



“social climate” or because it was a racially integrated setting. Some saw themselves as “crusaders and idealists” who came specifically because it was not a suburban environment or had themselves experiences prejudice in other communities.

Both white and African-American residents (who in 1963 made up close to 20% of the low-rise population) were highly enthusiastic about the neighborhood and their experiences with their neighbors. One resident indicated, “And it’s easy to raise children without prejudices here. The people who live here are Lafayette Park’s best asset.” Many of the residents cited the diversity of the neighborhood as a strong point, but were also quick to point out that they shared similar interests and values with their neighbors. It was clear that diversity extended to skin color, religion, and occupation (limited within a range of middle-class professions), it did not extend to economic or social class and in that regard the low-rise units were heterogeneous (Wolf and Lebeaux 1969).

Many of these sentiments that were expressed by residents in the early 1960s were articulated by my participants, all of whom resided in the low-rise complexes (6 in the Chateaufort complex, 1 in the townhouses). Two of these residents were Sol and Dorothy, a married couple and New York City transplants they settled in Lafayette Park in 1963 after Sol accepted a professor position at Wayne State University, where he was employed for 49 years until his retirement at age 81. He told me that in addition to being able to ride his bike to work and his desired lack of commute, “We came here because this neighborhood has the advantages of the city and the advantages of the suburbs or the country.” Aesthetically, Sol and Dorothy enjoyed the layout and physical environment of the co-op and location wise they liked being able to walk Downtown and the easy commute to work.

Dorothy, an urban consultant, who in her late seventies is still engaged in a number of projects throughout the city, echoed many of the participants in Wolf and Lebeaux study (she is actually acknowledged in the book as having provided research and writing support) about the integrated nature of the neighborhood. “We moved here....one of the important things to what you are probably looking at...is we moved to Detroit and Lafayette Park because we wanted to bring our children up in an integrated setting and an urban setting.” She further volunteered another draw to the neighborhood, specifically related to gender, that was not expressed in the 1960s study. “For me...it was an area that had an extremely equalitarian approach to men and women...even in the early days and we’ve been here since 1963...that’s when we moved in. Fall of 1963...it was very supportive, you have more activists probably than most other neighborhoods and it was racially integrated.”

Having spent quite some time telling me about the integrated nature of Lafayette Park, Sol furthers, like the conclusion of the Wolf and Lebeaux study, that while it is integrated and diverse, the neighborhood is “not economically integrated.” Dorothy acknowledges that while not any one co-op is economically integrated, the broader area is and there is an opportunity to observe every United States government-housing program attempted over the last 60 years. Where Dorothy perceives the lack of diversity in the neighborhood is age related. When the couple moved into their unit, they were one of many young families in the neighborhood; they now find themselves mostly surrounded by long time neighbors often retirees with grown children. “It’s gotten to be mostly a retirement community, we would like to see more young people, but we are getting it, particularly on the other side of the park, particularly in Lafayette Park...Mies van der

Rohe has a kind of cache and the young people like it.” Dorothy noted that the first baby to be born into the Chateaufort co-op was due soon and many of the residents were excited about the prospect.

Sol and Dorothy, along with their neighbors have settled into what is known in the gerontology literature as a NORC or Naturally Occurring Retirement Community. This term was first coined in the mid-1980s to refer to “housing developments that are not planned or designed for older people, but which over time come to house largely older people” (Hunt and Gunter-Hunt 1986:4). NORCs range in scope from vibrant communities where older people experience social support and are actively engage in neighborhood life, to the opposite end of the spectrum where most of the residents are socially isolated within their own homes. While the word “naturally” in the acronym implies that these communities have occurred without intervention in areas with long-time residents and low-turnover, the term NORC has evolved to include conscious efforts to support this type of neighborhood environment, with the idea that if older people are clustered in certain areas, delivery and development of services will be more cost effective. Most of the current NORC related research is focused on the development of formal and informal strategies to support NORCs for those who wish to age in place and the physical and mental health benefits related to living in such a community (Guo and Castillo 2012). While formal programs are often targeted at NORCs, informal networks and relationships are critical features of what makes the NORC a good place for older people to age. While NORCs have high concentration of older persons, they are not entirely age homogenous and contain a number of younger persons who can provide informal social support. The cache of Lafayette Park, mentioned earlier by Dorothy, is revealed as an important

component of attracting new residents.

Lafayette Park, with the building designs of famed architect Mies van der Rohe, site design by Ludwig Hilberseimer, and landscape design of Alfred Caldwell is notable for its architecture, urban redevelopment, urban planning, public housing development, landscape, and midcentury design aesthetic (Waldheim 2004). The neighborhood is a frequent fixture in design blogs and magazines (Grawes 2009: Aubert et al 2010) and in contrast with other Detroit neighborhoods, available van der Rohe designed properties are sold quickly. The buildings designed by van der Rohe are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in August 2015 the National Parks Service designated Lafayette Park a National Historic Landmark (Austin 2015). The central location and proximity to Downtown Detroit make it as attractive to those who hope to avoid long commutes, as it was to the first residents more than a half century earlier.

### *Conclusion*

Both Corktown and Lafayette Park are widely viewed as “successful” enclaves within an “unsuccessful” city in a neoliberal place-making context; Corktown for its ability to attract new businesses, visitors, and residents; Lafayette Park as a desirable place to live; and both for their historic status and press-friendly nature that make for attractive features in national media sources. Residents and former residents both professed that their neighborhoods were different than most areas of Detroit, often through metaphorically describing their neighborhoods as villages, furthering the narrative of the successful enclave. It was noted that despite the positive press and image of both spaces, they were often questioned about their choice to live in Detroit. For residents of both neighborhoods however, the success of their neighborhoods was heavily dependent

upon the people living there and not outside perceptions. It was the people and their relationships within the neighborhoods that make them both good places to live and age.

## CHAPTER 5: SPACES TO AGE

### *Places to age: Three Scenes*

**Scene 1:** It was the first big snowstorm of the winter and the phone rang at 9 am in Ruth's Lafayette Park home. At 96 years old, she prefers to sleep in and had not yet risen for the day. She answered the phone next to her bed and heard the voice of a younger neighbor, "Hi, it's Susan, do you need food?" Ruth, still waking up responded, "Huh?" Susan continued, 'Well, it's terrible outside and I have lots of food and I don't mind walking down to the corner, so just call me if you need food.'" Still unaware of the snowstorm outside and knowing that she had plenty of food in her kitchen, Ruth declined Susan's offer. When she later climbed out of bed, she found herself completely snowed in and unable to open her front door as the snow was piled high. Susan's offer now made sense. Although Susan was not a close friend, just a casual neighborhood acquaintance from the co-op where Ruth had lived for more than 40 years, she knew that Ruth had given up driving two years earlier and had limited mobility to walk to the store in a snowstorm. Ruth attributes this not necessarily to some kind of personal goodness on Linda's part, but notes that it is just the type of thing that people in Lafayette Park do for one another and have always done. Ruth feels she is an especially good position to stay put in her neighborhood because her needs are often anticipated by neighbors, both close friends and acquaintances. "I very rarely have to ask, it [help] is usually volunteered. I know that if I am hurt or if I fall, someone will come and see to it that my needs are taken care of."

**Scene 2:** Claire has recently retired from her career as a legal secretary at the age of 65. She lives alone in a newly built and nicely landscaped condo in suburban Northville, walking distance to shopping, her bank, and church. Despite having lived there for a

number of years, Claire admitted that she knew very few of the other residents, and none of them beyond the level of acquaintance. Soon after retiring Claire had surgery on both of her feet, and during her recovery period did not like to travel far from her home. As she did not know her neighbors well, Claire relied on family and friends scattered throughout the Metro-Detroit area to help her when she needed it. The youngest of eight children of Irish immigrants, Claire still has many family members throughout the Detroit area, although none of them have remained in Corktown. Claire herself only remained in the family home until her early twenties before living in apartments with friends, marrying, and eventually moving to the suburbs to raise her son.

During her recovery from foot surgery and as a post-retirement activity, Claire has recently written a short novella based on her experiences growing up in Corktown. The story is not autobiographical, but is based on an unwed Irish Catholic teenage mother who Claire knew in the 1960s. The story, despite its overall sad narrative, is also full of nostalgia for Corktown in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Claire spends a lot of time thinking about her former neighborhood and her now deceased parents. In addition to the novella, her memories about growing up in Corktown were recently featured in a weekly Detroit Free Press column titled "Michigan Memories." At the time that her large Irish Catholic family resided in Corktown, they were one of the few Irish families left. Although they were close to other Irish families and frequented the Gaelic League, Claire developed close friendships with many of her Catholic school classmates, with whom she still frequently sees.

Claire, although physically comfortable in her current neighborhood and condo, contrasts it with her former telling me, "I don't know if it is the memories or when family

was intact, Ma was alive and Daddy was alive....and you know there was....families....we had a large family and there was always activity there was no....I mean....you wouldn't be like this here, sitting here by yourself all afternoon, there was always somebody.” Between expressions of nostalgia for her former neighborhood and the conveniences of current neighborhood, Claire considers what it would be like to grow older in Corktown. She concedes that it is still a nice place to live, but that it is a better space for younger people. “I think you would have to be young and do more for yourself. You have to have access to your doctors and I don't know how good that is in Detroit. But if you are young, you could paint and fix things up yourself.” She furthers that not all of the houses in the neighborhood are kept up as well as they were in her childhood, “What would bother me to have my house and keep it nice, and the grass and then next to me I wouldn't like it if somebody let their property go and didn't care what it looked like.” The exterior of Claire's condo is nicely landscaped and maintained by a homeowner's association in a quality and style that she appreciates, and as such, so are all the other units on the block allowing her not to worry about either her own maintenance or the aesthetics of neighbors. For Claire the quality and convenience of the space make up for the lack of camaraderie with neighbors and lack of family nearby.

**Scene 3:** Marjorie wakes up in her Midtown condo just before 7:30 am every weekday when another resident of her building comes to pick up her dog for a morning walk. While her dog is being walked Marjorie sits in her living room with coffee and looks out her window, a favorite feature of her space, on to Woodward Avenue and the lawn of the Detroit Institute of Arts. She had initially considered a 10<sup>th</sup> floor unit in the 400 resident vintage building, as opposed the 5<sup>th</sup> floor one she ended up purchasing, but is pleased



with her decision. From her current vantage point she can see both the pedestrians in the area and make out their faces. In Marjorie's condo interspersed among her artwork, Persian rugs, and grand piano, are displayed relics, like posters and buttons, of various social justice movements she has participated in throughout the years. A sign proclaiming "Shame Israel! Shame!" sits in her living room window projected out on to Woodward Avenue.

Marjorie would like to walk her dog Cleo herself, but at age 86 her arthritis makes it difficult to walk any further than short distances and Cleo has a lot of energy. She relies on friends and neighbors, some paid and some volunteer, from the 400 person building where she resides, to help her out. Although a lifelong resident of Detroit, Marjorie is relatively new to her Midtown neighborhood. She most recently lived in a five bedroom and five-bathroom house in the University District that became far too unwieldy after the death of her husband. In her early 80s, she sold the large house and after a couple of stressful months of staying with neighbors and another friend, she purchased her Midtown condo and set out to make the neighborhood her own. She specifically chose this neighborhood because of the foot traffic and her desire to be in close proximity to other people and cultural amenities. Marjorie was quick to get involved in her new neighborhood and does not hesitate to reach out to neighbors with requests for help.

Unlike Ruth, her needs are not necessarily anticipated, but unlike Claire she has developed relationships with other residents where she does feel comfortable approaching neighbors with requests for help. Marjorie also feels confident to contact local neighborhood organizations with both praise and criticism. After all, despite only having lived there a short time, Midtown is her neighborhood. "I do identify with this

neighborhood; I see it as my neighborhood...I even called over to the Detroit Historical Society after 11 pm when they said they were going to shut the music off... I have a hard time with noise, I have a very low tolerance for noise and I called and I said, please can you knock off the music...I said, this is a neighborhood, there are people in this whole building, there are people in the Belcrest, and other places around here, who are people living in houses and spaces and you need to understand it.”

A self-identified anarchist, Marjorie’s politics extend to her relationships within the space as well. She believes in a system without leaders, but insists that this does not mean chaos. She is concerned with the “pyramidal” structures of a government with leaders, and would prefer to see a circle. She often expresses her views and a sense of frustration that she cannot seem to get other people to join her. Most recently Marjorie was at a meeting of condo owners in her building lead by the property manager whom she frequently butts heads with over a number of issues, her biggest concern being that he has replaced a number of black staff with white staff and some of his own family members. This particular meeting had been called to discuss some concerns about vandalism in the elevators. The property manager suggested installing a set of cameras in the elevators, but was met with resistance from Marjorie who insisted that the residents needed their privacy and brought the meeting to a quiet with a paraphrased quote by Benjamin Franklin, “those who want to sacrifice their civil rights...or something...their liberties for privacy...those who would sacrifice liberty for privacy, deserve neither.” She laughs that it was perhaps a little self-righteous, but firmly believes that as resident of the space and neighborhood it is impossible for her to separate her political beliefs from every arena of her life, particularly with regard to the space that she lives in.

I open this chapter with three scenes of older adults and their chosen spaces to age in the Detroit-Metro area; first Ruth, a woman in late old age who is happy she is able to “age in place” and is aided by the relationships with her neighbors who are both close friends and acquaintances; Claire, who moved to her condo in her early 60s and is “aging out place” and relies on a scattered network of family and friends for social life and help if needed; and Marjorie, who has chosen to create a new place for herself in her 80s, developing a new network of friends and neighbors to socialize with and rely on when she needs assistance. All three accounts represent the different types of experiences with spaces to age in that I encountered in my fieldwork. While all of the conversations included discussions of the physical environments and how it met their needs, most notably all three housing units required no exterior maintenance by the owner, most of the conversation focused on the relationships, or lack of relationships, as they related to the spaces. In this chapter, I argue that relationships are an important component of the experience of aging in specific environments.

### *Aging in and out of place*

The Center for Disease Control defines “aging in place” as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level” (CDC 2009). All of the participants in this study were technically “aging in place” as they were living in their own homes and communities, as opposed to retirement or assisted living situations. For the purposes of this study I chose to classify participants in three groups; aging in place (long-term residents of Detroit neighborhoods with strong relationships to other neighborhood residents); aging out of place (former residents of Detroit who are dispersed throughout the Metro-area and not

co-located in neighborhoods with family or close friends); and aging while creating place (participants who have relocated and developed strong new ties to their communities later in life).

The majority of older Americans currently live independently in their own homes and communities. More than 75% of individuals over the age of 80 continue to live in their own homes and this appears to be the preference of most Americans. According to research conducted by the AARP found that 73% of older adults strongly agreed that they would like to stay in their current residences as long as possible and 67% strongly agreed that they would like to remain in their communities as long as possible (Keenan 2010). The concept of aging-in-place is relatively new in gerontology, having only emerged in recent decades (Pastalan, 2013 [1990]) and although the concept is still developing beyond a policy ideal to explore the complexity of the relationship between aging and environment, it is generally agreed upon and accepted to mean the ability to remain in one's home and community (Cutchin 2003). As most Americans prefer to age in their own homes and neighborhoods, much policy and academic research is oriented towards understanding both how this affects older adults and how they might be supported in their desire to remain in place. However, studies tend to focus specifically on the home environment and neglect the role of the surrounding neighborhood on aging in place (Abbott, Carman, Carman, & Scarfo 2009; Krause 2004; Smith 2009). In addition to the surrounding physical environment, it is important for researchers to also consider the social interactions that are present in the neighborhood (Krause 2004; Smith 2009; Wahl & Lang 2004). It has been shown that having friends or relatives in the neighborhood have a positive effect on well-being in old age, (Krause, 2004; Rowles,

2008; Shaw, 2005), but that neighbors providing help to older neighbors serves as a complement to aging in place as opposed to a substitute for family or professional caregivers (Greenfield 2015).

### *Residential Histories*

When conducting my early interviews with participants, one of the first indicators that considerations of residences and neighborhoods differed for those who were aging in place and those who had relocated was the pattern of residential histories provided by participants. During the interviews, participants described how they came to live in their current space. Three differing themes emerged; for those who were aging in spaces as longtime residents the narratives focused on continuity or having found the perfect place to stay put; for those who were aging in new areas, especially those who were not in the neighborhood they identified with their formative years, their narratives often focused on rupture, transitions, multiple moves, and recollections of their childhood neighborhoods; for individuals who were actively trying to create new place in old age, their narratives followed a unique combination of the two aforementioned, their residential histories often mirrored those aging out of place, but without the sense of nostalgia or comparison to former neighborhoods. They were also like many of the individuals who chose to age in place, as they believed they had finally found the best spot for themselves in their current life stage. While these residence histories often described in detail physical environments and dwellings, the core of the histories focused on relationships with neighbors, family, friends, and community members.

### *Aging in Place in Detroit*

In the summer of 2014, while I was in the midst of collecting data, a joint project titled “Aging Together” was launched by the Wayne State Public Radio Station (WDET), and the local online magazines MLive and Model D. In early June 2014, at the time station manager and WDET host, Craig Fahle announced the project, noting that residual burdens of the recent recession were impacting the aging experiences of many Detroit seniors and that the summer series which would feature articles, blog posts, and radio programs, would explore, “the challenges we face as a region in providing more security, better health outcomes and a better quality of life of our senior population.” A piece by Khalil Al Hajal titled, “Stay or go: Growing old in Detroit isn't easy, but does moving make sense?” ran as part of the series on the MLive website on July 28, 2014. Al Hajal interviewed seniors with no plans to leave the city despite what Al Hajal interpreted as many challenges to living daily life for seniors (lack of transportation, high rates of crime, and poverty). The hook for the article was that many seniors did not want to leave for a variety of reasons, mostly noting that aging presents challenges everywhere, including the suburbs, and they were often hesitant to leave their both their neighborhoods, or often their homes where mortgages were paid off, or often they saw themselves as neighborhood elders or mainstays of the community.

### *Imagined Futures and Alternate Realities*

The same lack of desire to relocate outside of the city rang true for many of my participants as well, although there was often a question about the economics of leaving their long time homes, many of them felt that they as older people served a specific role as an older person within the community and had a clear vision of what they wanted their

old age to look like and where they wanted it to take place. Greg for example, had been thinking about what he wanted his old age to look like since he was in grade school. He is now in his mid-sixties and for the past three years has spent the majority of his time in California working as a project manager. While in California, Greg leaves behind a wife, multiple Corktown properties, and projects. Shortly after my research was complete, Greg's final project in California ended and he returned to Michigan and Corktown full time. He told me that Corktown was it for him and it was where he planned to remain in his old age.

I met him one rainy afternoon at a Corktown bar and before I had a chance to explain my project or why I wanted to meet, Greg began telling me his life story and opened with an exchange he had with his grandfather at the age of 10. He says that when he was 10 years old his grandfather sat him down and asked him what kind of life he wanted to have. Greg says that he had watched many older family members and friends retire and leave the Detroit area for "more glamorous places and nicer weather" and in his estimation the men all either died soon after retiring or left and came back to Detroit because they were miserable without their connections to friends and neighbors. Greg knew even at age 10 that this was not what he wanted for himself.

Greg and his wife came to Corktown in 1982 right after they were married. They moved into a townhouse on 6th Street and spent a year fixing it up. Greg said that moving into the neighborhood, which everyone thought was on the way down, they were "Pioneering the ideology that we are now living." He told me, "I know everybody hates this town, mostly the white people who fled it," but notes that it is his incredible passion for history that has kept him connected to the city and his desire to live in it. "It's not that

I want to live in the past, but I want to live next to it.” Like many participants, Greg demarcates himself as different from other white people with his choice to live in the city and not flee to the suburbs.

Greg has been actively involved in many projects in the neighborhood during his thirty-plus years in Corktown. Although his grand visions for the future of Corktown and his various neighborhood projects, at times put him at odds with his neighbors, he welcomes the challenge to work within the community and finds it fulfilling. Despite the ruffled feathers and disagreements with neighborhood “passive aggressive malcontents” Greg understands that his vision is not singular and feels a need to respect his neighbors’ points of view. “It was their neighborhood, they live here and who the hell am I? Although in some cases I had lived here longer, but I had to respect their feelings.”

Annie, like Greg, is still working as a hairdresser, commuting to a suburban hair salon multiple days a week and several years out from planning to retire. Annie is a short woman with curly dark hair and glasses. She tells me that her 22-year-old niece calls her “the original hipster” before asking me for a precise definition of the term. I told her that I believed the term originated in the 1950s with beatniks as someone who eschewed the mainstream, or enjoyed mainstream culture ironically. She tells me “eschewing the mainstream, that fits me.” The juxtaposition of the beautiful crown moldings and antiques in her home and the talking Pee Wee Herman doll that I spy on her dining room table, confirm her niece’s description. Additionally, the designation of hipster can be read as a form of Annie’s marked whiteness, as hipster consumption is often seen as an attempt to distance oneself from North American hegemonic ideals of whiteness (Michael & Schulz 2014).



At the age of 60, she has lived in the neighborhood all of her life, with the exception of a decade in her twenties spent living with roommates all throughout the Detroit Metro area. Also like Greg, Annie is involved in many community groups, "If I am going to live in the neighborhood then I need to contribute." While Greg remains close to family throughout Michigan, much of Annie's family lives on the same block, including her sister and 8-year-old niece. Her mother grew up in a house two doors down from where Annie lives now. Her two sisters now live in her mother's old house and another sister lives across the street with her daughter. Annie's mother was Maltese and her father was from a nearby Polish neighborhood.

Until their deaths, Annie's parents lived two doors down from her, a fact that she now appreciates, but initially made her reluctant to purchase the house twenty-five years ago. Although she initially purchased a house in this neighborhood because it was what she could afford at the time, Annie enjoys being close to her family and knowing all of her neighbors. The house is a beautifully restored cottage that was built in 1910. Annie lives there alone in a mix of midcentury and antique furniture, various pieces of artwork, and some kitsch decorations scattered throughout the house that give it an eclectic look. Annie does not plan on leaving the neighborhood for her retirement and would like to stay in her home as long as she can, since it is all on one floor, she hopes that will enable her to stay longer.

A recent incident highlighted why her neighborhood was a good space for her to age in place happily and made clear the vision that she wanted for herself in the coming years. Recently Annie went to visit cousins who live in the Detroit suburb Westland and accidentally walked into the wrong house. The house was five doors down from the

cousin and the homeowner did not know the cousin and the cousin did not know the homeowner, despite just being houses away. That really shocked Annie as she knows most of the people on her block. For Annie, this reinforced her belief that a suburb like Westland was not the type of place where she would want to live. “That’s when I realized how different this neighborhood is and I appreciated it much more.”

Something that Annie particularly enjoys about her neighborhood is the intergenerational demographics. She, like many participants, welcomed the return of children to the neighborhood. For many who grew up in the neighborhood they had clear memories of families with lots of children, many schools, and lots of family oriented events and activities. Many who graduated high school in the early 1960s believed that they were the last of the large cohort of children who grew up in the neighborhood. St. Vincent’s Catholic School in the neighborhood often had a long waiting list of neighborhood children who wanted to attend. By the time Annie graduated in the early 1970s, she was one of only twelve in her graduating class. In addition to large groups of children in the neighborhood there were many older people as well. “When I was younger there were older people in the neighborhood and that was part of the package. Neighborhoods need all ages.” Annie tells me that growing up she always thought that having all the old ladies around the neighborhood knowing all of their business was annoying, but now she realizes that it was a good thing. “It was good that the neighbors cared about each other.” Now that Annie is one of the older neighbors, she can see this coming full circle and enjoys her role as older person in the neighborhood. With the return of children to the neighborhood and her young niece on the same block, the family home is once again a gathering place for neighborhood kids and she is able to fulfill the role of

providing care to younger family members and watching out for neighborhood children.

Belinda Leach (2005) argues that humans engage with the cognitive processes of recalling the past, living in the present, and imagining the future. These processes allow individuals to reflect on past events, make judgments, and evaluate imagined alternatives. Their ultimate actions and ability to act as agents are a result of their distinctly human ability to imagine alternative futures or scenarios. For both Annie and Greg, the choice to remain in Corktown for their old age is a deliberate action based on a careful evaluation of past experiences, present circumstances, but also witnessing the experiences of other space and projecting themselves into those situations. After considering the imagined alternatives of aging in other places, I turn now to some of the physical and financial realities of older people aging in Detroit spaces.

### *Housing Stock and Finances*

Although all of the participants who were aging in their long term homes insisted that they wanted to stay where they were living for as long as possible, that did not mean that this was necessarily without challenges, especially as it concerned finances and home repairs. In Lafayette Park, the home repairs and upkeep were less of a concern, as the homes were co-ops and maintenance and landscaping was included in a monthly HOA fee. The oldest of my participants, including several in their 90s, hailed from this particular neighborhood, likely for this reason. In Corktown the majority of the people I interviewed were in their 60s and 70s, and only two were in their early 80s, Helen and Walt.

Helen is a retired funeral home owner, who has lived in Corktown, since moving from nearby Hubbard Farms in the mid-1990s. She lives in a well maintained condo

building that was built in the 1990s as the first market rate housing in the neighborhood in more than half a century. Like the residents of Lafayette Park, Helen was not responsible for any exterior maintenance and the newer structure ensured that she did not face many of the same upkeep problems that owners of older homes frequently dealt with. Many of the older Corktown residents were able to keep up with the maintenance, as they had both the financial resources to make repairs and were healthy and active enough to make repairs to their homes or manage paid repairmen. A few exceptions struggled comfortably to age in place.

One of these exceptions was Walt, an 83-year-old Corktown resident who moved to the neighborhood in the late 1970s. Walt was recommended to me by several participants, but came with many warnings that he was “negative,” “long-winded,” and under no circumstances would I be able to visit the interior of his house like I had with most of the others. I spent almost four hours with Walt in the Murphy Playlot, a neighborhood park in Corktown, one summer afternoon. He asked me to call him a half hour before we were to meet and make sure he was awake from his afternoon nap. While waiting for our meeting, I was able to spot him from quite a distance and recognized him as someone I had seen walking his dog around the neighborhood on multiple occasions. A former architect, Walt had unkempt white hair, a long beard, large glasses, and wore cargo shorts and a long-sleeved plaid button down shirt over a t-shirt and he was carrying two large poster boards covered with photos of the neighborhood from the late 1970s that he gifted to me. He was both fascinating and difficult to keep on track.

Walt had many strong opinions about his neighborhood, neighbors, politics, Detroit, and the world around him. He insisted that it was not the Corktown Community in

itself that drew him to the neighborhood, but he has been very much involved in the neighborhood and neighborhood politics since his arrival in the late 1970s. “It’s very hard to explain that I came here for my house. I wanted a typical federal townhouse. Like I said the neighborhood came with it. And I got involved in a lot of stuff.... we had a Citizens District Council. We had many arguments.” This comment about arguments was spoken with a grin to indicate that these were enjoyable for Walt in some way.

Walt had several problems with his older home and one of his main concerns was lack of available handymen. In the past he knew a number of recovering alcoholics who worked as handymen and now he has trouble getting people to return his calls. “Before you are old you can do those things yourself.” When we met in 2014, Walt had just survived an awful winter where the inside of his house never reached above 50 degrees. He told me that previously this was not a problem for him, but as he got older it was much more difficult to stay healthy in the winter and he suffered some bad illnesses this past winter because of the temperature in his house. “You asked what my house was like...rough.” In addition to his own house, Walt owns the house next door and tells me that he is preparing to sell it soon as he cannot afford the upkeep and plans to use the profit to winterize and heat his current home. At the time of our meeting, the house next door currently had a tenant who had lived there for 20 years paying him \$275 a month in rent. Walt has informed the tenant that he will need to leave the house, when it lists on the market and this had led to a dispute between the two. The tenant is very upset and Walt feels he has little right to be after the years of “free ride” low rent. Although the two have lived next door to each other for 20 years, they apparently do not have a close relationship. The tenant suffers from an undisclosed mental illness and is under the care

of a psychiatrist, who allegedly suggested that the tenant vacate the house next door and move in with Walt, an idea that Walt balks at noting that he has already helped the man out for the last two decades through the low rent he charged him.

In March of 2015, about 8 months after we last spoke, Walt's rental property went on the market and appeared on a popular Detroit real estate blog, where the pictures and post were inundated with comments, none of them positive. From the pictures displayed on the site, it was hard to believe that anyone had been living there, as it was in complete disrepair. A number of the comments on the website from people who claimed to live in the neighborhood indicated that it was in much worse shape in person than the pictures illustrated, as a tarp covered part of the roof and stray cats had overrun most of the property. The majority of the comments however centered on the \$120,000 asking price, which appalled blog readers and struck many as greedy attempt to capitalize on the current popularity of Corktown. The high listing price of the house was a surprise to me as well, as Walt spent most of our conversation lamenting the gentrification of the neighborhood, the high rents, and the attempts at making Corktown a destination for both visitors and newer, wealthier residents.

Walt was especially concerned with the gentrification that he perceived had taken place in the neighborhood around him since he moved in the late 1970s and several times alluded to his own financial constrictions. "It's a very quiet neighborhood, one of my neighbors said it is the quietest place that he's ever lived. The rents are really outrageous...for the type of people I would like to see live here. I'd like to see professionals, you see almost everything on that street is rentals, and that doesn't make a good neighborhood, rental does not make a good neighborhood." Walt then quoted me

several rents for Corktown properties which he deemed outrageous, despite the fact that I knew his figures to be much underestimated.

*The Political Economy of Old Age in Detroit*

As the processes associated with an increasingly globalized world and the 2008 global financial crisis undermine institutional support for older persons, increased longevity is often positioned as a global problem, while the emphasis for solving issues on aging remains focused on mitigating individual risk factors. These occurrences tied to world economic markets have in turn resulted in greater social inequality in old age (Phillipson 2015). The political-economic shift towards neoliberalism is reflected in both prevalent attitudes towards the elderly and increased social and economic inequality. Moreover, political-economic changes and the replication of structural inequalities have powerful impacts on individual lives (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Farmer 2004; Biehl 2005) and the dramatic political-economic transformations of Detroit over the past half century were salient in the narratives of the older person in this study. In particular, the municipal bankruptcy, which I will discuss further in Chapter 7, threatened the livelihood of several participants who had retired from employment with the city.

Narratives of youth spent in Detroit often recalled the financial homogeneity of neighborhoods were often juxtaposed with the widely varying financial current situations of participants. There was a broad range of economic positions within this sample. Some participants were wealthy enough to take early retirement in their late forties, while others struggled to heat their homes and survived on public assistance. Though often political economy and structural inequality narratives within anthropology focus on how the structural status quo has devastating impacts on the lives on individuals, the converse

also rang true for many of my participants. A number of them lived quite comfortably due to investments, carefully planned retirements, family businesses, and early opportunities for education that allowed them to pursue high paying careers. Dorothy told me, “I don’t like to tell people this, but I will for the purposes of this interview, we are part of the affluent community. We are not top of the 1% or 5%, but we are very comfortable.” Her husband furthered, “We are a hell of a lot richer than we ever thought we would be.” While Dorothy and Sol both concede that they did not lead lavish lives which allowed them to save, Sol confides that in reality it was the financial performance of his employer sponsored retirement plan that allows for their comfortable retirement. Other participants, particularly those who had been city employees, expressed more concern about finances.

Though savings and pensions were affected by the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent municipal bankruptcy of Detroit, most of the participants expressed little concern about the finances surrounding their housing situations. Few carried mortgages on their homes, as they had either lived in them for a number of years or had downsized in retirement. Though there were participants who unlikely had the financial resources to relocate, the majority of Detroit residents in this study chose to remain in the city regardless of whether their finances would allow them to move to a suburban or retirement community. In fact, many Detroit residents had to have financial resources to remain in their Detroit homes, as either their older homes required frequent maintenance and repairs, or they required paid helpers to come into their homes to help with daily living tasks. Later in this chapter I recall the narrative of Elena who, due to financial constrictions, was forced to move from her Corktown house in Detroit to the suburbs. There exists a myth of living cheaply in Detroit. When compared to cost of living other



large American cities, this would be true, but regionally it is more complex. While the national media is often full of stories about \$500 homes available in Detroit, the reality of everyday life in the city tells a different story. Detroit residents often pay higher property tax rates, car and homeowner's insurance premiums, than their suburban counterparts and are additionally subject to a city income tax.

### *Paid and Unpaid Help*

In addition to the higher costs of living in the city, the older participants in this study (in their eighties and nineties) all relied on some form of either paid or unpaid labor to help them remain in their homes. While many of the people in this study had adult children, it was often the case that the children of more affluent older participants lived elsewhere and were still working full-time, unable to provide daily or even weekly help for their aging parents. While several of these participants relied on paid labor to help with daily or weekly tasks, many participants with adult children who resided locally relied on offspring for tasks such as trips to the doctor and grocery store. Although Pam and her husband Don, who I will discuss shortly, were only in their early sixties, neither was able to drive and therefore relied on her daughter who lived nearby when they needed rides. There were several participants who had no adult children or paid help, but the majority of them were in their sixties and seventies and could still manage the tasks of day to day living by themselves and were still able to drive, and had often worked out arrangements with other family members, friends, and neighbors. Kathy, for example lived in the downstairs of a two flat building in Grosse Pointe, where her sister and brother-in-law resided in the upper flat. While I was interviewing her, her brother-in-law at one point came downstairs to handle a minor repair in her flat.

In addition to the challenges of maintaining a home, some participants faced challenges of navigating other household tasks and daily errands. In Corktown, with the exception of Helen, Walt, and Pam, those who remained in their homes were still at a place where they could manage their daily lives without outside help. Walt, although he had many difficulties and challenges with his home, had a network of friends in the neighborhood and Detroit, who were available to help him with tasks. These were mostly larger maintenance tasks, as he did not need daily help with basic tasks like getting dressed, as many of my Lafayette Park participants in their late 80s and early 90s did. His neighbor from several blocks over, Helen was self-sufficient on a daily basis, although she no longer drove very far. She would drive only in the neighborhood, to places like the local market or her church. She relied on her daughter to drive her to farther out shopping and appointments.

Like Helen, Pam and her husband Don rely on nearby family members to help them with tasks. They are both in their early 60s, although appear much older, and survive on SSI disability income and live in what was Pam's childhood home. Like Walt's house, I was informed by neighbors that I would likely not be able to visit Pam in her home as it was in disrepair; she later told me that her husband did not like strangers in the house and therefore could not invite me inside.

When we met at the Murphy Playlot, it was an unseasonably warm fall day of 65 degrees and Pam came strolling up slowly. She had long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail and was wearing a jean jacket. A neighbor had told me that she was at least in her early 70s and I would have put her somewhere around there as well. I was surprised when she told me that she was born in 1951. Her face was heavily lined and she had

bright blue eyes. She tells me that her doctor recently told her that she's got another 30 years left in her, an idea that both pleases her and sounds dubious at the same time.

Pam is the adopted daughter of a couple who migrated to Detroit from Nashville and settled in the Corktown neighborhood. Despite being a lifelong Detroit resident, Pam speaks with a slightly Southern accent. She attended Most Holy Trinity Elementary School and St. Vincent's High School, both in Corktown graduating in 1970. Pam reveals later in her narrative that she had a daughter that was born in 1968, prior to her high school graduation. Between Pam and her husband Don they have five children, 20 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. She admits that she has not even met all of them, although a number of them still live in the area. Pam used to regularly cook for all of them in her 900 square foot house, "Sometimes we fed them all in our dinky little house."

Pam indicated throughout our conversation that because her home was older, it was both difficult to maintain and heat. Their home lacks insulation and is quite cold in the winter. Her husband, Don, is now disabled and unable to make repairs to their home. Pam wraps the windows in plastic and places blankets over them to keep in the warmth. A friend of mine who lives on the block and frequently helps them out with shoveling snow and small tasks, told me that one winter day he carried some groceries into their kitchen, where they were attempting to heat the home by leaving the stove burners on and the oven on and open.

Pam and Don are both currently unable to work due to health problems. Pam worked for years as a CNA in home health care and Don worked as an auto-mechanic. Four years ago Pam had a small stroke and was no longer able to tolerate the stress of

her job as she often became too involved in the lives of her patients and grieved their deaths. Don is unable to work or drive at all having lost his eye in a carjacking incident at a gas station two years earlier. Pam is unable to drive at night due to her night blindness. She tells me that they are private and reluctant to ask for help, but are pleased that it is so frequently offered by neighbors and neighbors often check to see if they need anything. "It's a good place to grow old and I wouldn't trade it. If people see you need something they come to your rescue, although we are the type of people, we don't like to ask. People look out for on another around here." Recently both Pam and Don were sick and did not leave the house for days. A neighbor across the street noticed that their truck had not moved in days, so he knocked on their door to check on them and see if they were alright. "A lot of neighbors won't do that, even if they know you might be home."

Additionally, one of Pam's daughters lives in a nearby neighborhood and can frequently help by taking her places or bringing her items that she needs. Aging in place is not without difficulties, especially if one is without the financial resources to hire outside help, or in the cases of both Pam and Walt, to properly maintain and heat an older home. However, through a variety of strategies and social networks equipped Corktown residents to deal with the challenges of old age.

In Lafayette Park, many of the residents were older than those in Corktown, and most of the people I interviewed were in their 80s and 90s. Most over the age of 80 appeared to employ some kind of help, either monthly, weekly, or in some cases daily. The two African-American participants, Leona and Gloria, both relied on grown daughters who lived nearby to help them on what appeared to be a daily basis. Most of the others paid helpers to aid them in tasks.

When I appeared at Ruth's home on a Friday morning I was greeted by her paid aide, an African-American woman in her early fifties, and shown to where Ruth, age 96, was seated in the living room. Halfway through our conversation, the aide bid goodbye for the week Ruth thanked her and asked "Do I know where everything is?" The aide assured her that she was all set for the weekend. When the woman stepped out of the front door Ruth turned to me and said,

That's my salvation, she does everything for me. Getting up in the morning is always difficult. Five mornings a week, she bullies me [laughter] and forces me into the shower. I can't take showers alone, so she's there and hand holds, sees to it that I am still alive. And she's a good cook.

In addition to her hired aide, Ruth is able to rely on neighbors to meet any other needs she might have. "I don't shop, someone will call and say, I am going shopping, what do you need?"

Ruth has a less warm relationship with her handyman, who she alternately describes as "wonderful" and as looking like a "thug," a former Chateaufort resident does maintenance work for many of the older residents in the complex. While I was interviewing Ruth he called to set up a time to work in her yard and put up a storm door leading out to the patio. Ruth had been trying to pin him down to time for the tasks for several weeks and was visibly frustrated during the call. "I am very angry with him. He's a, pardon the expression, pain-in-the-ass, but, he has worked for everybody around here and is wonderful, can do anything. You know, paid to clean the carpets and do the yard." When the handyman, by my own estimations a middle-aged working class white man, arrived as I was leaving, I found myself reflecting on Ruth's use of the term thug, one that I had commonly come to associate with blackness. In Ruth's case it appeared to be selected to delineate that she and her handyman were of different social classes. While

she relied on both paid help of her aide and handyman, she clearly viewed the aide as a professional of more equal social standing, as opposed to the handyman from the working class background.

While both paid and unpaid care was utilized by many persons in this study, it is important to consider the ways in which both are embedded in the political-economic structures wherein the care is delivered. Although it may appear that paid care suggests a lack of care, and unpaid care suggests no financial sacrifices, the reverse is often true. Paid helpers and caregivers of elderly persons cannot be reduced to a simple transactional employer/employee situation. Though paid a fee for service, the labor is not fully commodified, as a relationship tends to develop (Himmelweit 1999). The work is often highly personalized and many paid caregivers often engage in unpaid informal care activities for their employers (Aronson & Neysmith 1996). The relationships, although technically employer and employee, are more complicated than simple business connections, as the paid aides are working within the older person's home, providing care and maintenance services that allow the individual to remain in their home as opposed to relocating to retirement communities. Ruth's contrasting relationships with her paid home care aide and her handyman reflects this. She admits that despite the handyman is "weird and frightening," he both does good work, is a fixture in the neighborhood, and she has known him a long time, and will continue to employ him. I discuss this type of complex employer/employee relationship further in Chapter 6 with the story of Lil and her paid helper Rodney, who have developed a particularly close relationship that extends beyond Rodney's paid service for Lil, and allows for them both to give and receive care.

Unpaid care is not without cost, in fact it has been demonstrated that there are a

number of hidden costs associated specifically with unpaid eldercare of family members that range from out-of-pocket expenses, forgoing paid employment opportunities, and physical and psychological costs as well (Fast, Williamson, & Keating 1999). In the United States the yearly total opportunity cost of unpaid informal eldercare is \$522 billion annually. The cost of replacing that unpaid labor with paid labor would be \$221 billion for unskilled caregivers and \$642 million for skilled care providers (Chari et al 2015). Unpaid caregivers may have difficulty navigating the work of unpaid care with that of paid employment. They often work fewer hours and are more likely to withdraw from the paid labor market than non-caregivers (Lilly, LaPorte, & Coyte 2007). Unpaid family caregivers are more likely to report emotional strain and decreased quality of life (Roth et al 2009). Compared with Caucasians, African-Americans are not only more likely to provide unpaid care for family members, but spent more hours per week engaged in unpaid care tasks, and were more likely to provide unpaid care to friends in addition to relatives (McCann et al 2007). Adult daughters are more likely to provide care than adult sons (Abel 1986; 1991; McCann 2007).

The participants in this study who had daily or weekly unpaid care from family members, the labor was all completed by daughters. Pam and Helen both received weekly help from their grown daughters, mostly in the form of transportation. The two African-American participants, Leona and Gloria received often daily help from their daughters who lived nearby, as Leona was in her nineties and Gloria in her eighties was blind. Moreover, many of the women in this study reported that they had at one point in time provided unpaid care to their own parents before their deaths.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five of the 32 participants in this study had adult children, their offspring appeared frequently in life histories, and many participants recited the accomplishments of their children and grandchildren with

### *Aging in Place in Detroit: Reflections*

Aging in place in contemporary Detroit is a mixture of both idealized visions, considerations of alternate realities, physical, environmental, and financial resources, and social networks. These long-time residents were diverse in their wants, needs, desires, and access to resources. For Annie and Greg, who purchased their homes in the 1980s with Hartigan's first wave of gentrifiers, their decades of living in the neighborhood have given them a point of reference from which to move forward with their projected future decades. Both had invested years of time and energy into making the neighborhood part of their idealized vision for how they wanted to live their lives in old age. Greg, unlike most grade-schoolers, had an early clear vision of how he wanted to live his life, informed by watching older relatives, and it was not to grow old in Florida away from his family and community. For Annie, her visit to her cousin's house in the suburbs, reinforced that she was living in a community where she could thrive and would be unhappy somewhere that she felt disconnected from her neighbors.

The realities of physically aging in Detroit are influenced by the resources, both financial and social, that the older persons have, and as such engender varying circumstances and a lack of uniformity for what it means to be an older person in Detroit. Many of the older people were in a position of being financially able to both hire people to work on and maintain their homes, and in the case of some who were in their 80s and 90s, employ paid aides to come to their homes and assist them with daily tasks. Those like Pam and her husband Don, and Walt, who all indicated that they struggled financially,

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great pride. However, with the exception of the four women who lived near their daughters and received help from them on a weekly or daily basis, and Joanne and Dave who were involved in business endeavors with both of their sons, children of participants did not appear in the narratives of the day-to-day life of the older person in Detroit and therefore do not feature prominently in this dissertation.



and were unable to maintain or heat their homes during the winter months, noted that living where they did was not without physical challenges, but social networks made it possible for them to stay, and agreed that like more affluent neighbors they could not see themselves elsewhere. Contrasted with former Detroiters who were aging outside of the city, residents of Detroit often focused their narratives on their relationships with their neighbors and community. This was especially clear when juxtaposed with narratives like Claire's who focused on the physical comfort and convenience of her suburban neighborhood, but stressed her lack of relationships with neighbors and the quiet nature of her current life with her youth in Corktown that centered on family and relationships with neighbors. In the next section I turn to the extended narrative of Elena, a recent transplant to the suburbs, whose move was precipitated by her financial circumstances and what that has meant for both her identity as a Detroiters and the processes by which she attempts to maintain a connection to both people and place.

### *Aging Out of Place*

Elena, wearing a white sun visor bright red T-shirt announcing "Sultana Family Reunion 2013," leads a group of about twenty people in matching t-shirts through the Corktown Home and Garden Tour in the summer of 2013. Elena is a petite woman, I doubt she measures much past 5 feet tall, and is about 70 years old. Her dark hair is cut short, but an abundance of it spills out the top of her visor. Despite being the shortest person in the family reunion group, it was clear that Elena is the leader. She charges in front of the others pointing out sites and informing them of relevant Corktown history. Elena eagerly approached the Wayne State exhibit outside of the Worker's Row House and surveyed the objects on display with interest. She identified herself as a long-time

Corktown and expressed an interest in being interviewed for the pilot research I was just beginning. We later arranged for her to come to my office at the Institute of Gerontology on campus. She arrived straight from an exercise group of seniors that walks weekly on the Riverwalk. Still decked out in her workout gear and white visor, she charged down the hall ahead of me and assured me not to worry, that we would get my dissertation done.

Elena's life and residential narrative is punctuated with ruptures, although Corktown appears as a stabilizing place throughout the story. Elena was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1943 to Maltese parents. The family returned to Malta shortly afterward where they remained as a group until 1948 when Elena's father traveled to North America to find work. He landed in London, Ontario and in 1950 was sponsored by a cousin to come to Detroit and moved into the family home in Corktown, which would remain in their possession for the next 61 years. Elena says that he was drawn to Corktown for both the convenience and the culture of the large Maltese population. In 1951 after three years of separation, Elena, her mother and siblings joined him at the house in Corktown. "I am very, very proud to be an American, but it all started with coming from Malta." Elena still strongly identifies with her Maltese background and is in the process of planning a 70th birthday party for herself with a theme that incorporates Malta, Egypt, and the United States to celebrate her heritage. Although she strongly identifies with her Maltese heritage, she quit attending events at the local Maltese American Club on Michigan Ave after a confrontation with a woman who was smoking cigarettes in front of children at a Christmas party a few years prior.

I was surprised to discover when I interviewed Elena that it was not her own family

reunion she was leading the day of the Home and Garden Tour. “That was someone else’s family reunion, someone I knew that lived in the neighborhood, they call me Aunt Lena, so it is like I am in the family. I happen to be godmother to the gentleman who is one of the sons of the family, and I also stood up for the wedding.” I was further surprised that Elena was no longer a Corktown resident, as she had identified herself as a Corktownner when we met. It is clear through our conversation that having recently relocated to a suburb and being no longer able to identify herself as a Detroiter pains Elena. “There is a part of me that hurts, if that city comes back and I am not a part of it that makes me sad.” Elena returns to the neighborhood often to visit friends and old neighbors, but she also returns to visit with non-biological kin. Her own biological siblings decline to visit with her, which she attributes to fear and covert racism.

Elena’s residential history is one that centers on disruptions and transitions, but is bookended by 12 years of stability in Corktown on each end. After her birth in Egypt and early childhood in Malta, Elena rejoined her father in Corktown. She, her mother and siblings got off the train at Michigan Central Depot and moved in directly to the family home a few blocks away. She lived in that house for 12 years until she married and moved out in the early 1960s. For the next four decades Elena’s education, nursing career, later social work degree, and two divorces, took her all over the Metro Detroit area. She lived in a variety of dwellings with her husbands, children, and later alone. After her children were grown and her parents deceased, she returned to Corktown for another 12 years in 1999.

After the death of Elena’s mother at the age of 84 in 1999, Elena and her siblings were in the process of settling the estate. At the same time a BSW program run by

Madonna University had opened up at the site of the former St. Vincent's Catholic School in Corktown, Elena's alma mater, also across the street from the family home. Elena enrolled in the program, eventually completing her bachelor's degree in the same building where she graduated from high school. Elena and her three siblings had been discussing selling the house when Elena decided she wanted to move back in. "I said out of the blue 'why can't I live here? And they said 'Oh no! You wouldn't want to live here!' And I said "Why wouldn't I? I grew up here." Elena's parents had paid \$3300 for the house in 1951 and in 1999 she took out a \$60,000 mortgage to buy them out. The siblings understood Elena's connection to the childhood home, but there was more to her return to Corktown that she did not share with them.

W: What precipitated your move back to Corktown?

E: I was going through a severe grief process with the loss of my mom. I basically took care of her always, spiritually, shopped for her, did all her business, financial business. When my mom passed away I was going through some serious depression and I decided I need to do something about it and that's when I got the opportunity for school and the house. And then to be really rigorously honest there was some trauma when I was growing up. I was sexually abused by a neighbor and that resulted in a pregnancy and naturally some of those bad feelings remained. I didn't share that with my family, but I wanted to go back and face the demon.

Despite the unhappy circumstances that lead to her return, Elena was thrilled to be back in the neighborhood. She was unfazed by the newly acquired mortgage debt "That never entered my mind, I was happy with the memories and the beauty of...the beauty of being in Corktown. I was comfortable there, knew the neighborhood, knew the neighbors. I still talk to the neighbors that live there." Soon after moving Elena got a job at the nearby Detroit Medical Center, the location was convenient for both work and school, and she found a nearby church that she liked "everything had fallen into place." She enjoyed

being in the house with the memories of her family, being near old neighbors, and connecting with new neighbors. When I asked her to describe the neighborhood to someone who had never visited she told me “The first word that comes to me is family....just family and connections, that is the best description.” Several times Elena referred to the neighborhood as family, despite the fact that none of her blood relations resided in the neighborhood with her.

Her new neighbors, mostly younger people, helped her out with a variety of tasks. They took care of her snow removal and maintained her grass as she was no longer physically able to do it herself. “They took care of me, they looked out for me.” They also looked out to make sure both Elena and her home were safe, although despite their efforts her home was burglarized on multiple occasions. Her siblings, who reside in suburbs, encouraged her to move out of the house and the neighborhood. Elena insists of the burglary incidents however, “That didn’t deter me, maybe just scared me for a little bit. No one was going to steal my joy; I was going to live where I chose to live.”

Ultimately, despite another incident where she was carjacked near her church, it was not fear for her safety that drove Elena from the city, but her finances. “The only reason that I moved out was the expense to bring the house to the way that I would like it and be comfortable in it, was way, way beyond my means.” Reluctantly, in 2012 Elena listed the house for sale and joined a list waiting for subsidized senior housing in Royal Oak. She was approached by an architect who wanted the house and offered cash, but at a price less than Elena desired. After some time passed and the woman sent Elena a home baked pie and handwritten letter, she decided it was time and called the realtor and said she was ready to leave. Within three weeks of her departure, the woman had gutted

the interior of the house and was busy remodeling it. Elena keeps in close contact with her and has been back to the house several times. "What the home is inside now is exactly what I dreamt for myself. Exactly what I had pictured I would do if I had the money and that is what I she had done. So I feel with her now that I still have a connection." Before leaving the house Elena had 40 of her family members over for one last dinner. They all crammed in the modest house, looked at pictures, selected mementos, and ate Maltese pastizi.

Elena moved in with one of her brothers in the suburbs of Livonia while she waits to be called for the subsidized senior housing in Royal Oak. Although she is currently living with family, she still finds ways to come back to the city every week. Her church is still in Detroit, she does volunteer work in the city, she belongs to a group that walks along the Riverfront weekly, she invents errands to bring her back, and attends events like the Home and Garden Tour. "I did the Home and Garden Tour and it brought back a lot of good feelings." Even though her finances prevented her from aging in place, Elena still likes to return and remember. Despite the good feelings that returning to the neighborhood brings back, there is sadness to leaving and aging out of place, she misses both her family home and the neighborhood, specifically being around her old neighbors. "You know, someone asks me, 'do you miss your house?' and I said 'yes, I do.' But you people talk about the neighborhood and I still miss it, I still do. If I knew I was able to fix the house the way that I wanted, I would have stayed there." Elena does a good job of still remaining connected to her former neighbors, she has invited a number of them to her upcoming birthday party and some of them still call her regularly to ask for advice. She knows that her home in Livonia with her brother is temporary and has not quite settled

in there. She still sees herself as a Corktown, hence why she identified herself as such when we first met.

E: I almost feel bad that I have to tell people that I don't live in Corktown anymore.

W: Why do you feel bad?

E: Because I love the idea of Corktown, it was unique, there were people there who loved Corktown and I wanted to be a part of that love.

Although Elena tells me that she still feels part of the Corktown Community, the above quote demonstrates that she does feel a severance from her former neighbors, her reluctance to tell people that she no longer lives in the community, and the love that families and neighbors experienced there, which Elena insists is just not present in other communities, especially contemporary communities where people are more transient, less likely to connect with others, and do not share the same values as their neighbors.

Sharika Thiranagama (2007) writes about the internal displacement of Sri Lankan Muslims due to civil war in the 1990s. Thiranagama examines the intersection of kinship and place by reflecting on loss of home as a measure of belonging. For her participants, this displacement has reordered understandings of the social landscape and heightened anxiety about the temporary nature of home. The displaced Muslim communities are unlike many war refugees as they have been internally displaced, and therefore are still in Sri Lanka to witness change, their home does not remain static like individuals evicted to other countries. Relocated to refugee camps, their new home served as a reminder that they were now unable to own land and build something of their own. Additionally, the possibility of leaving refugee camps and returning home made their current environment contingent and rendered it unable to ever really serve as home. This was particularly poignant for older members of the group, who expressed their anxiety not for

themselves, but for their younger kin and what future would be available to their children and grandchildren if they were unable to return. For the elderly members of the group their lives, social relationships, family, and education had taken place in their former homes, which served as a symbol of those events and relationships. “It was their former home that had made them into persons” (2007:141). Their lives now were focused on memory and survival, adaptation strategies were for their children and grandchildren. For Thiranagama, this discourse that relates kinship and place was about both loss and transformation towards a new future. Like Carsten and Sahlins argue, people are intrinsic to one another’s existence, but those people are also inextricably linked to place.

There are many parallels between Thiranagama’s displaced Sri Lankan Muslims and Elena’s story. Although Elena was not forcibly displaced through the tragedy of civil war, she was forced to leave her home due to her financial circumstances. Elena is additionally housed in a temporary housing situation, living at her brother’s house, highlighting the temporary nature of home and her inability to reside in property that she owns. Like the displaced Muslim community, her Corktown home symbolizes belonging, as she illustrates with her point of wanting to be part of the love in the neighborhood and she strongly believes that her home in Corktown has shaped her as a person. “I think it has shaped me because I chose to move back down there and be connected to my memories. It kept me connected to the gratitude of living in the U.S., living in Michigan, and living in the United States.” Elena was additionally internally displaced and her home in Detroit has not remained static, as she is able to witness the changes in the neighborhood and the City.

This is where the commonalities diverge however. Perhaps because of her



residential history that is strewn with ruptures and displacements, Elena, unlike the elderly Sri Lankan Muslims, is able to imagine and fashion herself a new future while remaining connected to her past. Elena was able to return to live in her former home after an absence of almost 40 years. Although she is now unable to live in the home, she has visited several times to see the changes the new owner has made. She regularly returns to the neighborhood and still considers herself part of the neighborhood. She does not have the same anxiety for her younger family members, they have all made places for themselves in the world that are not the family home, and she is okay with that. Elena recognizes that she is the member of her family who keeps their history alive. "I am the one who keeps it alive because they know that I am so excited about it and my family respects that fact."

Although she remains connected to her history, her former residence, and especially her former neighborhood through the strong relationships she has developed, Elena in many ways mirrors the younger members of the displaced Sri Lankan Muslim group, as she is focused on transformation towards a new future. When I ran into Elena one year later at the 2014 Home and Garden Tour she was leading a smaller group of friends through the tour. She had just returned from an educational trip to Malta and had been called from the listing of waiting seniors for subsidized housing in Royal Oak. She was adjusting to the new space that was just hers alone, making plans for the future, but still returning to visit Corktown.

Elena was the participant with the most recent relocation from her long-term neighborhood, which is likely why much of the rupturing process is still fresh in her narrative. Although she still clearly feels a strong affinity and connection to the

neighborhood, her narrative was less focused on the nostalgia of her childhood and teenage years, than other participants. Like many other participants Elena regularly returns to the neighborhood to bring back good memories, and unlike others to confront bad ones. This regular return, and the ability to regularly return due to both proximity and physical good health that permits regular trips, highlights the intersection of place and mutuality of being. The two are inextricably linked as the place provides a landscape connect with family and friends, but also a platform to remember them. For Elena and many participants, it is not about settling for one or the other, aging in place or out of place, but finding a way to integrate the two and remain connected to the people who were in the place.

#### *Making New Place and Place-making in Old Age*

Like “aging in place” the idea of place-making is fluid concept with varied meanings. It has roots in urban writings of the midcentury (Jacobs 1961) which suggested that urban spaces accommodate people instead of cars, incorporate mixed-use real estate, and be structured to construct social interaction. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, place-making is both an urban and design philosophy, but is also considered a process by which people interact with their communities to draw on environmental and collective social strengths to “make” a desirable place to inhabit. Much research on public space recognizes that places do not have permanent meanings, but instead understandings of place are fluid and fluctuate. Spaces become as opposed to are. Place-making is understood at the collective level as “articulation of social relations” (Massey 1994). Although place-making is usually discussed at the community level, individuals seek to make spaces their own and engage with the world around them in meaningful ways, as demonstrated by the

earlier scene with Marjorie who relocated in her eighties and claimed her new neighborhood as her own.

In contemporary gerontology research there has been a shift in understanding the place-centered experiences of older adults as processes. There has been call to critically examine the multiple factors such as demographics, culture, economics, and politics that intersect in the modes of place-related experiences of elderly persons. “Place is not static or a simple background to events, but is very much a part of social relations” (Wiles 2005: 101). Wiles furthers that individual geographies are continuously negotiated as people transition through the life course and make decisions about how and where to live their lives (102). Place-making is not an activity or experience limited to urban planners, younger community members, working professionals, hipsters, or gentrifiers, but should extend to include and understand how all members of a community, regardless of age, engage with that space. In this last section I discuss older people engage in place-making in their communities through the lens of both “relatedness” and “mutuality of being.”

*Joanne and Dave: New places to age*

Joanne and Dave rise early every morning in their Corktown condo, a recently renovated loft that they moved into during the last few years. At 7 am Dave is out on Michigan Ave watering all the flowers that have been recently planted in front of the businesses, an initiative that he brought to fruition with the help of the Corktown Business Association, a group that he helped to found. After that he heads into his office, a desk at a local real estate company that was started by one of his sons. Throughout the day he is involved in working on real estate projects that he is developing in Detroit, is an investor

in his two sons' local businesses, and in the evening he and Joanne are involved in several different community volunteer projects. During her days, Joanne serves as building manager for a nonprofit creative business incubator space in the neighborhood. She refers to herself as a “den mother” of the space, which at any time has up to 30 people working in it.

Dave and Joanne are relative newcomers to the Corktown neighborhood, having moved in 2009. Now ages 68 and 65 respectively, Dave and Joanne retired for the first time in their late 40s and split their time between their former home in Marysville, MI and a newer home they purchased in Florida. Their decision to come out of retirement and leave Florida was motivated by many factors, but most notably their sons were both living in Corktown and running businesses. It was their solicitation for help that initially motivated Dave and Joanne, and they were additionally interested in being close proximity to their sons again and new grandchildren. Five years ago they agreed to help out for two years, but now have no plans to leave. They both admit that they were tired of retirement and that their current lives are much more interesting than retirement. Joanne told me:

“It was very young, it was waaaay too young [to retire]....I was somewhat bored with living the good life. Even though it was a beautiful life, this is much more fun for me. I am challenged, I've got something to do that's exciting and being part of the growth, being here watching my grandchildren and children grow.....I enjoy it.”

Dave and Joanne's commitment to working 12 hour days in for-profit, non-profit, and volunteer sectors is driven by their desire to make the neighborhood a stronger and better place. “I do this for my grandchildren and children, to help them have a better life....um...what it does for me is that it gives me satisfaction” said Dave.

When Dave initially agreed to back his sons' Corktown businesses, one of his stipulations

was that they had to live in the community where the businesses were located and be active parts of it. "I feel if you are going to have a business in this city, you've got to live in the city and give back the city." When he decided to come out of retirement and become more involved in day-to-day business operations, he felt that it was only right that he and Joanne live in the Corktown neighborhood as well. They were initially eager to get involved in the local community and took active steps to make that happen. They did not know very many people, so they decided to just start frequenting local businesses regularly and attending community meetings. They soon met many local residents and were asked to participate in a variety of volunteer opportunities. They were enthusiastic to help start a business association, but knew that it was best to reach out first to long-time business owners to determine their needs and interests, and additionally not to step on any toes, or attempt to reinvent the wheel. Dave especially felt that building trust with longtime residents was essential for both a successful community and business endeavors.

A trust relationship with the old timers [is important] because if the people that stayed, had run away back when everybody...when white flight was taking place...these people they are the ones that were courageous to stay here...there was a lot of .....no lights, no police protection, they stuck together at a neighborhood. For us to move into a neighborhood...I keep telling people to respect the older people because this neighborhood might not have been here....this might have been all commercial or who knows, industrial....they were trying to do all kinds of things, but....and that trust relationship is important.

The process of gentrification is generally situated as an urban occurrence at the intersection of economics and culture, where after a time of disinvestment an area undergoes a period of reinvestment, result in changes to the landscape. It is often associated with the displacement of lower income residents with higher income residents.

The term is often used rather liberally, often times when displacement does not appear

to be occurring. In my conversations with residents it often came up to refer to any new development, for example new restaurants that appeared more upscale than long-time local establishments. It was clear in these conversations that the change was really more about the changing business landscape on Michigan Avenue, which most appreciated, as opposed to specific instances residential displacement. Many of the long-time residents, who came to the neighborhood in between the late 1970s to early 1990s, as described in John Hartigan's (1999) study of gentrification in Corktown, admitted to being part of the first wave of gentrification and appreciated the new development and influx of businesses and residents.

Although the majority expressed pleasure with development, they noted that there was tension between long-time residents and newcomers. Interestingly the only example that was provided to me, by multiple participants, was a recent bout of graffiti on local businesses with tag lines like "Hipsters Go Home." When pressed further most concurred that it was unlikely long-time residents, people their own age, expressing these sentiments in graffiti, and attributed it to people who were either envious and had little understanding of life in the community. Annie compares the new wave of residents to when "hippies" moved into the neighborhood in the 1960s and her own parents disdain for the new residents. Annie however, notes that for neighborhoods to stay alive they need to change. In fact, the majority of long-time residents did not conceive of new development as gentrification. They considered themselves middle-class residents of a middle-class neighborhood, and many conceived new developments as simply a cyclical return of a business district that had been lively prior to the 1970s.

For Dave and Joanne, their multiple projects and businesses often keep them and

their family in the media spotlight and their endeavors receive a lot of press, both local and national. Their success has resulted in charges that they are leading the gentrification of Corktown.

You know a big word here is gentrification.....we are accused at times of promoting gentrification, but I don't know how....I don't understand that....I do understand that people get misplaced or displaced.....and that's sad in my estimation....but what if we would have left these buildings all falling apart, by now 9 years later, these buildings here would have been caved it....they had lost their roofs and that's when things start to cave in....we now employ 150 people....if we weren't here and didn't fix those buildings up, none of those 150 people would have a job .

Like the graffiti on buildings, Dave estimates that it is just a very small portion of envious individuals who are unaware of all that their family contributes to the neighborhood in addition to locating their businesses there. "They look at us with green eyes, they look at us that we came in and we're successful, again they don't realize probably what we try to give back, what we try to accomplish." It is this sense of accomplishment and engagement that makes the neighborhood a good place for Dave to age. "I get up in the morning and I never hesitate and think, oh God this is going to be a horrible day...there's just too much to accomplish and too much to do." For both Dave and Joanne, the sense of accomplishment is rooted their relationships with the other members of the neighborhood, in addition to their biological family who reside close to them. Despite the fact that they are recent newcomers to the area, they consider themselves an integral part of the community because of their commitment to both the space and people.

Although he did not name Dave and Joanne by name, Walt had many opinions about who he considered to be a community member, and it was clear that anyone who lived in newer housing was not part of the community. As we sat in the park Walt pointed across the street to the condos where Helen lives and told me that the people who lived

in the condos were not part of the neighborhood. He told me that they were not part of the neighborhood because they do not interact with the other people in the community. Interestingly however, one of the residents of these condos, who I met through a neighborhood community group, gave me his phone number and recommended him as participant. Walt furthered that owning a business in the community does not necessarily make you a community member. Walt was walking his dog one day and ran into the owner of a local sandwich shop. Walt was unhappy the man brought his dog near Walt's dog, as opposed to remaining on the opposite side of the street. "We turned the corner and the next thing I know he was following me. I said 'you're not from the neighborhood are you?' and he said 'yes I am, I own [the sandwich shop].'" Walt imparted that if that man was truly part of the neighborhood, he would know the dog walking etiquette.

Walt claims that since he moved in the late 1970s, there have always been people who thought that they should be in charge of the neighborhood and running everything. Despite his rants about many of his neighbors, he maintains that he mostly gets along with everyone. Throughout our conversation Walt consistently ranted about the gentrification of the neighborhood, people buying and fixing up houses as investments, the influx of pricier new housing like condos and lofts. At the time he had not yet listed his own property at a price that many deemed exorbitant for the condition of the structure.

Walt was particularly miffed about place-making efforts he believed were aimed at making Corktown a "destination." Walt noted several times in our interview that Corktown was a "destination." He claims that when he moved to the neighborhood it was not called Corktown, a sentiment echoed by many of my participants who grew up in the neighborhood. According to Walt it was in the late 1970s with the first wave of



gentrification that the name Corktown was coined. “It was a way to give identity to the place.” While we were sitting in the park Walt pointed out a young woman in a WSU t-shirt jogging. He told me that frequently Wayne State students run through the neighborhood. “See how nice it is down here? All the runners from Wayne State come down” and then in a mock shriek “They like to come down to Corktown!”

Walt was for a long time active in neighborhood groups and activities and has somewhat pulled back now that he is in his early 80s. Interestingly though, much like Dave and Joanne, and Marjorie in the opening of this chapter, he has created a new space for himself and a new social network. After many of Walt’s friends passed away, he started going up to Motor City Brewery in the Wayne State/Midtown neighborhood several evenings a week and has made many new friends there. Walt usually sits at the bar and the staff gives him the pizzas that were ordered as mistakes or are leftovers. He notes that because of his emphysema he can no longer smoke and his doctor told him that he can only have one shot of alcohol a week. He tells me with a smirk that this has become a joke between him and the staff they often ask if he has had his *one shot* for the week, indicating he consumes more alcohol than that. He spends a lot of time extolling the virtues of the restaurant, bar, staff and the community that he has formed there. Over a recent holiday weekend when the restaurant was closed, he spent the day with the employees at a private swim club for a party hosted by one of the restaurant managers. He told me repeatedly how much that he enjoyed spending time with the people there, but that he now led a narrower life and went fewer places. “I am just at the point now that I have a number of people that I know and like. Maybe if some more of my friends die, I will get some new ones,” he told me, indicating that although he was comfortable for now

with his new places and friends, if needed he could continue to expand his social networks.

### *Creating new place: Reflections*

The individuals in this study who had created new places for themselves in Detroit in their old age brought a variety of motivations and experiences to their narratives. For Marjorie, she was motivated to move by both a need to unload a large home and the desire to remain within the city. She was able to establish a set of new relationships with neighbors and community members that brought her both friendship and aide when necessary. She was also able to be a vocal decision making member of her new community and express place-centered values that were in line with her political leanings. Dave and Joanne were inspired to relocate and become part of a new community by both their desire to be close to their sons and their boredom with retirement. Leaving “the good life” behind for new business, non-profit, and community ventures, they are motivated by the sense of purpose they feel in their new home, their desire to make it a good place to live for themselves, other residents, and their own family. Interestingly, those who relocated within Detroit or to Detroit set out to make connections and develop relationships with those around them, which was not expressed by older people who had relocated outside of the city and often felt a sense of isolation from their neighbors. For Walt, who did not relocate to a new neighborhood in old age, he has also created a new set of relationships tied to a specific place, in this case a restaurant, and has established himself as an integral part of the community. Motivated by the loss of a longtime friend, and the fact that a number of his contemporaries had passed away, Walt created a new community for himself of younger restaurant staff and regular patrons. Although

dismissive of place-making efforts and perceived gentrification efforts in Corktown, Walt chose to create his new relationships in another changing neighborhood, where narrative patterns of rebirth and revitalization often mirror those of Corktown. Ultimately at the core of all of the narratives of those older persons creating new places for themselves in old age, were the relationships that they developed in those places. The place was a platform for developing the new connections.

### *Discussion*

When considering the spaces to age for Detroiters and former Detroiters, it is a challenge to divorce connections to environment and the relationships enacted within that space. While the neighborhoods provided a platform for the development of the relationships, one did not necessarily take precedence over the other, as both were inherent to the older person's sense of connectedness, either to their contemporary neighbors or to their past. For those who chose to, and were financially and physically able to, age in their long-term neighborhoods within Detroit, their experiences, although not uniform, were all reinforced to some degree by the relationships with the people in their neighborhoods, by either their desire to age next to people they had long-standing relationships with, or social networks that provided them with assistance.

For those who chose to, or in the case of Elena were forced to, age out of place they presented ruptured residential histories, expressions of longing for both times and spaces in their lives, and occasionally perceptions that although socially a space might meet their needs, physically they would be unable to either maintain an older house or access the goods and services they needed within the city. Many, like Elena, found a way to integrate aging in and out of place by maintaining connections. The next chapter

details the processes by which older persons strive to maintain and build relationships. Like those who were aging outside of Detroit, individuals who had relocated to Detroit or to new Detroit neighborhoods away from long-time communities and had chosen to create new places for themselves in old age, their narratives lacked expressions of longing for former homes, communities, and places. They were focused on actively making new places their own and developing relationships within those spaces.

Race and class present themselves throughout the lives that participants have constructed for themselves in relationship to growing old in Detroit, and allow white older persons to position themselves as different from who they view as other white persons. This is displayed clearly in the early narratives of both Annie and Greg, who purchased their homes in the early 1980s with Hartigan's first wave of gentrifiers. Greg refers to himself as "pioneering an ideology" and dismisses white residents who fled, while Annie reaffirms her niece's description of herself as the "original hipster." Both designate themselves as in distinct opposition to mainstream North American whiteness.

Through discussions of their financial circumstances, Pam and Walt also position themselves as outsiders to both suburban whites, but also the other whites in their neighborhoods. Unlike the majority of my participants, who were eager to show off their homes, both Pam and Walt did not invite me inside and it was clear from remarks by other community members, that they did not think I would be physically comfortable with the condition of either of their homes. Though both living with some financial constraints, Pam and Walt were marked as white in different ways. Pam, although friendly with those around, did not participate in any community groups or socialize with her neighbors. She did not frequent the same stores or dining establishments, preferring to trek to farther out

discount stores driven by her daughter, or fast food restaurants. Walt, although currently living in reduced circumstances, had a great deal more education than Pam, having attended boarding school at the expensive private Cranbrook Academy in the wealthy suburb Bloomfield Hills in the 1950s and later training as an architect. Walt, over the past three decades, has interacted considerably with his neighbors in a variety of community groups where he was an active participant. He told me repeatedly that the rents in Corktown were too high for the people that he wanted to see living there. When pressed further, it became clear that the type of person who Walt wanted living in his neighborhood, was someone like himself; educated, but not wealthy or in search of upscale dining and housing options.

Like Walt and Pam, Dave's own class background allows him to distinguish himself as different from other suburban whites, but also some of his neighbors. He understands Walt's challenges of gentrification, but positions himself as both a community partner and job creator. He views himself as different from other wealthy suburban white investors, because of his insistence that he and his family live in the neighborhood where they have their businesses. However, his expectations that other people follow his charge were at times indicative of his own personal financial circumstances. For example, he was dismissive of people who lived outside of the city for access to good public schools, suggesting that they live within the city limits and send their children to private school, ignoring the financial realities that may render this unfeasible for many families. Most tellingly, these distinctions between all of my participants tended to play out in their social networks. Not only did participants structure their social networks by race, but by class distinctions as well, interacting with other whites who they saw as similar to themselves

in terms of class and education.

By way of conclusion, I return to my initial question and ask what does this all mean for older people, good and bad spaces, sociality, and “successful aging”? The variety of ways that older persons in the Detroit-area are spending their old age, both in choice of environment, relationships, and activities are connected to individual visions of what kind of old age they would like to experience. The complexity of their experiences of aging and environments did not neatly fit into neoliberal prescriptions for old age which suggest that the older person has free will to make choices that will aide them in avoiding normal declines associated with the aging experience. These experiences of old age are intertwined both with choices, opportunities, and at times forces beyond the control of the older individual that had the ability to dictate where and how they lived. The unifying thread throughout the narratives were the relationships, or lack of relationships, with other people and how those relationships were connected to environment. For many the affiliation with their current neighborhood, whether it was a long time neighborhood or one they deliberately chose to make their own in late life, was central to how they saw themselves aging successfully by their own metrics. It was the place that they wanted to be, regardless of outsider conceptions of their spaces. For those who chose to age outside of neighborhoods where they had both strong connections to place and people, they often accepted that there was a trade-off. Physically the new spaces met their needs, but socially they often had to travel to reconnect with friends and family.

Across all the participants, place affiliation was key for their sense of self. However, their personhood with relationship to place is revealed through a series potential threats rooted in inequality and access to resources. As Buch (2015:54) states,

“These cases also suggest that theories of personhood and subjectivity must account not only for change across the life course, but also for how social, material, and bodily resources intersect with these complex processes. Theories of personhood must thus consider which kinds of persons are able to successfully pursue valued social roles at different stages of the life course and how the possibilities for personhood vary depending on the kinds of resources people have access to.”

For many of the individuals in this study, ability to age successfully and retain full personhood was directly linked to their resources. Participants like Pam and Walt, whose homes were in states of disrepair and lacking heat in the winter, faced these threats due to their limited means. In contrast, participants who remained comfortable in their homes, had both the financial and social resources to make this feasible. Ruth and Lil could both afford outside paid help, and several others without paid help were able to rely on adult children and neighbors. Though Pam and Walt additionally received occasional help from neighbors, it appeared that due to their lower-income status, and possibly Walt’s feelings about perceptions of gentrification, they were not as integrated into the social world of the neighborhood in the same ways as their middle class peers, who frequently entertained in their homes and frequented the same entertainment and dining establishments as their neighbors

Additionally, those who transitioned to new spaces later in life exemplified the opportunities for and threats to aging successfully rooted in differing access to resources. Joanne, Dave, and Marjorie, who were all successfully creating new places for themselves in old age, managed to do so through both their social and financial resources. Joanne and Dave, who initially retired in their 40s and came out of retirement for non-financial reasons, were able to buy a condo that suited the physical needs for their later years and was located close to both of their grown sons. The social networks

that they are connected to through their children, ensure an intergenerational network for socializing and assistance if need be in the future. Additionally, their financial resources and business skill set has made possible their involvement in several successful neighborhood businesses and neighborhood business association. Marjorie, who was close to 20 years senior to Joanne and Dave, but in a similar financial position where she had the resources to relocate to a space that met her needs both physically and socially, and hire paid help when necessary. She was able to participate socially in her community through philanthropic efforts as well.

Elena presented the most complex estimation of successful aging with regard to personhood and connection to place. While, residential transitions in old change often signify a change in the older person's role in both families and the social world around them (Cohen 1998; Lamb 2009), they can additionally be shaped by access to resources. Like Buch's older Chicago residents (2015), Elena's home not only was central to her identity through connecting her to her memories (both good and bad) and family, but was also an attempt to oppose the erosion of her personhood. Ultimately, she was unable to keep her home, but this does not suggest a full destruction of her sense of self or personhood, as she was able to create new ways to maintain her social connections to her former neighborhood. In the next chapter I will elucidate these types of connections by examining the processes through which older adults participate in place centered relationships and the kinships idioms they use to describe their relationship.



## CHAPTER 6: MAKING AND REMAKING KINSHIP

Every Monday and Wednesday afternoons Lil rises from her midcentury modern living room furniture, walks past the five bathing suits she keeps on pegs in her entryway and the baseball bat leaning against the wall as a safety precaution. The 93-year-old Lafayette Park resident walks out her front door and climbs into the front seat of her 90-year-old friend Agnes's car and the pair drive from Lil's Detroit neighborhood to the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The two friends are part of a program for senior citizens at the university where they can attend classes as either auditing or degree pursuing students. Lil, who recruited Agnes for the program 15 years earlier, is now in her 29<sup>th</sup> year of taking classes. After she was widowed by the death of her second husband in the mid-1980s, her stepson encouraged her to sign up for the program and when she resisted he told her "instead of sitting around crying all day, I want you go out there and enroll." In the past three decades, Lil has recruited 32 people for the program and taken an array of classes. She laments that many of the people she had originally recruited have now either stopped participating or passed away.

Through her recruiting efforts, Lil has both maintained and revived relationships with friends and acquaintances, and forged new relationships with both classmates and faculty. A week before I met with her in her home, a philosophy professor whom she had taken eight classes with over a number of years, approached Lil and Agnes wanting to take them out to dinner. The women agreed on the condition that the dinner took place at 3:15 pm after their class ended so that they might make it home before dark. The professor's agenda was two-fold; first he wanted Lil and Agnes to join a class that he was planning for the winter semester on Medical Ethics (they declined, having already taken

it twice); secondly the professor, who at age 70 was approaching his own retirement, wanted to know the secret of their success.

W: What did you tell him?

L: What is it? Here's what it is....I have been going to classes, I have finished 28 years, I go swimming at least three times a week. I belong to the Downtown YMCA. I love to cook and I love to bake, which I still do and that's all I can tell you.

By all outside estimations, including Rowe and Kahn criteria, Lil was a model of successful aging; engaged with life, mentally sharp, and physically healthy. Although she informed me "that's all I can tell you" it was clear as our conversation continued that relationships, both old and new, and connected to specific places like her neighborhood and university, were also central to her satisfaction in old age.

This chapter focuses on not just the satisfaction derived from connecting to other people and maintaining, recreating, and creating relationships in old age, but the processes by which the older people in this study go about this and the relationship to place. My interest is to show that place provides both a physical environment to stimulate new relationships and maintain long-term relationships, but how also remembered and no longer tangible spaces serve as a common uniting thread for relationships to redevelop. However, a limitation of this study is, the fact that I had little opportunity to engage with people who were socially isolated a key component of "unsuccessful" aging experiences.

The majority of participants I encountered expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their relationships and had active social lives, although a few expressed that they were not as active socially as they had been in their childhood and adolescence in the

neighborhoods where they grew up<sup>2</sup>. Although old age and Detroit are both widely misperceived as lonely and desolate, many of my participants expressed a great deal of satisfaction with their lives, not in spite of their old age or environment, but because of it. They had the time and opportunity to pursue new and revive old relationships and additionally, environments that encouraged these relationships, as spaces to live, return to, and collectively remember.

There has been much attention to the importance of social relationships in old age and they relate to both health and emotional well-being, but with that comes the underlying assumption that older people are inherently socially isolated and often lack the agency or motivation to develop new relationships. The focus in gerontology research tends to narrowly consider the number of connections with other people and the self-rated quality of those relationships. The size of the social network appears to be the measure of resistance to social isolation. One model in gerontology that has long dominated considerations of social isolation is the Convoy Model of Social Relations developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980). The convoy model is posited as an interdisciplinary concept that explains the development of social relations over the life span and how social relationships affect health and wellbeing. This model has roots in earlier anthropological studies focused on kinship and fictive kinship (Barnes 1974; Stack 1975; Myerhoff 1980)

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<sup>2</sup> Additionally, this high degree of satisfaction with social relationships may have affected my results in another meaningful way. Participants in this study were often quite eager to help both me as a student and their friends who had recommended them and I interacted with generally supportive and obliging persons. As a result, this type of behavior extended to their place-based relationships as well and participants did not express frustration about the reciprocity or kinship obligations created by these ties. Not only did participants outline the things that their neighbors did for them, but they also provided examples of favors and services that they were happy to do for neighbors. A service that was routinely mentioned by those who still drove was providing transportation for those who no longer drove. This is not to romanticize these types of ties and suggest that they were without conflict, but generally the people I met with helped their neighbors without mentioning any of the challenges created by these obligations. Dorothy's reference to "life as a spiral of obligations" in the opening of this dissertation did not have an underlying unenthusiastic tone, but instead suggested that it was these obligations to others that kept her working and looking forward.

that clearly demonstrate the importance of social relations for health, wellbeing, and survival. Antonucci and Kahn borrowed the term “convoy” from anthropologist David Plath (1980) who created the term for his ethnographic studies of Japanese children. Plath used the term convoy to express the idea that the social relations experienced through membership in an age-related cohort functions as a form of protection to mitigate social threats throughout the life span. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) used the term for their Convoy Model, which emphasizes that yes, social relations matter, but also they are experienced over a lifetime and therefore they change and take on added significance in old age. Additionally, the model has been advanced to demonstrate that it is not just the size of the social network and number of social connections that are associated with health outcomes, but it is also the quality of those relationships that matter (Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Dartigues 1997). While the Convoy Model of Social Relations provides an excellent starting point, my own research seeks to expand on it by including attention to both processes and environment.

The narratives presented in this dissertation do concur with the Social Convoy Model. The majority of my participants demonstrated that they had large social networks, and expressed high degrees of satisfaction with those relationships. Ultimately, I was only able to complete this project because of the strong relationships between my participants; they were able to easily put me in touch with friends and former neighbors who they maintained close relationships with. My concentration is to extend this model to understand how certain forms of relationships in old age are compelled and compounded by the participant’s relationship to place. These relationships, I argue, are maintained, recreated, and created through a set of processes that cannot be determined

simply by counting the number of social contacts an individual is connected with. The importance of expanding this model is rooted in normative understandings about how life should be lived in old age, the underlying assumption that it is a socially isolated time and the negative effects associated with this isolation can be mitigated by increased connections. Gerontology research concurs that social isolation for older persons is risky, it is not always clear how increased social connection takes place, and the processes by which social relationships are rooted, shaped, and changed over time. Despite these positive associations between health outcomes and social integration, much remains unknown about the process, as social relationships are dynamic in nature, not standardized, and are managed by individual older persons to meet their own specific challenges and needs (Shaw et al 2007). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that older persons with a greater support network size report perceived lower stress and higher life satisfaction, with a greater network of kin increasing this occurrence. However, these types of quantitative research and measures of satisfaction often fail to consider the complexity of labeling kinships relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study seeks to illuminate these relationships, particularly non-biological considerations of kin that are rooted in places.

I focused first on Lil, who I felt embodied all three types of relationship strategies through her participation in the senior education program and connected with the university space as a place to maintain, recreate, and create relationships. Later in this chapter, I will further examine her narrative as it relates to the creation of new kinship relationships and how the development of one relationship in particular has allowed her to remain in her home and community. The narratives of Eddie and Joe, who return

weekly to their childhood neighborhood, serve to examine the processes by which older people maintain relationships in spaces where they no longer live. Additionally, I examine the relationships of a group of female former classmates who have recreated their networks, mostly outside of their former neighborhood, but still engage with their collective memories of the neighborhood as a compelling force for the recreation of their relationships. The relationships depicted in this chapter are all propelled in different ways by a connection to place, and it is this connection that allows for the resistance of a socially isolated old age.

### *Maintaining Relationships and Returning to Place*

At a midweek mass I attended for Holy Trinity Elementary School students, the current priest, Father Kohler gave the students a sermon about the importance of Holy Trinity to the community and their roles as ambassadors of the school and the importance of projecting a positive image. Fr. Kohler continued there was an older man who grew up in the community and now lives in the suburbs and works downtown. Every morning before he goes to work, on his drive in, he drives around Holy Trinity Church and School. He does this because he likes to see that everything is in order and he likes to look at how the buildings have been maintained and flowers that they have planted. He has reached out to thank Fr. Kohler and told him that this morning drive around the properties allows him to get his day off to a good start. Like many of my participants who returned often to the neighborhood, this man visits regularly and felt compelled to reach out to Fr. Kohler as an avenue for maintaining a connection to his past. In particular, both Eddie and his longtime friend Joe maintained both relationships to people and places from their past.

### *Eddie*

I first met Eddie in the summer of 2013, after one of his former classmates from St. Vincent's recommended I give him a call. We chatted on the phone and he suggested that we meet for lunch in Corktown at O'Blivions Restaurant. He greeted me in the entryway with a poster of the Old Tiger Stadium, one of several that he had made years earlier in a money-making plan after the planned demolition of the stadium was announced. Eddie identified himself as having Italian roots and as a former Catholic. He was emphatic throughout our conversations (this initial lunch was the first of multiple meetings) that he no longer participated in the church due to both their stance on a number of social issues, but mostly because of the abuse of children by priests. He was not much taller than I am at 5' 5", and close to seventy and usually dressed casually in polo shirts and shorts for our meetings, having been retired for the past several years. Eddie was a lively character who was eager to tell me stories about his days growing up in the neighborhood, the trouble (mostly harmless childhood pranks) he caused for the nuns and neighborhood residents, his teenage years as member of a local neighborhood gang "The Stilettoes," his work as a union print maker which he likened to the television show Mad Men, his "discovery" of Barbra Streisand, the illegal bookmaking operation he ran in the 1970s, and his current day trading activities. There was never a lull in the conversation with Eddie and he was eager to help me with my project, introduce me to other residents, show me around, and offer advice on the stock market.

At our first meeting, Eddie was so familiar with the staff and many of the other patrons of the restaurant I was surprised to learn that not only did he no longer live in the neighborhood, but he had moved out shortly after graduating high school, when his family

was forced to relocate in 1961 while the building of the Lodge Freeway precipitated the tearing down of his family home. The family was given \$4000 for their house and relocated down Michigan Avenue to a Polish neighborhood. After Eddie married in 1967, he purchased a home on the same street as his parents. A decade later in the late 1970s, Eddie and his wife decamped to the suburb of Dearborn Heights, citing safety concerns for their now school aged children. "I wanted to leave Detroit because things were getting bad.... they had those barrio gangs. Southwest Detroit had a lot of gang activities...so I didn't want my son hanging and my daughter hanging with the wrong crowd and that is why I moved."

Despite relocating outside of the neighborhood and eventually outside of the city, Eddie never stopped spending time in Corktown. "I just continued hanging out, even after I had to get into the car to do it." His recent retirement now allows him to spend even more time in the neighborhood. Eddie makes the point that, unlike many other Detroit neighborhoods, there is still a neighborhood to come back to. Although some of the landmarks have changed, there are still business establishments to frequent, and in addition many the same residents from a half century earlier.

"If you talk to my sister...you know what we do? She lives in Woodhaven, I live in Dearborn Heights, we'll come down here, we'll park our car and we'll go walking. We'll walk across where we used to live. There's still some folks that live around here, we'll go see them. We go visit, we walk and we visit folks. We'll walk downtown, we'll go to Greektown, we'll go for about two hours and we'll have a nice walk, but we always come back to Corktown. We come back...it's not like any other neighborhood. If you go in the inner city in Detroit, there's nowhere to come back to. There are empty buildings, empty lots, grass growing. You've got one house and then you got three burned out. Here [Corktown] every house is occupied."



After our first lunch, Eddie took me on one of his walks through the neighborhood, pointing out landmarks from his own life. It was a nice day and he was greeted enthusiastically by name by several neighborhood residents sitting on their front porches. It was clear that not only had they known him in the past, but that he was a regular fixture in the neighborhood and kept up relationships and friendships with many of the current and former residents. A former classmate, who divides his time between Las Vegas and Traverse City, regularly calls Eddie on the phone to chat.

“Anyway Johnny and I still talk and he told me, ‘Eddie I think about all the guys, you of all,’ he told me this, I don’t know why, ‘You are the heart and soul of Corktown.’ He said I am the heart and soul...well that was kind of a compliment...because I am sentimental.”

Despite his sentimental feelings about the neighborhood, his weekly visits, and his efforts to maintain relationships, Eddie hesitates about returning to the neighborhood full time. For Eddie, his musings often vacillate between the virtues of the neighborhood and his desire to spend time in the neighborhood, but the various reasons that he cannot relocate to the city; an ill wife who does not leave the home frequently, and his equity in his home in Dearborn Heights. He cites one of the draws of the neighborhood is the long-time residents who have stayed and maintained their homes. He notes that new Detroit residents are not older people or minorities, but instead “white kids like yourself...how would you call it....intelligent people...what would you call them? Professional people.” For Eddie the neighborhood is still a good place for people to live, but not necessarily the right place for him at this stage in his life. Corktown, however, is still a good place for him to visit and maintain friendships with people from his past

## Joe

After one of our early meetings, Eddie set me up with a long-time friend of his named Joe, who I met one afternoon at a Coney Island Restaurant on Michigan Avenue. Joe is a heavy-set Mexican-American man in his early seventies. A former Teamster, he approved my choice of vehicle (Ford Focus) and offered to take me on a driving tour of the neighborhood. Joe's tour centered on a several main themes; baseball (the Old Tiger Stadium site was where he and Eddie both had their first paid employment in the 1950s and served as a space of youthful hijinks and provided opportunities to meet the players), both the changes and stability in the neighborhood, and most prominently the Catholic community in Corktown.

During our driving tour, Joe told me that he believed that the neighborhood was once a blue-collar neighborhood, but his impression is that the demographics have now shifted and the real estate prices have increased because of it, "its yuppie, you have to have money and an education to live here. They love it, close to everything. It's the place to be. It's safe and well taken care of." When Joe took me on the driving tour of the neighborhood, he pointed out how well the neighborhood was kept up on several blocks. When we encountered a block West of Rosa Parks Boulevard where the houses appeared in disrepair, he conceded that, "Some people keep it up better than others." Joe's comments extended beyond the physical appearances of the neighborhood and homes to commentary about the inhabitants inside the homes as well. He told me, "No squatters here, nobody on welfare here," referring to the inhabitants of a well-maintained, tree-lined street. Joe credits Holy Trinity Church with the stability of the neighborhood, noting that the priest works very closely with the local police to report crimes and

suspicious activities. He believes that this is one of the better neighborhoods in the city because both the people and the priest care about the neighborhood.

Like Eddie, Joe spends multiple days every week in the neighborhood and even wonders out loud “what would I do with my time if I wasn’t down here?” Retired from the Wayne County Road Commission and widowed in the late 1980s, he is currently still involved in the Holy Trinity Church and serves as Athletic Director and coach for the Holy Trinity School. He tells me although he lives in Dearborn, he spends up to 50% of his time in the Corktown neighborhood because “My heart is in this neighborhood” and “I love the people.” Joe was born and raised in Corktown, where his father owned a gas station, and he left in the early 1960s when he married his wife who was from the Northwest side of the city and wanted to live elsewhere. Joe met his wife while she was working in the neighborhood coaching cheerleading in 1962, but they relocated in 1964 when they married. “We married in 1964 and she wasn’t from the neighborhood and didn’t want to live here. She was from the NW and an upper middle-class family. We also wanted some place where their children could be educated and that was Dearborn for us.” The onslaught of first-marriages and the prospect of children often prompted former Corktown residents to leave the neighborhood in the early and mid-1960s.

However, despite leaving the neighborhood a half century earlier, Joe never stopped spending time in the neighborhood or maintaining relationships with people who continued to live and work in the neighborhood. Joe has always been engaged with the Catholic community in Corktown; he continued to attend church at Holy Trinity, worked as director of Casa Maria, a neighborhood activity center for children, and as a coach and current athletic director for Holy Trinity School. The relationships that Joe maintains in

Corktown are inspired by one relationship from his youth. As a young man he was mentored by Father Clement Kern, who served as pastor at Holy Trinity Church for close to 35 years in the 1940s –1970s. When I asked him what kept in coming back to the neighborhood after all of these years he tells me that he is inspired by the memory of Father Kern. “I hear Father Kern’s voice and he tells me, ‘Keep going. Who can you help? Who can you save?’ He was my mentor and he tells me to keep going.”

*Processes and Places for maintaining connections*

Writing about the Górale people in the Polish mountain country, Frances Pine (2007) argues that recalling memories is a complex process that does not allow for disentanglement between collective, individual, national, and local memories. She furthers that kinship, and memories of kinship are rooted in place and inextricably intertwined. For the Górale it is the land that holds the memories and through a combination of memories of place and a system of complex relationships based on work and exchange, members of the group are able to make and remake kinship. Traditionally a shepherdic group, the Górale have experienced waves of migration that continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century although the mountainous region of their origin is considered a constant. Pine argues that it is through narratives that recount memories and are interlinked with place that the Górale are both making and reinforcing kinship that connects them to certain groups and group members and renders them as distinct from other groups. She furthers that the sense of kinship is not static and is “endlessly elastic and plastic” (Pine 2007 114) as relationships are maintained, created and recreated.

For Eddie and Joe, it is not just the act of recalling memories that keeps them connected as members of the specific kindred group of Corktown, but it is the act of

actively engaging in the neighborhood, Eddie through maintaining friendships and frequenting businesses, Joe through his faith community and work with Holy Trinity Church and School. Additionally, like Pine's participants, the narratives of the two men do not allow for the unraveling of both personal and collective narratives at the generational, national, and local levels, nor the collective narratives of the Catholic Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Joe chooses to remain connected to his faith and therefore the community, Eddie is adamant that is a community that he no longer chooses to engage with. The maintenance of their relationships with people in the Corktown neighborhood is largely dependent on their ability to frequently return to the neighborhood. Both are in good health, still drive, and are retired with the time to devote to leisure and volunteer pursuits. The neighborhood of Corktown provides a space for the two men to maintain their relationships with friends and faith-based community. Eddie's assertion that unlike many other Detroit neighborhoods, there is still a neighborhood to return to is a key point that demonstrates the importance of the place in the maintenance of the relationships. There are still open businesses for Eddie to frequent; the neighborhood is maintained and safe enough for Eddie and his sister to spend several hours walking around in the afternoons. The strong presence of the Catholic Church with not only the church, but the school, and outreach programs provides Joe with not just a spiritual home, but a physical space as well to continue long standing relationships.

For both Eddie and Joe, the process of remaining anchored in their former neighborhood is one that requires a negotiation of understanding the space as both successful in some regards and unsuccessful in others. They both continually boast of the neighborhood as consistent, full of long term residents, and a joy to regularly return

to and participate in the social community. However, on some level, they both understand that this is not a place for them to make their permanent residence. At one point Eddie even acknowledges that if he “*had to leave*” his home and “*had to move to Detroit*” he would only considering returning to Corktown. The phrase “had to” indicates that he would only return to live in Detroit if forces beyond his control forced him to return full-time. So, as opposed to making a full time return like residents such as Elena in the previous chapter, Eddie and Joe have negotiated a strategy that allows them to remain connected to the social relationships of the neighborhood without returning full-time to live. They return during the day time to Corktown, Eddie to engage socially and Joe for work, volunteer activities, and religious community, and subsequently go back to their suburban homes in the evening. Like Pine’s Górale participants, the space holds the memories and it is through engaging with the space and the relationships established as connected to that space that Eddie and Joe are able to maintain strong relationships to the Corktown “family.” Like the Górale, by reinforcing these connections Eddie and Joe are still able to consider themselves Corktowners and express a distinct connection to the community.

### *Recreating Relationships*

It’s a Saturday night in April at the Italian-American Banquet Hall just off Michigan Avenue in Dearborn, MI. Groups of adults sit at tables and talk and enjoy pizza, beer, and snacks, while others dance to the Motown hits played by a DJ. Patrons purchase tickets for a 50/50 raffle to benefit the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter that is hosting the fundraising dance, just as they have for the past 15 years. One table of former Corktown residents is particularly boisterous, making lots of noise laughing, talking, and

sharing memories. Several members of the class of 1965 from St. Vincent's school often make plans to attend the event, which takes place just six miles due west of their former neighborhood. Though most of the group left the neighborhood in early adulthood after graduating high school or marrying, and some fell out of frequent contact for a number of years, many of the class of 1965 now regularly reunite to catch up and reminisce. Former Corktown resident Claire told me,

“A lot of the guys were taken off to Vietnam, a lot from our school, I know a couple that died.....that's what happened. They all went to Vietnam and so they have those dances and you will see, you'll see people, you can see 20 people from the neighborhood, we call it the neighborhood.”

It is not just the Vietnam Veteran's Dance, or other sanctioned school events that many of the class of 1965 wait for to reunite. Many who still reside in the Detroit-Metro area, and who are now retired and with grown children, meet regularly for a variety of activities; museum outings, restaurant and bar trips, picnics, and even out of town vacations together.

It was on one of these outings that I met Diane, Kathy, and Claire (technically a 1966 graduate, but still considered part of the group by the class of 1965). The three women and another couple of friends were in Corktown in June of 2014 for the Corktown Home and Garden Tour when I met them. Although some of their excursions bring them back to Corktown, many of their activities take place outside of the old neighborhood. Unlike Eddie and Joe they are not daily, or even weekly, visitors to their old haunts, instead coming a few times throughout the year for special events or dining. The class of 1965 crowd, who clearly demonstrate renewed close relationships, often meet throughout the Detroit-metro area for different group activities and events, and even travel outside of the state together as a group.

### *Growing up together*

I interviewed the three women separately and enjoyed long lunches with both Diane and Kathy, who both told me that they chatted beforehand about what kinds of memories they wanted to share with me. All three women produced a significant amount of memorabilia from their time in Corktown including scrapbooks, yearbooks, programs from high school reunions, mass cards from funerals, and in Claire's case a newspaper clipping from the Detroit Free Press written by her about her memories from the neighborhood and a fictional story she wrote based on her time growing up in Corktown. All three women had similar themes running through the narratives of youth in Corktown, namely the freedom that they had as children and adolescents, the activities they enjoyed, but most importantly the closeness they shared with their neighbors and classmates, and the pride they feel being able to say that they are from Corktown.

Freedom and independence was central to all three women's memories of their time in Corktown. This freedom was often juxtaposed with perceptions that it uncommon for contemporary children to have the same type of and amount of independence as the women had in the 1950s and early 1960s. Kathy and Diane recall taking multiple busses throughout Detroit to make trips to the dentist or the library independently in elementary school. Diane doubts that her teenage grandchildren could figure out how to get home on a bus if necessary. They all insist that it was in fact a safer time to be a child, although not without risks, as they were located close to "Skid Row" and there were neighborhood gangs present. Claire insists that her mother never locked the door, as there were few safety concerns and she wanted neighborhood children to be able to come and go as they pleased into their home. This freedom and perception of safety allowed the women



to enjoy many activities that they enjoy reminiscing about today; particularly things like trips Downtown for shopping, neighborhood games, ice skating in nearby Clark Park, and most notably school dances that featured up and coming musical groups like the Temptations.

Most important to the narratives of growing up in Corktown was the sense of community experienced by the women. Kathy told me that her most salient memory of the neighborhood had to be,

The total experience, it was like a little community, the whole area, St. Vincent's and you felt like you belonged to everybody and knew everybody. Because you didn't have air [conditioning] people were always sitting on their porches. You knew if you had trouble, a neighbor would come to your rescue. If you were being bad, your neighbors would tell your mom and dad, so we all looked out for one another and there was a sense of community and a real sense of belonging.

Diane and Claire echoed her sentiments, noting that most of the activities revolved around the church and St. Vincent's school, where Claire estimates that 90% of the neighborhood children, even Protestant Diane attended. Diane told me that what she remembers the most about growing up in Corktown was, "How close we were. We were very, very, very close and like I told you there was always something to do." It is also clear through their narratives that the neighborhood, community, school, and church activities served to foster this sense of closeness, as there was also some group activity to participate in.

### *Separation and Reconnecting*

Although they had a close connection in childhood and adolescence there was a time when the women were all busy making their own lives, especially after leaving the neighborhood in the 1960s; Diane married a man who grew up nearby and raised a family in the Detroit suburbs; Claire married twice, raised a son and had a long career as a legal secretary, and Kathy traveled extensively for her job as a flight attendant until her

retirement upon the 9/11 attacks in 2001. During this period of time the women saw each other less frequently, but they did manage to keep in touch and eventually recreate those close relationships that they held in the earlier parts of their lives. Diane told me,

“Well, we got married and of course we raised our families...and there was a little split at that time because everybody was busy making their life. Somehow then we all just got together. I don’t know if it was a funeral or what, I really don’t know.”

They attribute their continued closeness to their lack of moving in childhood. As all of their parents stayed put throughout their childhoods and adolescence in Corktown, they were able to build the solid foundation of friendship that was easily recreated later in life. Additionally, the fact that they all remain in the Detroit-Metro area, have grown children, and are retired provides them with the time and opportunity to make plans regularly with one another. All three expressed how much they enjoyed being with each other as a group and with other friends that they saw regularly.

Although sometimes the women meet in Corktown for their outings, many take place outside of the neighborhood as well. The neighborhood provides a central driving force for the recreation of the closeness they experienced there, but unlike Eddie or Joe in the preceding section, they do not necessarily need to reconnect in the neighborhood. The group does enjoy some outings in Corktown, like the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, the Home Tour, and some of the “boys” from their grade were planning a cookout for later in the summer in a local park. It was clear from their stories that they believed the neighborhood as a site of return was only really suited to those with good memories. Diane believed that her husband no longer considered himself part of the community like she did, as he did not have the same good memories as she and her friends. He often teased her that if something happened to him, he knew that the next day she would be

packing up and moving back to the old neighborhood.

While they all express that they love coming back to the neighborhood on occasion, it is not central or necessary to their reconnecting. Kathy told me that it was more about just being together because, “people make the place. Corktown really, I enjoy seeing the renovations, but they still are just buildings, it’s who inhabits the buildings.” I asked all of them what they liked to do when they got together and all three gave some close variation of Claire’s answer, “We play our music, we talk....and you know...we reminisce a lot too. Sometimes we will get together in a restaurant...Mexican, we love Mexican....we’re all aficionados, we go down to the [Mexican] Village.” In addition to the casual events planned by friends, many formal and organized events, like an upcoming September all-class St. Vincent’s reunion planned for a banquet hall in Garden City, are held outside of the neighborhood.

The process of recreating the social networks of their past and renewing their close relationships, rests heavily on the process of recalling the past for the women. They spend much of their time together listening to music from their past and the collective telling of stories. The idea of collective memory is often traced back to Emile Durkheim, although he did not use or coin the term. Durkheim argued that societies require a connection with the past to provide both individual and group identity (Misztal: 2003). The term “collective memory” was coined by Durkheim’s student Maurice Halbwachs in his 1925 work “On Collective Memory” which argues that in addition to individual memories, there is a group memory that is determined by the social context within which the group exists. Contemporary definitions of the term vary, but Alon Confino (1997) argues that to understand cultural history, it is not enough to simply focus on the concept of memory,

but it can only be of use when it is tied to particular questions or problems to be solved. The question for the class of 1965 groups is not only, “Who am I and where do I belong?” but also, “Who else belongs to this group?” It is through the process of collectively recalling their pasts that they establish themselves as group that is distinct from others who either choose not to reconvene to remember or those who, like Diane’s husband, have memories that they would prefer to forget. If place is always an expression of social relations (Massey 1995), it is the neighborhood of Corktown that provides the starting point for this collective remembering and articulation of who is a member of their “Corktown family.”

The women distinguish themselves as a distinct social group, different from people who grew up in other neighborhoods, in addition to people who grew up in their neighborhood and are no longer connected to other former or current residents. Moreover, they consider themselves as different or unique when compared to contemporaries of their same era, who they perceive as not recreating the strong relationships from their pasts. The three women also acknowledged that they believed their close connection to be unique, and that they did not know many other people their own age outside of their circle who kept in such close contact with their childhood peers. Claire told me of their connection, “It’s a unique....I don’t know of anyone else who has this connection...so many of us from second grade that are still in touch and one will say ‘Did you hear this happened?’” She furthered with a recent incident at the Corktown Home and Garden Tour where former neighbors happened upon each other.

“I just don’t know, but how many people can say I saw seven people that I went to high school with, We always get together, like....when we went to the tour, we stopped by Denise’s house because she still lives on Church St. She lives in her mother’s house and she was on the porch with a woman whose sister I graduated

with. So there was Diane, Kathy, Janie, myself, Denise, there was five people from St. Vincent's all around the same age, and then who walked by, it was three more from St. Vincent's. It was like a reunion, so seven people from St Vincent's on her front porch."

The former classmates and neighbors expressed a great deal of satisfaction with their renewed and recreated closeness. They all indicated several times how much they enjoyed spending time together. Diane furthered that the joy she derived from these relationships was an unexpected and happy occurrence in later life. "Never in my wildest dreams, did I think when I was a kid that we would all be old ladies together."

Not only did the women consider themselves "old ladies together" but the women viewed themselves a distinct kinship group and often used traditional kinship terms when referring to the group and each other individually. The term "family" was often employed to talk about friends and former classmates from the neighborhood and several statements were made to the effect of "we are like sisters" when talking about each other and additional girlfriends. The terms "friends" and "former classmates" appeared inadequate to convey the close nature of their relationships.

Kinship terminology and classification has long been of interest to anthropologists (Morgan 1871; Kroeber 1917; Lowie 1930; Murdock 1968, 1970). This type of classificatory documentation has long fallen out of favor with the Schneiderian turn in kinship studies, as anthropology has long recognized that many relationships that fall under the consideration of kinship are based on neither blood nor marriage. Carsten's concept of relatedness (1995), argues that kinship designations should be understood at the local level, which is often outside the purview of the Western anthropologist's understanding of social articulations. As an anthropologist working within my own culture, I was able to comprehend that closeness the women mean to convey with terms like

“sister” when describing their relationships with one another.

The nature of Kathy, Diane, and Claire’s group dynamics, recreation of relationships, and use of kinship terms provides insight into the means by which people strive to experience satisfying friendships in old age. I frame the recreating experience as one where social isolation is actively resisted through the intrinsic nature of the women’s relationships. The focus on specific experiences and means is necessary, as it extends the Social Convoy Theory to move beyond simply counting number of connections, to establishing both how and why satisfaction is derived from these relationships. Moreover, by linking the recreation of their relationships to place of origin, I show how collective memory is able to work through place as a starting point for recreating relationships in old age. By presenting the group’s narrative of “fictive” kinship, I challenge certain notions about Detroit as a place for older people.

Although, like Eddie and Joe, the women mostly expressed that they would be unlikely to return to the neighborhood or to live in Detroit, despite the fact that they enjoyed the occasional visit, unlike many of their contemporaries who outright refused to return, the place of Detroit still provided an important organizing point for the recreation of relationships. Detroit and Corktown are not only material, but psychic as well. The psychic space of Detroit and their former neighborhood provides an origin point for relationships to be recreated elsewhere. Older people do not need to continually reside in the same space to retain the same sense of “family” that they encountered living in the neighborhood as children and adolescents. In the preceding two sections on maintain and recreating relationships, I examined the processes of place-based relationships in which although place is central to the ties, the participants no longer reside in that space.

I now turn to examine the creation of new forms of kinship and their relationship to residing in a Detroit space.

### *Creating New*

The phone rings in Lil's kitchen and she rises to answer it. From the one side of the conversation I can hear that the caller, much to their concern, needs to reschedule plans she has made with Lil for the next day. Lil seems unconcerned with the change, and tells the caller

“Look Maria, if you are busy, tell Steve that he does not have to come down here. I mean I am busy enough, okay? I think he always feels guilty or something like I haven't got enough to do...as a matter of fact I am being interviewed right now by a lady from Wayne University...she's doing her PhD, so she's interviewing me, okay? And Friday instead of the girls going out to lunch, I am having them to lunch, there's going to be five of them to lunch. So tell Steve, he's not to feel guilty. I love him and I am fine.”

After she hangs up the phone, Lil turns to me and explains that her nephew and his wife need to reschedule plans they have made to take her to dinner tomorrow. As much as she enjoys their company and spending time with them, she is slightly relieved. Between her multiple social commitments throughout the week, her swimming, her classes at U of M Dearborn, she is often tired by Sundays and looks forward to having the day to relax. “I didn't even really want to go tomorrow, but I know Steve. When he calls he always says, ‘are you alright?!’ and I say ‘Steve! I am fine! Stop worrying about me.’” Lil is close with her nephew who lives in a Detroit suburb, which is nice for her as her own son passed of a heart attack at the age of 60 and her daughter and her family live in Milwaukee. In addition to her family and school friends, Lil has a close group of girlfriends who she sees regularly. “I have a lot of friends. We have one group we meet once a month on a Friday and we go out to lunch, but this coming Friday instead of going out someplace I am going

to have them here for lunch.”

Divorced from her first husband, and widowed by her second husband almost 30 years ago, Lil has lived in the Chateaufort complex in Lafayette Park for the past 41 years. She and her second husband moved from the suburbs when their close friend Coleman Young recruited her husband to serve as director for the Detroit City Airport. They had been living in a large house for a number of years with his two sons and Lil’s youngest son, her older children were already off at college. “So we decided to combine the two families, which was not the best idea because I didn’t know that his oldest son was a paranoid schizophrenic. What he told me was ‘Oh he has learning problems.’ I don’t know, I think he was also in denial.” By Lil’s account the transition was not a smooth one for the two families. The schizophrenic stepson, Ken, was so disruptive that eventually Lil sent her own youngest son to Cranbrook as a boarding student for his last two years of high school. After five years of providing care for the schizophrenic stepson, Lil gave her husband an ultimatum, insisting that he live elsewhere and the psychiatrist treating Ken agreed.

Ken went through a series of jobs and apartments until the death of Lil’s husband in the 1980s, and the guardianship of Ken was then entrusted to his younger brother, who wanted to move to California. At the time it was impossible to maintain the guardianship and live out of state, so Lil told him that she would become Ken’s guardian for the time being, which has now been almost 30 years. Ken now lives in a group home in the Virginia Park neighborhood in Detroit, and Lil at 93 continues to serve as Ken’s guardian.

As active and sharp as Lil is at 93, she is not without the need for assistance and has developed a strong bond with her paid helper Rodney. She finds many of her



neighbors to be very helpful, but her relationship with Rodney has allowed for staying in her home and continue serving as guardian to Ken. “We all look out for each other...now I can’t drive anymore because of my eyesight, but I have a young African-American man Rodney, I have adopted him.” Rodney used to be a close friend of the family who lived next door to Lil, a grandmother, mother, and daughter who all lived together. The three women passed away in succession, the grandmother at 103, the mother at 82, and the granddaughter of cancer at age 52. After her death, Lil approached Rodney about working for her. “So I said Rodney, now that you don’t drive Carole around, would you take me out? And he said, ‘absolutely.’ I could not stay in this house without him. He’s my driver; he comes and brings my mail. He’s the one who took me to this place [a medical device supplier] and he’s going to come and take me back. We are going to take this machine [a device to enlarge print for reading] back and get the larger one. He just takes care of me, he’s my best friend, he really is.”

Rodney, in his early 50s is now on disability because he is a cancer survivor and previously ran the post office at the airport, lives nearby Lil. He calls her every day to ask if she needs anything. “He calls me every day and if there’s anything I need he comes right over...he only lives about a ½ a mile from here. Anytime I want anything he’s here in 5 or 10 minutes. He’ll call me today we are going to do a little bit of shopping.” Rodney is paid by the hour for driving Lil and helping her run errands, but it is clear that their relationship is much closer than that of employer and employee. Lil regularly bakes and cooks for Rodney, something she enjoys doing and he appreciates. Although not a Chateaufort resident, Rodney is a fixture in the Lafayette Park neighborhood and integrated into the community by his long association first with Lil’s neighbors and later

by association with Lil. “And of course everybody here knows him. When they see Rodney, they are looking for me, even at the grocery store on the corner. It’s a mutual admiration society, the two of us.” This extends beyond Lil’s neighborhood, as Rodney frequently accompanies her to family events, such as a recent family wedding he attended as her date. Lil admits that she would not be able to stay in her house without Rodney and she points out several things throughout her place that he has attended to, fixed, or provided, including the wooden bat by the front door as a security measure.

The most striking element of the relationship between Lil and Rodney, is that their bond has extended to her schizophrenic stepson of whom she still retains guardianship. Rodney first became familiar with Ken helping Lil run errands for him and taking him on outings with her. Their relationship has now developed to the point that Rodney will go and visit Ken on his own. Lil frequently tells Rodney that he does not need to see Ken so often, as they take him out to lunch regularly and his needs are being met in the group home, but Rodney insists that he enjoys doing it and spending time with Ken.

“So Rodney will, without me he will go over there to see Ken. Friday he took Ken out to lunch...he said ‘I am going to take Ken out to lunch’ and I said “Rodney for crying out loud, we just took him out last week.” He said, ‘well...’ because he also has a sister that is schizophrenic that lives in a group home, so he’s very sympathetic....heart of gold.”

The bond between Ken and Rodney has developed in such a way that Rodney has also agreed to serve as guardian for Ken when Lil either passes away, or is no longer able to serve as guardian. This arrangement provides relief to everyone involved, Lil, her other stepson who still lives in California and is unable to move back to Michigan or move Ken to California, but most of all Ken, who has developed a friendship with Rodney. “And Ken, the stepson, is crazy about him. He can’t wait until I kick the bucket so that he can

have Rodney to himself. Ken and I tolerate each other, that is about it. Rodney will say, 'You have no patience with him' and I say 'You know, after 30 years yes, I have lost my patience.'"

The close relationship that has developed between the 93-year-old white Jewish woman and fifty-something year old African-American Christian man traverses the boundaries of family, friendship, employer-employee relationships, and legally binding connections. Lil's assertion that she has "adopted" Rodney implies that she views their relationship in terms that extend beyond employee and employer or even friends, she considers him more like family. Writing about the ethics of kinship and adult adoption among homosexual men in Germany John Borneman asserts that, "the priority of an ontological process to care and be cared for is a fundamental human need and nascent right in the international system (2001: 42). Although Lil has not legally adopted Rodney, their relationship allows them both to provide care and be cared for. Although Lil is clear that she pays Rodney and he provides her with both a number of services in addition to his friendship, she views herself still as a motherly figure for him noting that she has "adopted" him and she routinely provides care for him in the form of providing him with the food and baked goods she enjoys making. Rodney, although unable to work in other capacities due to his disability status, is able to provide care for his "client" and by extension her adult stepson, who he will eventually retain legal guardianship of. The relationship is a mutually beneficial one providing them both with an outlet to provide and receive care in multiple forms.

Additionally, place plays an important role in the creation of the new form of kinship established between Lil and Rodney. Their initial acquaintance developed from proximity,

as Rodney was close to Lil's former neighbors and was well-known within the Chateaufort complex. Rodney resides less than a half mile from Lil's home and is available quickly should she need assistance. However most importantly, it is the development of this relationship that has allowed her to age in place in her own home. She told me several times that she could not stay in her home if it was not for Rodney, as her living biological and step-children reside too far to provide assistance on a daily or even weekly basis.

### *Discussion*

I opened this chapter with the account of Lil and her friend trekking weekly from Detroit to Dearborn to participate as senior citizen students at U of M-Dearborn. I turned to this narrative first as I felt that it encompassed the variety of strategies and processes employed by participants for connecting to other people in old age, which were most importantly all centered on place. I wanted to explore the dynamics of routes taken in old age to ensure personal satisfaction and how these relationships with people were also predicated on relationships with space. Lil embodied all three types of processes present as she maintained long-term relationships, recreated and renewed connections, and created new relationships. This pattern appeared consistent throughout her life as she made and remade family and friendships, her strongest current connection being the establishment of a new relationship with her paid caretaker and friend Rodney that allows her to remain in her home at 93. In thinking about the narratives in this chapter, I consider, what do they mean for successful aging, kinship, and place and how they are extending and augmented psycho-social understandings of social networks and social isolation in old age.

Although the participants in this study expressed great satisfaction with the

relationships they cultivated in old age, this was not to say they never experienced dissatisfaction, loneliness, or conflicts. It is also not meant to suggest that growing older in Detroit (or outside of the city) for that matter was without challenges. By way of conclusion, I consider that designations about both spaces and the lives of older people are more complex than to be labeled as simply “successful” or “unsuccessful” as they are at times both. Like cities, relationships are a complex set of processes, continually being made, remade, unmade, and produced. So what then is the relationship between the “unsuccessful” neoliberal city of Detroit and the experience of satisfaction with relationships in old age? Through the preceding narratives I have demonstrated that the space provides an opportunity for relationships, not only as a physical environment to interact, but as shared intangible space to collectively remember and remake. Like Carsten’s concept of relatedness and her applications of it to Malay processes of kinship that are constructed through shared spaces and acts throughout their lives, the processes of place based relationships in old age are acquired through human agency.

## CHAPTER 7: DETROIT NARRATIVES

Thirty-five thousand miles above ground and 20 years ago, somewhere between the serving drinks and preparing the cabin for landing, former flight attendant Kathy engaged with a passenger in a conversation about the city of Detroit, her hometown. She frequently chatted with people about different cities and was used to negative reactions about her hometown, some of which she believed to be unfounded and others were right on the mark. Kathy and the passenger were discussing Downtown Detroit and revitalization efforts of the 1980s and 1990s when the passenger asked for her opinion. Kathy remarked, “You know...we are trying to make a silk purse out of sow’s ear. We’re tough, we’re gritty. Yeah, we are not the chi-chi foo-foo kinda place. No, this is a gutsy place.”

Another passenger, an African-American man in his early-twenties, became very angry with Kathy for criticizing Detroit and admonished her with a “How dare you?!” Kathy looked him in the eye and said, “What do you mean how dare I? Let me tell you, I grew up down in that City around Tiger Stadium, I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth like you may think. I feel free to speak, I did not abandon this city and I can talk about it.” Kathy said that the man quickly retreated and ended the conversation.

Although mostly based out of Chicago at that point, having been a long time resident of Detroit with parents who still resided in the city, Kathy felt a sense of ownership and a right to both defend and critique the city. She further engaged with long standing narratives of Detroit as a place that was gritty, hard-working, and unpretentious, one that she did not see as fitting with the attempted revitalization efforts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Kathy’s view of the current state in Detroit was a complex and mixed bag. She still

loves the city and believes that there is much to enjoy there. However, she is pessimistic, but hopeful, about Detroit's supposed comeback and current revitalization, noting that she has been disappointed by expectations before. "Okay the Renaissance Center downtown? We were all so excited about it, that it was the rebirth of our city...and that turned out to be a joke. All these new wonderful things were going to happen and they did not, they did not." In this opening scene, Kathy underscores many of the sentiments expressed by longtime residents of Detroit. They have a long-standing connection to the city, are proud of their identity as Detroiters, feel an obligation to defend the city, but also free to criticize and produce their own counter-narratives. This final data chapter explores the narratives of older people's relationship with the city of Detroit, the processes by which they engage as community members, and the bi-directional relationship of these processes through which the city shapes them, but how they also shape the city.

### *The City as Identity*

"Identity" has emerged as a significant construction for contemporary anthropological analysis (Leve 2011), but what exactly is conveyed by the term is multifaceted and varying depending on the scholar. Self-identity in the globalized world is often considered reflexive, as the individual is not a passive recipient of external forces that determine their identity, but now has access to information that allows for self-reflection of both circumstances and actions (Giddens 1991). With regard to identity in old age Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) argue that it is experiences across the lifespan that help to shape identity and state that,

"Identity is the sense of who one is in the world, distilled from a lifetime of experiences. From the collective perspective, identity consists of the life course as a cultural construct: socially normative and collectively outlined and accepted life course statuses and transitions. But at the individual level, every person creates

for herself a particularized version of the collective life course, a life story, depending upon her specific experiences and the meaning she attaches to them (1992: 144).”

So not only do individuals take in experiences throughout their lives, but through their own agency attach meaning to them. In this chapter, I explore how individual and collective identities are expressed through connection to the city of Detroit.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, scholars have explored the relationships between persons and places. With respect to how individuals understand themselves in relationship to a certain space, several key concepts have emerged. The concept of place-identity emerged in psycho-social research during the late 1970s (Proshansky, 1978; Proshansky et al., 1979; Proshansky and Kaminoff, 1982). This research was an expansion of self-identity conceptualizations by which an individual makes distinctions between the self and others, to extend also to objects, and the spaces and places where persons and objects exist and interact. Psycho-social research now considered cognition about the physical environment in which individual lives are lived and aided in defining the everyday lives of humans. The main focus of this cognition was considered the “environmental past” of a person which was made of places and their features which served to meet biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs. It was noted that individuals engage with their environment beyond simply recording and remembering. Additionally, the environment would fulfill individuals’ needs to varying extents that would in turn serve to shape beliefs and values about the physical world. The experience of place identity is not influenced by the place alone, but also the other people in that place and their articulated beliefs and values about a space (Proshansky, Fabian, & Karminoff 1983). Place is now considered an essential element of personal identity (Proshansky,



Fabian, & Karminoff 1983; Lalli 1992; Wester-Herber 2004).

The idea of place attachment is both an outgrowth of place identity and an overlapping concept. While place identity is often conceptualized as a process, place attachment is considered an emotional bond that individuals establish and maintain with specific places (Hernandez et al 2007). The origins and study of place attachment is interdisciplinary and multi-faceted, and within anthropology it is characterized by seeking to understand the meaning of places in everyday life (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The bond between individuals and places they designate as important, but also the personal, group, and cultural processes through which places become important both individually and collectively, and how place attachment serves to foster both group and individual identities (Altman and Low 1992).

With regard to older people, place attachment has become a critical concern within environmental gerontology. Since the late 1970s Graham Rowles has been at work on developing a theoretical trajectory focused on the experiences of older people and place. Rowles (1983) argues that the process of place attachment in old age and the assignment of meaning to place are the result of living in the same place for a long time, and as a consequence highlights relationships and insider status. Rowles argued that "Place becomes the landscape of memories, providing a sense of identity" (1983: 114). Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) further that attachment to place exists only with the context of the entirety of the events of an individual's life course and relate to the need to maintain a consistent sense of self-identity throughout one's life. They expand on this noting that place attachment is not limited to the memories of older people exclusively, but is also currently lived.

As relationship with place is rooted both in memory and current everyday life, I proposed that by identifying as a Detroiter and distinct from other geographic groups, the older persons in this study have emerged as possessing kinship relationships not only to other Detroiters, but a kinship relationship to the city as well, as for many the city itself displays the characteristics of Sahlins' argument of mutuality of being and the residents and city have become "intrinsic to one another's existence." As a result, like Kathy in the opening scene, they feel an ownership over narratives constructed about the city, critical moments within the city's history are experienced at both the personal and collective level, they carve out physical spaces to participate as Detroiters, and are actively engaged in shaping the city.

*Not suburbanites and "urban pioneers"*

[I consider myself part of] the city as a whole. I really consider myself a Detroiter, with what I consider the ethic of Detroit; you know the kind of tough, strong personality [laughter] that kind of thing.

-Sandy, age 67, Lafayette Park

Tom and his partner Jack invited me into their Corktown home on a summer afternoon. The house is a meticulously restored 19<sup>th</sup> century cottage that they purchased in the early 1990s. The backyard is adorned with several large cement statues which I incorrectly identified as "mushrooms" before being informed that they were in fact designed to resemble a male body part. The two purchased the house twenty years ago after discovering it by chance when they arrived to buy a bookcase from the former owner. She was selling off furniture after losing her home due to her inability to obtain permanent financing from a bank. Tom and John were able to purchase the home from the bank and finish the repairs and restoration started by the previous owner. They had been looking for an older home to live in and were anxious to leave the suburb of Farmington

where they had been living. Their motivations for moving to Corktown were two-fold, the first being finances. “I approached the bank and bought it from the bank and we’ve been here ever since, basically because it was cheap. The same reason that a lot of people came here in those days. Let’s say inexpensive” he told me with a hint of laughter. The second motivation was that although they met while living in the suburbs and his partner was what Tom terms a “suburban person,” Tom had lived most of his life in the city of Detroit and considered himself more of a city person. “I was raised like I said in Detroit and here [Corktown] was far more interesting and at that time it was kind of the Wild West too, you could pretty much do what you wanted.” He furthered that no one, including the City was paying much attention to the neighborhood, and he had the freedom to do what he wanted with his own property without resistance from the city, neighborhood associations, or neighbors. Tom notes that when he and John arrived in Corktown in the mid-1990s they were some of the last of who were considered the “Urban Pioneers,” that they people who came before him were either “hanging out or hanging on” indicating that residents who arrived before him were either eschewing mainstream trends of decamping to suburbs, or were long term residents reluctant to leave. “You know, they were pioneers, by the time we came down, it had become more of the acceptable thing maybe....or more so anyway, it wasn’t quite as trendy as it is now.”

The term “pioneers” often appears in conjunction with articles about Detroit’s “rebirth” or “revitalizations” with reference to the influx of newer residents, often from the creative class and often white. An article (Conlin 2015) that appeared in the July 12, 2015 Sunday edition of the New York Times titled “Last Stop on the L Train: Detroit” focused on new Detroit residents and positioned Detroit as an outpost for artists who could no

longer afford Brooklyn rents. The piece was generally met with a number of eye-rolls and groans and remarks about another “Detroit is the new Brooklyn” article. Even the author seemed displeased with the title given to the piece as she tweeted, “Detroit is NOT the new Brooklyn, but a new magnet city for creative urban pioneers!” Already displeased with the article itself, the tweet was particularly offensive to many, including Detroit poet Casey Rocheteau, who was interviewed for the piece. “The issue with the idea of pioneers is that historically they are treated as if they discovered something. Detroit has been here. People live here, have lived here, have raised generations of their families in Detroit proper. No amount of cheap studio space is going to allow artists or anyone else to move in and act as if they found something new,” Rocheteau wrote on her blog about the troublesome nature of the phrase “urban pioneers.”

The term has long had a problematic history. Smith (1986) examines the phenomenon of restructuring of urban spaces and the term gentrification and popular media focus on loft-dwelling “urban pioneers.” Smith also asserts that with the decentralization of cities and the suburbanization of America, cities are now often viewed as a disorganized and dangerous urban frontier. Smith particularly takes to task the language of gentrification which refers to newer residents as urban pioneers. He notes that, “contemporary urban-frontier imagery implicitly treats the present inner-city population as a natural element of their surroundings. Thus the term ‘urban pioneer’ is as arrogant as the original notion of the ‘pioneer’ in that it conveys the impression of a city that is not yet socially inhabitable” (261). Smith furthers that it is the American ideals associated with the frontier have produced a very narrow-minded view of gentrification and that although gentrification is a highly visible part of urban restructuring; it is only one

part of much larger social, economic and political processes. The term is particularly problematic within the context of Detroit, a majority black city, where they self-designated “urban pioneers” tend to be white. Safransky (2014) writes, “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.” The term furthers white notions of a black city that is socially uninhabited, and the longtime residents of color as “less-than” the new white pioneers.

Although Tom uses the term “urban pioneers” to refer to himself and those who began to gentrify the Corktown neighborhood before him in the 1970s and 1980s (see Hartigan 1999), to clearly define himself as different from those who choose to remain in suburbs, his use of the term is more complex than simply an envisioning of moving into socially and physically uninhabitable lands. He concedes that those who moved in before him did in fact take some risks with their safety, but by the time he moved into the neighborhood in the early 1990s, there was little danger to concern him. Additionally, although he utilizes the term “pioneer” he insists that it was the long-time residents, like the heavily Maltese population, who are to be credited with the long-term stability of the neighborhood, never indicating that it was uninhabited by any means. He also insists that it is the nearby Southwest Detroit and Mexicantown neighborhoods that should receive media and public attention as the long-term stable neighborhoods within the city, but notes that it is likely due to economic and racial biases that they are less heralded than neighborhoods like Corktown and Midtown. For Tom the use of the term “urban pioneers” is less about setting himself and his predecessors as breaking new ground in a previously uninhabitable land, but as distinguishing himself as different from both suburban dwellers

with fears of the city and longtime residents, who served as a steady and consistent presence in the neighborhood. Although use of the term still continues decades after both its inception and first waves of new residents, for Tom the “urban pioneers” are really a group of the past, who are now absorbed into the groups of long-term residents, and newcomers are hardly considered adventurous or exploratory, as in Tom’s view it makes sense that people would now flock to Corktown/Downtown/Midtown with their current amenities. Tom’s use of the term “urban pioneers” denotes that he views himself as different from his white suburban counterparts, however it is also used to demarcate himself not only from longtime black residents, but also other longtime white residents like the Maltese of Corktown and the Mexicans in Southwest Detroit.

Tom definitely views city dwellers, like himself, as a distinct group from those who have decamped to suburbs or choose to remain in suburbs. Throughout our conversation he several times refers to the suburbs as a “vast wasteland.” Though he enjoys his neighborhood and feels safe within the city, he recognizes that much of the city is in fact a “wasteland” in its own right, one resting on physical condition and the other on attitudes of residents.

T: I take care of property on the East Side, so I know it’s not all a Midtown/Corktown enclave. The rest of the city does exist out there and it’s a vast wasteland. Not suburban anymore.

W: How do those two wastelands differ?

T: One is just vacant land and the other is vacant people [laughter] That’s kind of nasty, but you know to a point, it’s true.

One of the main differences that Tom verbalizes between suburbanites and those who choose to live in the city is the racially based fears harbored by suburbanites. He furthers that many of suburban dwellers complaints about shifting demographics of the city and

neighborhood continuity are unfounded.

You know, I have been here all but 15 years of 71 years and the suburban folks, or the white folks, they complain about 'no roots' and everything has changed so much from when they grew up and so on.

But you know, when I go to the gym down there on Ford Road and the guys in there, they are for the most part African American, and they are very attune to that neighborhood they are second and third generation in that neighborhood now. They definitely have the roots out there now that folks who have left miss.

It is not just the generalized unknown suburbanite that Tom feels does not understand living in the city, but friends and family as well. "You get a lot of people, a lot of suburban friends, who don't understand why you live down here and really aren't excited about coming to visit you down here." He mostly attributes this to fear and misperceptions about danger of the city, noting that, "When they come down to this area they see that it's not so bad, but....unfortunately this is kind of an anomaly in the city. If they happen to get off the freeway....their fears are somewhat based." For Tom, like many of my participants, his relationship with city is a complex one. He clearly identifies with other city dwellers and delineates a distinction between himself and those who either left the city or choose to remain in suburbs. Although he enjoys his neighborhood as a place to live, and is active in a number of neighborhood projects, he is able to see beyond his own enclave of Corktown and spends time in other sections of the city, and clearly sees that many neighborhoods do not enjoy the same quality of life as the few high-profile neighborhood cases of revitalization in Detroit. Like Kathy, he feels free to speak about the city as a resident and a sense of ownership over competing narratives about city life.

### *Say nice things about Detroit*

Among the Detroit residents who I engaged with, and even some former residents who return to the city regularly, there appeared a general consensus that people either

understood Detroit, or they did not. Many of them subscribed to the idea that they were part of the former, that Detroit was a complicated space, it was not what was seen on the news which furthered negative perceptions about the city, and that many parts of the city were still good places to live. Many of the long-time residents were quick to defend their city to outsiders, but also to encourage others to “say nice things about Detroit” (a phrase coined in the 1970s by Detroit booster and small business owner Emily Gail to encourage people to be positive about her hometown). While many of the people in this study were saying nice things about Detroit themselves, they were also busy encouraging others to do the same. Helen, an 80-year-old Corktown resident, related a recent interaction with a friend departing for a suburban home. “The further out you get, the more people don’t think about Detroit. In fact my friend who is selling her house on 25<sup>th</sup> street is moving way out to Northville, or some other suburb, and I said to her ‘now, don’t badmouth Detroit when you get out there!’ Because people who live out further tend to badmouth Detroit and I find myself defending Detroit.” One of Helen’s major frustrations, echoed by many others, was the frequent questions that they received about the safety of their neighborhoods. Many took this line of questioning as a personal affront to either their intelligence or common sense, as they took the questioner to mean that they had neither by choosing to live in a dangerous situation. Many were insistent that crime happens everywhere, even in the suburbs. Helen detailed how she usually responds to this line of questioning,

H: Oh I say ‘I feel as safe in my neighborhood as you do in yours’. In fact I had a friend whose husband was the mayor of Madison Heights, or someplace, and she introduced me at a meeting as the bravest woman she knew, because I lived in the “inner city”

W: How did that make you feel?



H: You realize how silly they are. It's the same thing; people probably say that to you about living in your area [Midtown]. They can't imagine anybody would want to live in the city. Of course they might live a cracker box of a house that looks like the one next door and the one on the next street. They only look for the bad; they don't look for the good.

Like her neighbor Tom, Helen was quick to point out differences between herself and suburban dwellers, namely that they did not understand what it was to live in the city. However, many also revealed biases of their own about suburbs that were based on perceptions of places they also spent little time in, which may or may not be true of some residents (suburban residents were disconnected from their neighbors, all of the housing was identical, or those who chose to live in suburbs often had racially based fears that kept them out of the city). Although, at times the pressure to "say nice things about Detroit," was applied in such a way that many residents were at times hesitant to voice the fact that they did indeed leave the city for services that they could not obtain within the city. A Lafayette Park resident confided in me that she occasionally left the city limits to grocery shop because she could not obtain all the varieties of food she preferred shopping at Detroit grocery stores alone. She asked that I not mention this to any of her neighbors for fear of appearing disloyal to the city and residents. Another resident reluctantly admitted to traveling to the suburbs to visit a hairdresser after multiple failed attempts to find one within the city, the admission was expressed with a sense of defeat.

Like Helen, Marjorie, an 86-year old Midtown resident, feels as though she has a differing perspective on the city than many of her suburban friends and acquaintances and that it is difficult for outsiders to understand the problems faced by the city of Detroit. Comments related to the city's bankruptcy and emergency manager situation recently led her to part ways with a social group.

I was with some people in the suburbs one time, in a little lunch club that I was in, and after that I quit. I could not stand them any longer because there were people sitting there so smug saying 'it's their [the city of Detroit's] management.' It's thinly veiled racism, that's all they are doing. I said my piece and then I said 'I gotta go' and I sent an email to everybody that said I am very busy I can't continue with you.

It was a lesson to me, how many people think that Detroit's problems are home based, instead of being racially motivated. You know obviously, the city's that have had emergency managers are all black cities and poor.

It is not just Metro-Detroit suburban residents who Marjorie speaks positively to about her city, but in her extensive travels as well. Her daughter calls her the "Detroit Ambassador."

I was in Barcelona last year and I was talking to this guy and I said 'Where are you from?' and he said 'Oakland, California, where are you from?' and I said 'Detroit, MI don't believe everything you hear' And he said, 'Same with Oakland, but we are getting better' and I said 'So is Detroit!' So we had a good laugh over it.

Wherever I go outside of Detroit, outside of Detroit, I feel I have to defend it and there are very few people, especially now with the national news of the bankruptcy and all that is going on with the emergency manager, there are an awful lot of people who think that it is a dead city.

And as I heard once my sister saying "They ought to pave it over it, "she was talking about Los Angeles. God Almighty! It's other people! We don't care, just pave over themselves and their houses and everything and we can forget about them.

So I just feel very strongly that they, people outside of Detroit, who don't know much about it and are critical of it, need to see that there are a lot of good people doing a lot of good things in this city and I can tell you all kinds of stories about them.

Marjorie asserts that many outside of the city who do not understand it forget that there are "real people" living and interacting with each other in the city. She furthers, that yes, many of them are poor, but that does not make them any less real and they cannot just be "paved over." A long-time community activist and not afraid to speak her mind, Marjorie frequently writes letters to local and national news outlets about their treatment of a variety of subjects, but particularly with regard to stories about Detroit.

I watch Democracy Now religiously. I wrote...I send Democracy Now a pretty good

check, so they invite me to things that are happening in New York. I wrote an email to this woman and I said 'Could you please try to find some more positive pictures of Detroit, when you are doing a Detroit story?' Because they were showing the same old train station pictures that everybody shows and the burned out building and they said "Where can we get them?" and I said [local photographer] can help you. And he said he would do anything that he could. So the next time they did a story, they showed some nice pictures of Downtown.

Marjorie's plea to Democracy Now as a Detroit resident was met with the desired results as she encouraged them to "say nice things about Detroit." However at the same time, the push for more positive images coincided with popular media narratives about the rebirth of Detroit that were complicated and conflicting for many residents.

### *Revitalization Narratives*

Most of the former residents of Detroit tended to fall somewhere in between two camps about a comeback or "rebirth" of Detroit. There were many who said that it would never be what it once was in their youths, or echoed sentiments like Michael's "It would take a miracle." Squarely in the other camp were former residents like Diane who were excited and optimistic about the city's future and saw the changes taking place rapidly. "You know what, I think that Detroit's on the move, I really do. I think, this is my opinion, I thought it was going to take 20 years, but I don't think it's going to take 20 years, I am going to give it ten." Diane furthered that she had seen aerial pictures of Detroit where swaths of land were empty, and was convinced some entrepreneur would come in and build subdivisions bringing a lot of suburban dwellers back into the city, "Everybody's going to go back. I truly think that." She additionally harbored the idea that the Downtown of her youth would be revived as a shopping district. "Downtown is going to thrive again girl.... oh Downtown!"

Residents were excited, but like Grosse Pointe resident and former Detroiter,

Kathy they were cautiously optimistic and thought that it would happen much slower. Nancy is a petite 69-year-old woman with glasses and curly short gray hair and serves as director of the Swords to Plowshares Peace Center Art Gallery in Downtown Detroit. A retired university administrator, she lives alone in Detroit's Morningside neighborhood. Nancy told me that while she sees changes and improvement in her neighborhood and others, it is happening slowly and on a smaller scale in neighborhoods that are not Midtown or Downtown.

Morningside is a neighborhood on the east side of Detroit, situated close to the upscale suburb of Grosse Pointe. The residential streets are a mixture of older maintained brick homes, structures in disrepair or abandonment, and newer Habitat for Humanity dwellings. When Nancy moved into her home more than 30 years ago, she estimates that 95% of her block was white families. Over the years the demographics gradually shifted so that the block is now majority African-American residents, but she has noticed that in the last two years more families with children, both black and white, have been moving back in. She does note that while residents are returning, the central business district in Morningside has not experienced the same revival as a select few other Detroit neighborhoods. "Unfortunately the businesses have not come back. I say if somebody landed here from Mars they would think all we did was get our hair braided and nails done, and talk on cell phones. When I moved in, there were meat markets and bakeries and fruit and vegetable markets, all within walking distance."

Nancy sees some improvement in small things like the revival of an old movie theater down the street or the slow return of families with children to her block, but notes that revitalization throughout the city is an uneven process.

N: Personally, and I am realistic enough to know that not everything can happen at once, but I wish that neighborhoods were all Midtown, that the businesses would come back, that the investment and upkeep would be there, because I believe that is the only way that the city is going to ....I don't want to use the word comeback because we are never going to have a Hudson's downtown again, it's not going to be like it was in the 1960s....that the neighborhoods could become more habitable.

W: What do you think is uninhabitable about them?

N: Schools....safety....especially for seniors, but certainly not limited to that.

She tells me that while she herself feels safe, thanks to an alarm system and guard dog and cat, safety is still a concern in Detroit neighborhoods, especially for seniors.

I think we are more vulnerable. They advise women to walk purposefully and that's not always an option for older folks. I think many older people don't go out at night. Part of it is vision, part of it is concern, rightly or wrongly, that someone...if they live alone or even with somebody, that somebody is going to waylay them when they come home. Home invasions seem to target seniors more than they do younger people. And when you've been robbed you lose your sense of security.

For Nancy, it's not just about a few pocket neighborhoods with trendy restaurants and amenities for professional and creative classes, but to make the neighborhoods habitable again would involve addressing safety issues, bringing back amenities like grocery stores, and repairing the school system.

Through narratives about their relationships with both the city itself, and the other residents within the city, older Detroit residents distinguish and position themselves as a group distinct from those who either do not live within the city limits, or who have limited engagement declining to cross the border from the suburbs. As individuals with a strong affiliation to the city and other residents, they strongly defended their city and acted as Detroit boosters to outsiders, but were not blind to the multitude of issues that plagued the city.

Residents often lamented what outsiders failed to recognize was that there were

actual people living within the city limits and that those people had strong social networks and bonds with each other, despite decaying infrastructure and poverty. Their experiences as residents often put them in direct opposition to outsider perceptions and strengthened their connection as a group. As on the ground observers they often had a more nuanced picture of the happenings in the city, particularly with regard to revitalization movements. Although they were hesitant to accept criticism from outsiders, residents often felt that they had the right as insiders to make less than complimentary comments about the city and argue against many of the narratives furthered by both media and outsiders, both negative and positive. Additionally, residents were in the midst of living through many of the newsworthy events playing out within the city, and this played a key role in their relationship to the city and perceptions of the city.

#### *Personal Detroit Histories and Critical Events*

It [Detroit] was really nice. It breaks my heart I tell you....I used to sometimes take the bus down [from the suburbs], the park-and-ride bus and look out the window and it just breaks my heart to see all of those burned out buildings because it was such a vibrant city....there's some kind of affinity that I have [with the city]

-Claire, age 65, former Corktown resident

While narratives of change were common among all of my participants, former residents were often more likely to articulate the major changes that they perceived between the Detroit of their childhood and adolescence and the current state of Detroit. In her analysis of oral histories titled "The Sight of Loss" Alesia Montgomery (2011) explores the "narrative of the fall" of Detroiters and former Detroiters, and asserts that their longings for the Detroit of their youth is not simply place-based nostalgia, but relates to how objective structures are embedded and interpreted throughout the life course. Montgomery interviewed Detroiters who experienced Detroit as children between the

1930s through the 1970s. Montgomery's older participants (born between the 1920s and 1950s) echoed many of the sentiments and place specific memories of Detroit, Hudson's Department Store and the vibrant Downtown. They additionally marked the 1967 Riots as a turning point for the city, when white residents began to leave in droves and erode the tax base. Montgomery's younger participants, many of whom were born after the 1967 Riots, additionally articulated narratives of the "fall" of Detroit, and their childhood recollections of living in Detroit, were often similarly wistful and pleasant, mirroring those born a half century earlier. She notes that although none of the interview participants had a model or perfect childhood environment, "as adults they focus on the difference between today's streets and their lost world. This place may never have existed as a reality that their entire community saw. They recall a reality shaped by their position as children" (2011: 1844-45). Montgomery concludes that personal narratives of the decline of the city are less related to deindustrialization and power, but are more closely associated with the "social and cultural structuring of the life course in a city of constant conflicts and perennial devastation" (1846-47). Like Montgomery's participants, many of the older people that I met expressed the intertwined nature of their own personal stories and both the slow "decline" of Detroit and events that they perceived as major catalysts for changes in the city. Many felt a personal pain at the destruction of former haunts and spaces, but noted that changes were inevitable in the life course of cities.

Bill, a former Detroit resident and former relocation specialist for the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal in Detroit and later as a private urban renewal consultant, left the city in 1971. He initially had planned to look for homes for his family in Detroit thinking it was what he could afford, but discovered that he could purchase newer, larger

housing for the same price in a neighborhood in the suburb of Novi. Space had become critical, as Bill now had six children. He tells me that a lot of the white residents of Detroit were leaving out of fear at that time, but he felt that his northwestern Detroit neighborhood had remained relatively stable in the late 1960s and it was more the need for space for his family that pushed him to look for real estate outside of the city. "I have to say that our move was pretty much economic, but there was probably an undercurrent of fear and the family and changing neighborhoods. Our neighborhood directly didn't change; we didn't see much of it." However, Bill did see many changes in the city as a result of his work in the city neighborhoods. He also notes that it was not just the city of Detroit that had changed, but also the suburbs as well.

B: So after seeing all of the change in the city, I saw the change out here in the suburbs. And I think this happens as you age. If you age in an urban area where things are growing you just see a lot of change and some of it from a personal viewpoint, you enjoy it and others you just regret it...

W: What do you regret?

B: When you see things like places you've been destroyed, like Hudson's and downtown...and even the stores out in our neighborhood. About a year ago I found a whole box of stuff that I had stored away, receipts from wherever we had spent our money, and many of the stores that we bought from are gone, small clothing stores and dime stores and restaurants and cleaners and doctors offices, just because development takes place and change. I even heard an expression 'the city grows, like a person through infancy and youth and young adulthood and middle age'

For Bill the changes were slowly taking place and he still revisits Detroit regularly and takes out-of-town visitors on tours of the city. "I am a big fan of Detroit. Now some of the people who visit me, my kids and friends who come from out of state, they want me to take them on tours of Detroit and so I do that. I drive people around, sometimes they initiate it, and sometimes I initiate it." Most of his tour consists of personal landmarks,



such as his former homes and old neighborhoods, but for Bill many of the public spaces in Detroit are also personal landmarks.

And then they like to see the ruins, so we drive through the areas....and most of them are landmarks for me...places where my relatives lived or my dad worked, or where I was born, or whatever. So I have a connection with many parts of Detroit. You can see the stages, places where the housing is still up, but the siding is off and the windows are all boarded up...to the ones that are burned or whatever...and then right down to the prairies and forests that are in Detroit and you can still see pheasants and foxes in Detroit. So they like that and then I like to show them the good stuff. I like to drive them Downtown and along the River.

Having spent most of his life working in the city, Bill saw the changes in the city take place gradually and although he references several critical points in Detroit history, specifically the 1967 Riots, but mostly in the broader context of what was happening in the country with regard to race relations and his own personal growth trying to learn about racism in America.

When I was working for the city the Riots broke out. By the way, not all of my experience was really friendly with the African-Americans, sometimes in the neighborhoods, they didn't want their house taken and so forth. But this mentor I had Ron, who was teaching me about the Black Power movement and about all the political aspects of racism and his own personal experiences. Then I began reading in that area, I read a lot of black authors at that time.

I believe that the Watts Riots occurred first and then it spread and Detroit broke out in 1967....I was four kids and Carole and I in Northwest Detroit...and Carole said she saw military trucks going down our street, I don't remember that.

Through his work in Detroit and experiences in the neighborhoods, Bill's narrative of the decline of Detroit unfolded steadily over his 40 years of work experience in urban renewal. The 1967 Riots were a marked event, but not necessarily a critical turning point for either the city or Bill personally, as they were for many former residents (and no current residents referenced the Riots in their narratives about Detroit). For many of the former residents, the 1967 disturbances were social imaginaries that marked a turning point in

the city, what Veena Das (1995) terms critical events, or moments in time when everyday life is disrupted, altered, and new means of functioning, categories for understanding and organizing the world, and relating to other people arises. Critical events explore the intersection of both everyday life and local and national politics and with regard to memory the intersection of the personal and the political.

For former Detroit residents, Frank and Louise, ages 88 and 86 respectively, long time peace and justice activists, the 1967 Riots were a call to action and forming new types of community programming. Frank and Louise lived in a Northwest Detroit neighborhood until the early 1980s when they “abandoned” their residence of 35 years for a condo on the Detroit Riverfront, before decamping to a suburb to be closer to older relatives just prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Louise tells me initially that it was the deterioration of the neighborhood and safety concerns that led them to leave their Northwest Detroit neighborhood for the river view condo, and then Frank counters that isn’t entirely true. They ultimately agree that the move to a condo was the next step for them in their lives as retirees and empty nesters. I met with Frank and Louise at the Swords to Plowshares Peace Center near Comerica Park one of their multiple volunteer gigs that they still travel to weekly in Detroit. The large gallery space is maintained by volunteers like Frank and Louise. The white walls are covered with local artists’ work and large windows look out at the Comerica Park baseball stadium. Louise comments about a group that walks by the gallery on their way to the stadium, noting that they did not even look in the windows or seem to notice that the gallery was there. Most passersby, she tells me, only stop if they are seeking a restroom. Although they are at the gallery several times a week, it is only one of their many volunteer endeavors, as they have been active in volunteer work,

community activism, and politics for decades.

Frank and Louise first came to community activism through the Catholic Church. Pre-Vatican II they were part of a group of “forward thinking Catholics” who wanted the work of the church to be drawn out into practice in community settings. In the 1960s they wanted their parish to be oriented towards social justice and the Riots were a particular turning point for their activism. They formed an adult education group within the parish and invited parishioners to attend lectures. Louise told me, “So after the Riots we decided that one of the things that people needed to know about was black history. So we had a series on black history and we engaged black professors from U of D and U of M to present the series, which we taped.” Although the turnout was small for these types of seminars, they were further inspired at this point to become more politically active, volunteering for campaigns, running for local offices, hosting a cable access television show through Wayne State in the 1970s, and numerous other activities in the “peace and justice” movement in Detroit. Already active volunteers and parish participants, the Riots were for Frank and Louise the “critical event” that transformed them into community activists more broadly beyond their church and shaped their interaction with the community around them.

### *Bankruptcy*

I worked for the Urban League and I ended up my career as a grant writer for the Recreation Department for the City of Detroit. So I am one of those poor retirees that you hear about. We are losing some money and we are losing some health benefits, but at least we are not losing everything. It’s kind of the position we are in. It will be alright though.

-Sandy, age 67, October 2014

In the midst of my dissertation fieldwork, the City of Detroit was experiencing its own critical event in the form of the largest municipal bankruptcy in United States history

filed in July 2013 and the installation of an emergency city manager, Kevyn Orr, appointed by Republican governor Rick Snyder. At the time of my fieldwork, the city retirees I interviewed were resigned to the fact that they were in fact losing some of their benefits, although the final reduction had yet to be determined. In the spring of 2015 city workers began to see the first deductions from their pension checks, as general city workers were forced to forego a 4.5% base cut in their pensions and the elimination of cost of living increases. Additionally, the city sought to recoup \$240 million in annuity payments that had already been distributed, resulting in either an upfront payment of thousands of dollars for some retirees or the further reduction of monthly pension checks. Health insurance for retirees was replaced with either a voucher system or Medicare for those 65 and over (Tompson 2015; Ferretti 2015).

Two of my participants who retired from the city were in the midst of the unfolding of this critical moment when I interviewed them. Lafayette Park residents Ruth, who at 96 was the oldest participant, and Sandy, who at 67 was one of the youngest, were still awaiting the final decision on the reduction in their benefits, although they both knew at the time that it was imminent. From the installation of Kevyn Orr in March of 2013 up until the fall of 2014 when I interviewed both women, the impending cuts had been on their minds. Ruth told me.

Well, for a while I was having sleepless nights. I have a good pension, because I was at a fairly good salary level as the director of a department and also because my husband and I were both working at the time and my children were independent. I didn't need my whole paycheck, so I always contributed, in addition to my pension. It is now one of my primary sources of income. I have my federal check and those are my two sources of income. For a very long time we were all worried about our pension. One of the things that the caretaker [emergency manager], Orr was hinting that they [pensions] were too high, but we paid for them [laughter] they were deductions from our paychecks!

For a very long time I was concerned that I would lose part of that or all of my pension. I don't know what has been decided there or if it has they haven't said. There will probably be a cut in my pension, which means a cut in my monthly income. Now, I will survive, I won't go hungry, I have been very careful with my savings and my husband's. So I will survive, but I have four grandchildren, I have two and 1/3 great-grandchildren, and they all deserve something.

Fellow retiree Sandy both echoed and expanded on some of Ruth's thoughts about life as a city retiree.

First thing that you feel is betrayed, because you took a job kind of with the unspoken assumption that I am going to work for less than I am going to be able to get on the outside, because I am getting benefits that will see me through my old age. So it really feels like a betrayal to those of us. This was not what was supposed to be happening.

I think there's a feeling of solidarity between city workers knowing that we are all going through the same thing. And we talk to each other and try to figure out what's the best approach. What do we need to do? And also I think that there is a lot of pride amongst city workers that they have done really laudable work with virtually no resources, we don't have the financial resources, we had a really outdated IT system, the busses don't work, the lights don't turn on, despite everything we were still trying to deliver services to people.

As a grant writer I really felt that I made a contribution in millions of dollars to the city....through my own personal work. So it's a combination of pride and being pissed off. And I worry that the city is going to have a hard time retaining workers that don't have benefits, or who don't have so many benefits. And then they will try to privatize a number of things and discover that doesn't guarantee that you get good services.

Writing about the intersection of critical events, memory, and kinship Janet Carsten considers, "through large scale political events, as well as the institutional structures of the state that impinge on personal and familiar life, kinship emerges as a particular kind of sociality in which certain forms of temporality and memory-making, and certain dispositions towards the past, present, and future are made possible while others are excluded" (Carsten 2007: 4-5). Although both women readily identified as former Detroit city employees, maintained friendships with coworkers, and participated in retiree groups,

the bankruptcy and threat to their pensions has given them a new mode for organizing and engaging with each other as a distinct group. Although at the time of our interviews the final decisions about their pensions had not been made, both women had been watching the drama of the emergency manager and bankruptcy filing for over a year and a half at that point and had come to similar conclusions. They ultimately were upset about how the situation was handled, the loss of benefits, and were angry as they had paid into the system. However, both women expressed more concern for retirees other than themselves, as they both noted that they would survive with a pension reduction due to careful savings. By the time that I met them in the fall of 2014, both Ruth and Sandy had spent a lot of time living in the midst of the event, making sense of it, and ultimately accepting that there was little to be done.

All of the older adults that I spoke with reflected on alterations that occurred within the city during their lives, many of them experienced directly. Like the events Das (1995) considers, both of these Detroit events received heavy media coverage and at the individual level consider what it means to be an individual in a contested space. For many of the former residents, they reflected on distant critical events, like the 1967 Riots, as turning points in both the city and their residential histories, and this event was central to many of their Detroit narratives. The Riots did not appear in any of the Detroit narratives of longtime residents, and narratives of change progressed at a much slower rate, as the changes unfolded around them and opposed to punctures in time of specific events, both individual and collective. For the former residents who marked the Riots as a key critical event in both city and personal histories, the disturbance was often tied to changes in their own lives, a choice to move, not necessarily based on fear or the event itself, but

often positioned as a life stage change, as many of them were either marrying or raising families during the 1960s and had newly altered requirements for home spaces. Although the critical event can seem to come suddenly, unanticipated, and marked by one distinct point in time (multiple days of disturbance, the filing of bankruptcy) as its origin, the event itself is often the breaking point of long-term tensions. The current residents did not mark the bankruptcy filing itself as a critical event, but were still in the center of experiencing the aftershocks and attempting to unravel what it meant for them personally. However, it was clear that the reference of these events marked both former and current Detroiters as distinct from other groups. For former Detroiters they were marked both in time and space as members of a specific geographic group, but also as a specific generation who experienced the critical event first hand and were still present to reflect on it. As current residents in a bankrupt city, many felt obligated to defend the city as still a good place to live and grow old. A particular solidarity emerged among the groups of former city workers, who relied on each other for support, commiseration, and information. The older adults were navigating the experience of the contested space, while constructing their own narratives about both the space and where they fit within the structure of that space.

#### *Home and Identity as a Detroiters*

For older Detroit residents, public spaces and events, although relevant to personal experiences, were not the only spaces relevant to the construction of their experiences as Detroiters. Their individual homes revealed themselves to be important spaces, not simply as private spaces, but also for their participation as Detroiters as well. For the older Detroit residents who invited me into their homes, the structures themselves were often a source of pride and inhabitants were eager to give me tours and tell me

about the spaces. For many the restoration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century homes in Corktown and their unique character was integral to how the older person saw themselves, as someone who did not want to live in a house that was exactly like the house next door. In Lafayette Park, where the homes built in the late 1950s do mirror the space next door, the residents prided themselves on the again trendy mid-century charm, the functionality, the limited amount of maintenance that they as members of a co-op were responsible for, and the nice upkeep of the grounds and shared spaces. While all of the older residents of Detroit actively engaged with spaces, businesses, and their neighborhoods, many viewed their homes as particularly important to both their experience in Detroit, their identity as Detroit residents, and their community engagement endeavors in shaping the city.

For Marjorie, an 86-year-old lifelong Detroit resident, long time peace and justice activist, and self-described anarchist, her Midtown condo has become an important space for her Detroit related activism. In Marjorie's condo interspersed among her artwork, Persian rugs, and grand piano, are displayed relics, like posters and buttons, of various social justice movements she has participated in throughout the years. Marjorie is unafraid to express her opinion on a variety of political and social subjects, both at the local and global level. Throughout our interactions she frequently refers to historical anarchist figures by first name as if they were acquaintances (e.g. "Emma [Goldman] always thought..."). Plagued by some physical limitations, arthritis, and chronic pain it has become increasingly difficult for Marjorie to walk long distances, which is a source of dismay for multiple reasons. Firstly, she is now unable to walk to nearby local businesses or walk her very active dog. On a very good day, she can make it across the street to the Detroit Institute of Arts, but not much further. But equally distressing to Marjorie is how



her physical limitations have affected her activism in the city. “I mind very much not being able to be out in the streets” she told me in reference to her previous endeavors that included volunteer work, actively protesting social injustices and engaging with community groups.

In addition to her independent work activities, Marjorie is able to use her space to further her community activities by serving as a hostess. One time I was visiting her home and she was busy preparing her guest room/office for an out of town activist who was coming to Detroit for an event. Another time I attended a large yearly gathering that she hosts at her home as a fundraiser for a local neighborhood social service organization where her late husband served as a board member. When I saw Marjorie again the summer I was writing this dissertation, she told me that although her pain had gotten worse, she was thankful that she was able to continue some of her work from her condo through the internet, working on newsletters for groups, maintaining mailing lists, and writing letters to various organizations and news outlets. “If I had born fifty years earlier, this wouldn’t be available to me and I would be cut off from the world.”

#### *Ruth’s basement*

I’d like you to come down and see the basement, how much space I have, but you will have to come down with me, I am not allowed to go down by myself.

Ruth age 96, Lafayette Park resident

Ruth sits at her dining room table, in her spacious Chateaufort Place home in Lafayette Park. The main living area sprawls over one level and includes three bedrooms, two of which are now used to house Ruth’s extensive collection of personal files and records from her multiple decades of work in the city of Detroit with former mayor Coleman Young. Although many have updated their units, Ruth’s still hosts a midcentury kitchen,

although she herself no longer cooks much and relies on a paid helper throughout the week.

Dressed in casual slacks and a cardigan sweater, Ruth is a short woman with a mass of cropped white curls and large clear plastic framed glasses. Born in 1918, and one of Chateaufort's oldest residents, Ruth now lives alone in the community she moved to more than forty years earlier. Although she was born and raised in Chicago and lived in various cities across the United States in her twenties, Ruth and her husband made Detroit their home after WWII, drawn to the city by his career as a labor organizer. They settled in a neighborhood in Northwest Detroit, where they remained until the 1970s when someone set fire to their home. Although the individuals were never caught, Ruth is certain it was a group who opposed her family's politics.

My son at school had a fight with a right wing group, and one of the men said we know where you live, we are going to get you. And they were seen at the place throwing something.

Which was fine with me because the neighborhood deteriorated terribly in terms of crimes and everything else, I really wanted to move.

Ruth and her husband were familiar with the Chateaufort complex as they had close friends already living in the community. She and her husband were drawn to both the other residents and the lifestyle. "We were very content and we always said that this was the best move that we ever made." Although she is now a widow and into the latter half of her tenth decade of life, Ruth has been able to continue to live in her home alone with the help of a paid aide five mornings a week. Ruth maintains that it is still the best place for her to live and that three of her closest longtime friends still live on her courtyard and her neighbors provide her with both help and friendship.

It's a neighborhood, people know each other, people are friendly. It's large enough

that you can avoid the people you don't want to be friends with. My friend just called about two meetings that we are going to go to together. My handicap is that about two years ago my son took my car away from me, which is just as well, I was never a good driver anyhow. So not driving, and as you can see I am handicapped moving, I am sort of imprisoned here. But Carole, called me to confirm the two meetings she is seeing a movie that I would like, so a group of us will go to together.

Ruth's narrative is full of examples of times when neighbors have come to her aide and her long friendships with them. She maintains that for these reasons, and the fact that her unit is on one story and requires no exterior maintenance on her part, are why the Chateaufort has been such a wonderful place for her to grow old. When I ask her more broadly about aging in the City of Detroit she tells me that Chateaufort is not the norm and she knows that majority of Detroit neighborhoods struggle with issues not present in her own neighborhood.

R: It's not a fair answer that I can give you because I live in an unfair situation, as far as the rest of the City is concerned. For me, as you can see, this is the perfect place to grow old...every time my doctors hint at nursing homes or that kind of thing, I would go out of my mind...for me this is the perfect place to grow old.

W: What is unfair?

R: In terms of my living here? It's unusual. There aren't too many....there are good neighborhoods in Detroit, people get along together, have community organizations and work well. There are several pockets of Detroit that are really well organized and it shows if you go down the streets, the yards are well taken care of, the streets are clean, the trees are kept

But here it's a neighborhood, in the best sense of the word, where people belong to it and are responsible to and for each other. and it's a co-op, if the trees are damaged, they are also my trees. If someone does damage to one of the buildings, it's also my building. So that's the really important part of living here. So when I say it's not fair to compare the rest of the city to this, no....there are pockets like this throughout the city, which are communities and that is how they survive.

The community of neighbors, many of whom are close friends and also fellow city retirees like Ruth, has been critical to her experience living and growing older in the Chateaufort.

Additionally, as an almost 60-year resident of the city and former city employee, Ruth's

home is an extension of her commitment to working and living within the city, and her political ideologies. After our conversation at her dining table, Ruth takes me on a tour of her space. The upstairs and main living areas are decorated with mementos and pictures from her life, travels, and family. A number of awards for both Ruth and her husband hang throughout the space and she proudly shows me several photographs of them with local and state politicians, and multiple with their close friend and Ruth's former employer Mayor Coleman Young.

Ruth had mentioned her basement several times throughout our conversation and was eager to show it to me. It was clear that it was one of the most important spaces to her, but also one she no longer frequently used. Ruth walked slowly and used a cane to get around her home. I could hear her audibly struggling to breathe as she walked. I carried her cane and she managed to make it down the stairs without too much difficulty grasping the railing with both hands. She wanted to show me the basement specifically because she said it was integral to her life as an organizer and community activist and her husband's work as a labor union organizer.

The large basement was remodeled in the 1970s to include a second kitchen with double ovens and entertaining space so that she and her late husband could host meetings, fundraisers, and celebratory events in their home related to both his labor union work and their work supporting local politics. The décor and furniture of the basement is frozen in that time period, including a long orange vinyl sectional couch that can be easily modified into multiple seating or sleeping configurations. She tells me that one of her friends makes fun of the old-fashioned furniture that she keeps, but she cannot part with it. Ruth's basement was mentioned by several other Chateaufort residents as an

important gathering space that I needed to see. I ceased mentioning that I had seen it after the first few times other residents expressed concern than Ruth herself had braved the stairs to show it to me.

Ruth clearly had a strong connection to her home beyond simply that as a dwelling or shelter. As Carsten writes, “But houses are of course, not just about warmth and intimacy, nor are they in reality static structures closed off from historical forces in the outside world” (Carsten 2004: 26). Houses provide physical shelters and stability, but are also vulnerable to harm, damage, and loss due to their links with the broader environment and economy. Ruth’s home was both functional as a place to grow old and as a repository for memories of her work and life. Moreover, it was her connection to her community in the complex that provided safety, friendship, and aide when needed. Ruth was one of the many older people I met in Detroit who were aging in long-time neighborhoods and enjoyed social networks that provided them both with aid and friendship, leaving them insisting that for them, Detroit was a good place to grow old.

The home is an important extension of the self and critical to social relationships and projected identities. Particularly for the older person, the home is not only important as a private sphere where they can be themselves, but also as a space where they can project their own internal sense of self identity (Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2005). As self-identities are created and reproduced through daily activities (Bourdieu 1977), so are older people able to derive meaning from the features of the home, both the physical spaces and the routines developed within those spaces. It is through these facets of the home that older people interpret their experiences as individuals (Rubinstein 1989).

Writing about Malay kinship and houses Carsten (1995) argues that houses are

not only important as nuclear domestic spaces, but for the broader community as well. The sharing of domestic space is part of the Malay kinship process, by which relationships are strengthened and individuals become full-fledged members of the community and where the lines between “social” and “biological” become blurred. For many of the participants in this study, their homes were critical to how they interpreted their experiences as Detroiters and served as spaces to further their activist causes, and strengthen relationships with other community members.

### *Discussion*

What then is the impact of cities on individual lives and vice versa, and how does it relate to social connections? I closed this last section with the story of Ruth and her basement, which illustrated not only her home as a shelter from the external world, but also had a long standing part in her engagement with her community, as neighbors, coworkers, and other Detroit residents. Ruth’s home was a connection to her past, her work, and other people, and additionally an extension of her beliefs and values regarding work and community activism. Throughout her life Ruth has been actively shaped by her experience of living in Detroit, but this relationship is not one-directional, as Ruth has been central to shaping the city as well as a resident, a neighbor, an activist, and a city employee. Ruth appears throughout the dissertation as an integral part of her community and in turn is aided by her neighbors and friends, which allows her to stay in her home at age 96 and remain active in organizations like the city retiree groups that she participates in.

This chapter outlines the processes through which individual and collective identities as Detroiters are expressed as both former and current residents. For many

former residents, they connected to the identity of Detroit or former Detroit, through remembering the experience of shared critical events that marked them as having experienced a specific place and time. For residents, it is about establishing themselves as not suburban dwellers, championing their city to those who “don’t get it,” but also navigating the complex nature of positive media narratives about the comeback of Detroit. Many residents, although pleased to see the return of businesses and residents to the city, are concerned with the fact that a small number of neighborhoods and types of businesses are reaping all of the benefits. Many articulated that it was not about trendy restaurants or retail spaces, but that the city would only truly comeback when the neighborhoods were made inhabitable again for all residents. Through their status as insiders and their shared championing of the city, and additionally resistances to certain narratives, the cohesive nature of longtime resident relationships was further strengthened through their affiliation with Detroit. Additionally, older residents of Detroit are revealed not simply as passive recipients of city processes and events that surround them, but active participants in shaping the city where they reside. As active participants in the social world of the city, a kinship with the city is integral to the personhood of older Detroiters in late age. Unlike Vesperi’s Florida residents whose lives are revealed by the city’s *relationship with* them, a *relationship with the city* is a complex means by which older persons struggle to maintain their personhood through a place based affiliation. Detroit provides these older people with an affiliation through both space and time, although this is not without challenges. Ultimately it is their defense of the city to outsiders that strengthens this identity and in turn personhood in old age.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I return to my central question: what is the relationship between connection to space, sociality, and “successful” aging and why should we care? In 2014 it was estimated that persons over 65 comprised 14% of the population in the United States and projected that between 2012 and 2050 the senior population would almost double in size from 43 million to almost 84 million persons and will be increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse. The size and composition of the elderly population is significant for both public and private concerns on both economic and social fronts, as this projected growth has the potential to present challenges to policymakers, social programs for older persons, and individuals and families as well (Ortman, Velkoff, & Hogan 2014). Although often presented as a challenge for communities, policymakers, and families, in a neoliberal political climate that underscores the importance of personal responsibility, the burden of a happy, healthy, and productive old age is increasingly placed on the shoulders of the individual older person.

Moreover, trends in gerontology research tend to reflect this emphasis on personal responsibility with queries into “successful aging” often under the guise of supporting strategies, while ignoring individual metrics of aging. Within both these strategies and individual metrics falls the domain of environment, and returns me to the core of this dissertation research which examines the intersection of relationships, environments, and growing older. To stimulate a different way of thinking about neoliberalism with regard to the individual, I consider a view of sociality that considers it as both the relationship to the community and incumbent on the individual as it is a system that relies on individual agency, thereby a categorical fallacy. For an older person to achieve a neoliberal



successful old age, they must rely on the assistance and social world around them. That social system is made up of individuals, who in turn create a community. This further problematizes designations of “successful” and “unsuccessful” aging, as those successes are not only individual metrics, but to age successfully at an individual level, they must be integrated into the social world.

I revisit the prologue of this dissertation which featured married couple Sol and Dorothy in their Lafayette Park co-op unit, as their narrative is central to the argument that I build throughout the data chapters of this dissertation. Sol and Dorothy assert that they can see their values in places, both through their choice of residence and their work within the city. They specifically moved to Lafayette Park because of their preference for both an urban lifestyle and racial diversity among their neighbors. Their values are also expressed through idealized or imagined spaces, as they conceive of how things might be different throughout Detroit. Although big boosters of the city and strongly convinced that their neighborhood is a great place to grow old, Sol and Dorothy are not blind to the problems that plague the city and surround their haven neighborhood, and readily admit that they are beneficiaries of both mid-century and contemporary patterns of gentrification in the city and that they are part of a privileged financial group compared to the majority of residents.

Most tellingly however, it is their fictive kin network and their position within that network that make Lafayette Park a good place to grow old. Sol and Dorothy are pleased with their neighborhood as they age because of the contributions of the other residents, but also because they have contributed to the community as well. Their experience of growing older is not only influenced by their surroundings and the city, but should they

not be cast as passive recipients of their environment, Sol and Dorothy keenly stress their participation in the surrounding community as part of their experiences. Their commitment to both their immediate neighbors and improving the city of Detroit is not simply a manifestation of their “values in places,” but extends beyond that to where they see themselves fitting into the social world around them in position to other people. Dorothy’s assertion that she views life as a “spiral of obligations” and Al’s desire to be a strong link in “chain stretches way back into antiquity” underscores the importance of relationships, specifically non-biologically based relationships, that are intrinsic to their work, values, environment, and existence. Like the former Corktown classmates who use kinship terms to reinforce their strong relationships with one another, Sol and Dorothy’s choice of words is revealing about the nature of their non-biological kinship with those around them. Both emphasize that as humans and community members they have responsibilities to other people. Al furthers that his own biological kin, children and grandchildren, are not part of this chain, but instead it is a widespread chain of humanity, wherein people are essential to one another. This is not to suggest that the sociality fostered by these neighborhood based kinship groups is a replacement for biological and legal kinship relationships, as many participants had strong nuclear and extended family networks as well, but instead an augment to those relationships, especially when grown-children and grandchildren resided out of state.

I opened this dissertation with the narrative of Sol and Dorothy, as their comments about their commitments to place and people clearly exemplify the outcomes of this study that the two concepts are deeply intertwined and difficult to separate, and central to the human experience throughout the life course. The purpose of this study was to discover

and explore the relationship between connection to place, sociality, and normative visions of “successful” aging. I chose to explore the intersection of the processes of aging, relationships, and places through the theoretical trajectory of anthropological conceptualizations of what constitutes kinship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specifically, I relied heavily on the theoretical lenses of Marshall Sahlins’ concept of “mutuality of being” and Janet Carsten’s concept of “relatedness.” Both of these theoretical trajectories focus on the processes and nature of relationships, as opposed to simply biology. These theoretical foundations consider the ways of experiencing of living in a world full of other people. For my own considerations in this dissertation, it was difficult for many to untangle their relationships with other people, places, and their individual experiences of aging in a specific locale. To explore my research questions through a kinship lens, I considered not only space or relationships, but also the processes by which spaces engendered relationships and also the affinities and relationships that older persons developed with current and former spaces. In this final chapter, I synthesize and analyze the data discussed in the previous three chapters and utilize the analysis to extend Carsten and Sahlins’ considerations of kinship to integrate relationship to aging and place in order to answer my research question.

Sahlins, with his ideas about “mutuality of being” and Carsten with the concept of “relatedness” underscore the shift in kinship from the domain of the known and taken for granted (i.e. biology) to the realm of the constructed, through which kinship must be considered in local contexts as processes. Kinship is revealed through a set of everyday practices situated in local contexts, and the focus is no longer on charts, bloodlines, and rules, but that of meaning. But more specifically, they both consider, what does being

related do for people in these specific local contexts?

In the case of this study an assortment of types of relationships with other persons, be they neighbors, community members, fellow residents, paid care providers, former coworkers and classmates, or biological family, allow for older persons to assume agency and actively resist the social isolation often associated with negative health and well-being outcomes in old age. For many they have both the opportunity to give and receive care in a variety of forms, thereby becoming “intrinsic to one another’s existence” as Sahlins suggests as the basis for kinship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in turn maintain their sense of personhood through a place-based affiliation.

*Place affiliation is critical, but complicated*

Across all of the participants in this study, place affiliation was key to their own sense of identity and personhood. However, the intricacy of their experiences did not always tidily reflect neoliberal ideas about successful aging, but instead were a complex fusion of choices, desires, and opportunities. This study concurs that a sense of place serves to foster individual and group identity (Altman and Low 1992), is important to identity in old age (Rubinstein and Paramlee 1992) and is part of the “landscape of memories” that provides an anchor in identity in old age. Where I would like to extend and challenge these prior assertions is to consider place affiliation in old age, not simply as part of the “landscape of memory” in older, but firmly rooted in the present as well and while it is often dependent on a long affiliation with a space, differing access to resources have implications for successful aging with regard to environment. It is demonstrated that older adults who relocate later in life or who have spent less time in a community are more likely to be social isolated (Kobayashi et al 2009: 387-8). In this particular study I

uncovered not only how this was affected by financial and social resources, but also how older persons create new communities for themselves and remain connected to former communities in spite of relocations. This is in line for calls to develop a view of successful aging that allows for meaning centered approaches in old age (Moody 2009; Lamb 2014), and accounts for differences in inequality (Buch 2015) and how this is relevant to the personhood of individual older adults.

This is best exemplified by Elena, whose disrupted residential history led in her and out of Corktown throughout her life. Although she would have preferred to remain in Corktown for her later years, Elena was unable to do so due to financial constraints. Her returns and departures were at times actively chosen by Elena, and at others beyond her immediate control, as was her last departure from her home due to finances. She maintains that she would still be there, despite the perceptions of the space by her now all suburban dwelling family that it was unsafe and dangerous, if her finances permitted. What made her reluctant to leave was both a connection to her recent neighbors, a mixture of longtime residents and newcomers, but also her connection to her past, her family's immigration from Malta, and her deceased parents who lived the majority of their lives in that house. Elena's narrative was less nostalgic for a time and place gone by than many of her contemporaries, who had left the neighborhood in the 1960s, and therefore unlike them she had a clearer vision of what it was like to age both within and outside of the neighborhood, as opposed to the imagined aging experiences of others who had left Corktown. For Elena, Corktown was both firmly rooted in her "landscape of memory," but also her present as she struggled to make a new place for herself as she waited for subsidized suburban senior housing. Her assertion that she "feels bad" that she now

must tell people she is no longer a Detroit resident, demonstrates how central this affiliation with Corktown is to her current identity.

While studies of place attachment in older persons often focus on memories, place attachment also concerns current lived experiences and imagined futures to be experienced in a particular space (Milligan 1998) and many of the current residents I interviewed were attempting to make sense of the current situation in their city. Unlike former residents' narratives of Detroit "before" and "after," the narratives of current residents were not punctuated by large public events. Although change was central to their stories, the modifications to the city unfolded as a much slower and smoother process. As opposed to focusing on critical events (Das 1995) of the past, many residents were attempting to grapple with events that they were still in the middle of experiencing like the recent municipal bankruptcy and the challenges it presented. For city retirees in particular, like Ruth and Sandy their identity as both workers and residents was further strengthened by the filing for bankruptcy, as they felt a tremendous amount of pride in their work, but also as they continued relationships with other retirees. Sandy articulated the sense of solidarity of city retirees:

I think there's a feeling of solidarity between city workers knowing that we are all going through the same thing. And we talk to each other and try to figure out what's the best approach, what do we need to do. And also I think that there is a lot of pride amongst city workers that they have done really laudable work with virtually no resources, we don't have the financial resources, we had a really outdated IT system, the busses don't work, the lights don't turn on, despite everything we were still trying to deliver services to people. As a grant writer I really felt that I made a contribution in millions of dollars to the city through my own personal work. So it's a combination of pride and being pissed off.

Though both Ruth and Sandy were previously involved in social groups for retirees, their sense of collective identity was heightened by the threat to their benefits as they now

relied on each other for support, information, and at times commiseration. Although much has been written about place attachment, little is known about the processes of place attachment (Lewicka 2011). There are clear implications for this research to make a contribution to this lack of knowledge, as I uncover many strategies employed by both residents and former residents to remain connected to important spaces from their pasts and presents and consequently retain personhood in old age and how this varies according to access to social and financial resources.

A clear connection between an attempt to remain connected to space as it relates to personhood is that of city retiree Ruth and her basement, as her story is central to the argument that I have built throughout the dissertation regarding the inability to separate elements of space, relationships, and aging while at the same time exploring patterns of neoliberal spaces, successful aging, and non-biological kinship relationships. Ruth's story exemplifies many of the themes presented in this dissertation analysis. At 96 she is happily still in her home living independently, with aide from paid helpers and neighbors, and considers both her immediate home and neighborhood a good place to age for both physical and social amenities. However, this does not suggest that Ruth believes the entire city of Detroit to be comparable to her own haven of Lafayette Park's Chateaufort complex, and she is aware of both the uneven development and redevelopment throughout the city, but also that her situation in her co-op is unique because of the relationships she has developed with her neighbors, which provide both a social outlet and help when necessary. Additionally, Ruth's relationship as a former city employee, activist, and longtime resident demonstrate a strong kinship of identification with the city, whereby the experience of living in Detroit and critical events enacted in the space shaped

her. Ruth has both the social and financial resources to remain in her own home and consequently retain her sense of personhood by remaining connected to her home, neighborhood, and community. Our trip into the basement is emblematic of her further attempts to retain personhood in old age as connected to place. Ruth is aware that she is not “allowed” to go down into her basement alone (or at all as several neighbors chided me later for not stopping her), but after several hours together she disobeys this rule, in order to show me the place critical to her social world as it served a place for political organizing, hosting friends and neighbors, and as a guest room for children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Interactions, like my trip with Ruth into her basement, highlight the importance of non-interview ethnographic encounters during my fieldwork. While my analytic strategy was one of constant case comparison, an ongoing data-analysis process rooted in grounded theory, by which findings are constantly compared to other findings as they emerge, my own reflections that emerged throughout the fieldwork process were equally valuable in helping me make sense of what was actually meaningful to individuals. In the case of Ruth and her basement, her determination to show me her space expressed a connection to place that could not have been expressed through conversation. It was this interaction that solidified the connection in my mind between Ruth’s work, space, and community.

Throughout my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to engage in interactions that strengthened my analytic strategies and conclusions. The most common non-interview data that I had the opportunity to collect were that of photographs. Participants were often enthusiastic to show me yearbooks, scrapbooks, and photos of families, former



classmates, neighbors, and friends. Often they told me that they had many pictures of the “neighborhood,” and what they showed me were pictures of people, thus further revealing the inextricable nature between people, places, and aging. Often it was also important for participants to demonstrate to me that they were still part of the community, despite living elsewhere. In the case of Eddie, we often met in Corktown restaurants where he proudly introduced me to the owners or appeared familiar with wait staff and other patrons. Our walks through Corktown together, beyond serving the function of showing me places of importance to him, served to demonstrate how well he was still integrated into the community, as he called hello and greeted people sitting on their porches or walking on sidewalks.

Additionally, my experiences working two consecutive years at the Corktown Home and Garden Tour allowed me to observe older persons, who unlike Eddie did not come back to the neighborhood daily or weekly, but sometimes yearly. The neighborhood still played an important social function, as many of them used the opportunity to gather groups of former neighbors and classmates for a return. I was able to observe large groups of former residents returning en masse and the same individuals attending both years. The interactions that I had with these returning residents were instrumental in forming many of my early research questions about the importance of the role that place plays with regard to relationships even when an individual is not situated in it and further demonstrated how people developed strategies to take advantage of the neighborhood's capacity to help them overcome social isolation in old age.

*Those who stay and those who leave*

Contributing to the complex nature of place affiliation in old age this study is divided

into two groups, those who are aging in long-term neighborhoods, and those who are aging elsewhere, due to either choice or circumstances. Often for those who chose to stay in their long-term neighborhood (or the few, like Dave, Joanne, and Marjorie, who relocated to Detroit in old age) they had a clear picture of what they wanted their social world to look like in old age. In contrast, those who were aging in neighborhoods where they had not established long-term connections, often presented requirements that are more stringent in terms of physical space with regard to age of home, perceived safety, upkeep of the neighborhood, and proximity to services. This was reiterated consistently with remarks about the lack of services in Detroit. However, there was clearly more to it than that. In her ethnography revisiting her graduating high school classmates' trajectories, Sherry Ortner (2003) explores how individuals make choices about remaining, leaving, and returning to the spaces of their childhood. In her classmates' accounts of their lives there is little place based nostalgia for their childhood, as the paths to success removed them from their former neighborhoods both geographically and socially, as was the case for many of the former Corktown residents I interviewed.

Many participants who grew up in large immigrant families in Corktown, referred to their humble backgrounds and the relative poverty of their youth. Their departure from the physical environment as they became upwardly mobile professionals in their adulthood, often coincided with what they termed the decline of the neighborhood. Many like Eddie, were in need of better schools for their children, or like Joe they married partners who were not keen to live in the neighborhood. Claire, who was nostalgic for the social world of her youth, admitted that she could not return to the neighborhood to live as it was now, mostly because of the concerns she had with regard to the other residents'

financial abilities to keep up their homes. “What would bother me to have my house and keep it nice, and the grass....and then next to me I wouldn’t like it if somebody let their property go and didn’t care what it looked like.” Her older brother, John, a successful attorney who now lives in an expensive suburb, expressed no nostalgia for his former neighborhood, rarely visits, and told me that I should focus my research on the many very successful former residents who came out of the neighborhood in spite of their childhood poverty.

A limitation of this study with regard to my interactions with former residents is that I often only had the opportunity to interact with many who were regular visitors to their old neighborhood and close with their old neighbors and few like John who had socially and geographically left their former neighborhood behind. However, even those who were nostalgic for their past, were often critical and reflective of the place. They were focused on the social world that they had as children and young adults, whereas current residents were often insistent about living in a particular style of house, like Helen’s assertion about suburbanites living in “a cracker box of a house that looks like the one next door and the one on the next street.” Many participants expressed what I initially mistook for place-based nostalgia for the social world of their youth, but on further reflection it is more complicated than that. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) argue that only by examining the non-fixed process of place-making and understanding that places are constantly under construction and being renegotiated, can places be truly understood without surrendering to nostalgia for an “authentic” past that may have never existed. Their narratives were still under construction and unfolding as they tried to make sense of them to me. There was a lot of attention to the financial the social life with neighbors with declarations that

people nowadays do not connect with their neighbors and communities like they did in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, conversations with participants revealed many elements of their own lives that one would hardly be nostalgic for; poverty, sexual abuse, alcoholic parents, drug abuse, and tragic deaths to name a few. Through the process of holistically recalling their lives, participants were able to avoid surrendering to an idealized version of the Corktown of their youth.

When reflecting on my central research question, how people take advantage of communities to age, it is important to note the complexity of time and its relationship to place for both those aging in and out of place. Richard Setterstein highlights the complexities of the relationship between time and place across the lifespan (1999; 2003). Setterstein argues that with regard to time, studies of aging must be retrospective and prospective, addressing both lives that have been lived, could have been lived, and that are yet to be lived, or the “cartography of human lives” that allows individuals to develop “strategies for managing terrain along the way.” Adding to this complexity, time is but a single dimension and cannot be separated from social context and environment. He argues “And just as we must take a dynamic view of individuals’ lives, we must also take a dynamic view of environments, examining when and how the characteristics and process in those spaces change, and examining intricate connections between changing individuals and changing environments (2003: 2).” While those aging out of place tended to focus more on the retrospective view of their lives with regard to place, those who remained in long-term neighborhoods were often centered on the current and prospective views of their lives with regard to the neighborhood. However, in the “cartography” of their lives, both had developed strategies that allowed them to take advantage of the

space to age. While memory plays a different function for each group, it is particularly critical for those who have left. In his book *Hotel Bolivia*, Leo Spitzer reflects on the role of nostalgic memory for European Holocaust refugees in South America. Reflecting on their temporary time in South America, the refugees to connect their past to their present lives, make sense of the ruptures in their environments, and construct a new collective identity to meet their needs and ease their sense of alienation. Similar to this former Detroit residents were inclined to engage in collective remembering as a form of asserting their identity as members of a group in both space and time. Whereas, long time neighborhood residents felt confident in their affiliation and social world due to their continued physical presence in the neighborhood.

As I reflect on the ideas of place-affiliation, personhood, successful aging and kinship, I consider not only what social relationships do for older people, but what does a place affiliation do for older persons, and how is this tied to individual metrics of success. With consideration of the actual physical space, long-time neighborhoods, and former neighborhoods provided a platform for maintaining, establishing, and reestablishing relationships. Spaces were both physical and mental, as they were environments to congregate within, but also remember and organize around. However, differing access to resources affects how one demonstrates place affiliation in old age. For Elena, she was forced to move out of Corktown due to her financial situation, and in fact lacked the financial resources to return regularly. She told me that she often combines errands into the city into single trips, as to not waste the gas. I contrast her with Eddie and Joe, who both have the resources to return multiple times per week, in addition to regularly dine in the neighborhood restaurants weekly and Joanne and Dave who were able to

successfully integrate into their new neighborhood due to their social and financial status as business owners. This research reflects calls for more individualized approaches to successful aging (Moody 2009; Lamb 2014; Buch 2015), but with specific attention to place affiliation. It with that in mind that I turn to consider the importance of people in relationship to place-identity and how this relates to both personhood and kinship.

*The importance of place-based kinship*

While affiliation to a specific physical environment is critical to sense of identity in old age, this cannot be divorced from the social relationships of the persons who reside or formerly resided in the space. Many participants reaffirmed that it was the relationships that made their neighborhood or former neighborhood special. Through confirming Carsten's concept of relatedness which positions kinship as a process, this dissertation research argues that psychosocial measures of aging, specifically the Convoy Model of Social Relations (Kahn and Antonucci 1980) are inadequate to consider individual metrics of successful aging. This model focuses on the size of social network, number of social connections, and the quality of those relationships; however, my project worked to expand it by including attention to both processes and environment.

I discovered that in addition to the inability to disentangle experiences of both place and relationships from each other, older persons negotiated a set of practices that allowed them to pursue place-centered relationships in old age. My ethnographic data elucidated the nature of these relationships and the satisfaction derived from them beyond measures of simply counting number of connections. I sought groups and patterns of participants and determined that they generally fell into three categories; those who were aging away from long time neighborhoods, but frequently returned to the space to maintain

relationships and connection to space; those who were still actively engaged in relationships with people from former neighborhoods, but for whom the space served less of a physical function in maintaining relationships, as the older persons sought to recreate them throughout the Detroit Metro area as opposed to regularly returning to their former neighborhoods; and finally those who were actively engaged in forming new place centered relationships in their current spaces, be they new or long-term neighborhoods. The commonality among all three groups was the function provided by the neighborhood as places to live, remember, and revisit and how these processes worked to engender relationships among older persons. The narratives presented in this dissertation represented the different strategies and processes surrounding place based relationships and older persons. For the first two groups, those who live outside of their long-term neighborhoods, they have negotiated strategies that allow them to return both physically and psychically, and keep them connected with people from their former communities, but without a full-time return to live in their former neighborhoods.

I now recall the narrative of Lil, and perhaps one of the most striking narratives in the dissertation, who represents a distinct group of participants, those who are actively creating new connections and establishing new relationships in old age. These individuals were both long-time residents of space like Lil, and newcomers to neighborhoods, like Dave, Joanne, and Marjorie. It was obvious that newcomers would likely be developing new relationships with people around them in their new spaces, but it was curious to me the way that many who were longtime residents like Lil were also developing new place based relationships. In Lil's case, she maintained long-term connections with both neighbors and friends who were now scattered throughout the

Detroit neighborhood, but the relationship that ultimately provided her a large amount of support and satisfaction in her old age was that with her paid helper Rodney. Lil's relationship with Rodney differs from that of other participants with paid in home help, as the relationship has evolved into a close friendship in which both are able to provide care for and accept care from each other. Lil claims to have adopted Rodney and the two have further come to an understanding by which Rodney will ultimately be named guardian for her schizophrenic adult stepson. Through this care-based relationships in which both are providing and receiving care in some form (Lil bakes for and pays Rodney, Rodney helps Lil with a variety of tasks and provides the social support critical for maintaining guardianship of her adult stepson, they both provide companionship for one another), the two are able to each affirm their sense of personhood through this fictive kinship relationship, Lil as it allows her to remain in her own home, and Rodney as it provides him with employment in spite of his disabled status which forced him to retire early from his post-office job.

These findings highlight the importance of relationships based in current and former spaces for older residents of the Detroit area, while at the same time providing insight into approaches to social connections in old age for older adults more broadly. With regard to dominant psychosocial models of resisting social isolation in old age, like the Convoy Model of Social Relations (Kahn and Antonucci 1980), there is attached an underlying assumption that the natural state of life in contemporary old age is social isolation, that older persons lack the ability or motivation to develop new relationships, and social isolation can only be mitigated by large number of social contacts that provide a high degree of satisfaction with those relationships. The narratives presented in this



dissertation, do correspond with the Social Convoy Model, as older persons in this dissertation demonstrate that they had both large social networks, and expressed high degrees of satisfaction with those relationships. My purpose in presenting these narratives is to extend psychosocial understandings of connection in old age and illuminate how certain forms of relationships in old age are inextricable from the participant's relationship to place. By approaching these questions through a lens of both "relatedness" and "mutuality of being" the processes of establishing and maintaining relationships extended to reveal how older adults engage as members of place-based groups.

The Convoy Model of Social Relations has been expanded and evolved since its inception in 1980 to include understandings of how relationships play a protective function throughout the life course (Antonucci and Akiyama 1994), with a strong emphasis on emotional closeness (Antonucci 2001). While the basic focus remains on the structure, type, and quality of relationships, with quality of more importance than quantity, the model has also been expanded to consider how these relationships are impacted by the personal and situational as well. Antonucci and collaborators (2013) have developed a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of social relationships in old age and their correlation with health and well-being. Their main focus, however, remains on developing quantifiable variables for assessing the nature of relationships in old age. While concurring that quality of relationships is important in old age, this study takes a sharp departure from both Antonucci's current focus on quantifiable variables and also her call for future directions of research which center on contagion and the interplay between genes and environment and how these factors shape relationships in old age. I chose to

think of the same questions about isolation and quality of life in old age from a different perspective, specifically by integrating anthropological understandings of both kinship and urban space, as the experience life in social groups and environments is critical to understanding the lives of individuals. I utilized a theoretical lens of kinship as it gives me the language to talk about both social groups and access to resources. As understandings of kinship have become less about biology and more about sociality, the cultural constructedness of kinship allows me to build an argument about spaces as central to social groups over time.

*Lives lived through space and time*

This dissertation contributes to scholarly literature extend research on the relationship between individuals and urban spaces through a theoretical lens that allowed me to consider the kinship affiliations that individuals develop with cities to further integrate the anthropology of aging with the anthropology of space in way that, contrary to the anthropology literature concerning older persons and urban spaces which portrays the city as merely a backdrop or setting, as opposed to a critical element of the aging experience. I have demonstrated in this dissertation that the relationship between social connections and place is interwoven for older persons with connections to Detroit neighborhoods both past and present. Consequently this dissertation research is an extension of early anthropology of aging endeavors like those of Myerhoff (1978) and Rubinstein (1986) which demonstrate the importance of urban fictive kinship communities in navigating the terrain of old age and allow individuals to retain their sense of personhood, through resisting isolation and constructing a collective identity. Additionally, it answers calls for more research about non-biologically based kinship care relationships

in old age. Barker (2002) demonstrates that these types of naturally occurring relationships within the community are beneficial to the community dwelling older person, but that a “greater understanding is needed, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, of when and how nonkin relationships are beneficial and why they in many ways successfully mirror the actions and sentiments of family caregivers.”

Participants established themselves as part of groups in both space and time; for former residents as group members of place that existed in their collective memory and served as the basis for continuing relationships; for current Detroiters as members of a distinct group of either long-term residents or establishing a new residency in a place that was not without challenges, but for them a good place to grow old because of their relationships with other people. The place attachment experienced by older Detroiters works to foster individual and group identities, and allows residents and former residents to identify as a group distinct from other groups. As part of this group of urban dwellers many felt strongly that they should “say nice things about Detroit” and act as ambassadors for their city. At the same time many of them felt a pressure to be champions for the city, and were often reluctant to admit that they left the city to occasionally obtain services in the suburbs, like the participant who insisted that I not tell her neighbors she shops in the neighboring Grosse Pointe for fear of seeming disloyal. While they chided outsiders’ criticisms of Detroit, asserting that it was difficult for outsiders to understand the complexity of Detroit’s problems and that outsiders often seemed to be unable to recognize that the city was still populated with people who cared about both the environment and the city, many older residents were not blind to the complex problems faced by the city. They felt freer to criticize and represent the challenges faced by the

city and many of its residents, as they had a closer seat to the action and more nuanced view of life in the city.

As they were directly experiencing life in contemporary Detroit, they were also often critical of competing counter narratives of revitalization, as they had both an understanding of the challenges of “rebirth” and saw firsthand the uneven redevelopment, allocation of resources to specific neighborhoods and endeavors, and the absence of long term residents from media considerations of revitalization narratives which tended to focus on young white incoming residents, entrepreneurs, and artists. It was often through engaging with both proactively defending Detroit and the production of their own counter narratives that strengthened their identities collectively as a group and individually as Detroiters. Through this collective kinship with the city, a “bad” place becomes a good space to age.

Like Maria Vesperi’s older residents of St. Petersburg, for my participants the experience of being older is inextricably tied up with the urban setting, and the relationships that affected their aging experiences, satisfaction, and every day lived experiences were additionally bound with their environments, both past and present. My own work builds on Vesperi’s work about stereotyped spaces and their relationship to isolation in old age by considering spaces as both psychic and physical spaces to organize around. As opposed to focusing on the city’s relationship with older persons, I focus on the older person’s relationship with the city and older persons as active agents in shaping the spaces and making the places around them. It is this kinship with the city that allows for the older people to not only retain affiliation as a Detroiters, but to assess and reassess the meaning of that relationship throughout their own life course. The city

is revealed as intrinsic to the personhood of the older Detroiter, and not simply a backdrop where their lives are lived. This is best exemplified by the remarks made by Dorothy in the opening prologue of this dissertation.

“I would not leave Lafayette Park, I cannot think of anywhere else that I would want to live, it’s my neighborhood, it’s my kibbutz, my support structure and I think we have contributed to it as well. I would not leave Detroit, although there are times when I am absolutely worn out and overwhelmed by the difficulties and the problems that it has, but I have a strong belief that I have a responsibility to participate in doing what I can to improve it.”

The city of Detroit is uncovered as fundamental to Dorothy’s sense of identity and personhood, and is intensely connected to her beliefs about herself, her values, her secular Judaism, her professional work, and her life.

#### *The Specific Locale of Detroit*

As the city is uncovered as more than a backdrop, it is important to understand the specific locale of Detroit and the particular set of race and class dynamics that are revealed in this study. Places are intricately tied up with power relationships and serve as sites where class and race relations are spatially replicated (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga 2003) and this was exposed in the racially segregated social, spatial, and class networks networks occupied by the participants in this study. Participants mostly spoke positively about racial integration and diversity, counted African–Americans as friends, co-workers and, in the case of two participants, spouses. However, with the exception of Sol and Dorothy, none were able to connect me with any black residents to interview. Though they presented a variety of financial statuses, the participants in this study tended to be well-educated (20 of the 32 had bachelors’ degrees or higher) and employed or previously employed in white-collar professional positions. Like Wolf and Lebeaux’ 1969 study of Lafayette Park, desire for diversity extended to skin color, religion, and occupation (limited

within a range of middle-class professions), it did not extend to economic or social class. This was further evidenced by remarks made by participants like Kathy, who when discussing her final departure from Detroit to her current Grosse Pointe neighborhood told me,

“[It was] cute little neighborhood and people took care of their houses, they raised their families there and that neighborhood starting changing. You could say what do you mean? Blacks? Well, okay Frances and Carol (neighbors across the street) are blacks, we have blacks neighbors now.....but the first person that sold their place, sold it to a son of somebody in the neighborhood and he had a party house is what they called it.”

She further elaborates that it was a house where drugs were sold, thereby making distinctions that her move was not about the skin color of the new residents, but the social and economic class (in addition to illegal activities) distinctions. The class distinctions were further exemplified in Corktown by the stories of Pam and Walt, who interacted with neighbors, but did not socialize with many. Walt was integrated to the social life the neighborhood in a different way than Pam, as over the years he participated in many community groups, and shared an education level and professional background with many of the other middle class residents, however his current finances, state of his home, and comments about gentrification in the neighborhood, indicated his outsider status.

Perhaps the bluntest participant in this study, Walt asserted the popularity of Corktown was due to the whiteness of the space, concurring with ideas about white spaces as aspirational (Bonnett 2005) and specifically about white spaces in Detroit (Pedroni 2011).

Walt: The other thing about Corktown is that Corktown does not have a heavy black population. I don't think there's any exclusion like there is in the suburbs, but I wouldn't even say we are 25% black. Which makes the place very attractive to some people. I don't think I would want to live here if it was all black.”

Wendy: Why not?

Walt: Because it's very hard to relate to black people! And I have black friends...but you can't relate to black people. They can't relate to you and you can't relate to them, because...they have their own agenda. I think that's one of the problems in the rest of Detroit...we call it white flight.

While Walt is demonstrating the segregated social networks within the city, he is at the same time distinguishing himself as different from his suburban white counterparts with his comments about race and exclusion. Whiteness as a category subject to classifications (Hartigan 1999: 2000) emerged throughout my conversations with participants who suggested that they were different than suburban whites who either left the city, or refused to visit.

### *Final Thoughts*

Eight years ago, I was employed by a large American automaker to collect ethnographic data about a set of health care programs provided to their employees and retirees. At the time, I was traveling to the homes of Midwest white-collar auto retirees there had recently been a large amount of bad press surrounding their former employer and several changes to their benefits packages because of series of fiscal and economic problems. The responses to changes in health care benefits were mixed and wide ranging from despair to acceptance. What struck me at the time was not the anger expressed by some older retirees, that I had expected, but the many retirees who expressed no or little disappointment at the situation, accepted that they had been well paid for the jobs that they had worked, loyalty to the product, their pride at having worked for this particular company, their continued participation in retiree clubs, and relationships that they maintained with former coworkers, despite the general bad press. This aforementioned project was one of the elements that sparked my interest in gerontology

and the anthropology of aging and I was fascinated by the older retirees' experiences and views of their current situation.

However, it is only years later as I am writing this final dissertation chapter that I can begin to understand the complexity of the long term relationships and identities that were expressed by the auto retirees in those interviews, their nuanced understandings as insiders, their resistance to label their former employer as good or bad, and the pride at having been part of not only a specific organization, but a specific age cohort of employees as well. I can also appreciate the inequalities that structured the frustrations or lack on in my participants, as the varied widely with regard to former profession and hence financial status. Through my analysis in this dissertation of older persons, space, and relationships, I have discovered several insights into sociality in old age and the utility of a non-biologically based kinship approach for considering how individual older lives are both judged and lived, and the role that belonging to a group provides older persons in specific contexts.

In some respects, this study is a return to the inclusion of older persons as they were considered in pre-1970s anthropological literature and the focus on older persons and kinship. However, as opposed to solely focusing on the older person's relationship to the kinship structure of the society or cross cultural comparisons of relationship between older adults, the rest of their families, and communities, this study takes an anthroapproach to considering kinship in old age that considers the function of relationships for the older person and the processes and strategies used to create and maintain relationships. I have attempted to engaged with Cohen's challenge (1994) to move beyond culture as a "disciplinary icon" for the anthropology of aging and engage



with the “everyday relevance of the macrosocial world” to reflect on both structural representations of the aging and environment and a phenomenological focus on experience, embodiment and identity. Within this research project I attempted to avoid answering questions of aging with the conclusion that, “culture influences aging” by assuming this as an established starting point and contemplates non-biological kinship with cities and persons, and the role that this kinship places in the personhood of older adults. Additionally by utilizing a kinship approach to the study of older persons and cities, I offer some possibilities to further integrate the domains of urban anthropology and the anthropology of aging. As the city and older residents are uncovered as vital to one another’s existence, the importance of anthropology, with an emphasis on holism, is also underscored to understand the significance of life stage, social networks, and environments. This holism provides a nuanced understanding of connections in old age that cannot be uncovered by psychosocial measures that rely simply on counting connections. Further, with regard to non-academic considerations the exploration of aging, connections, and environments has important implications for those who seek to design interventions to mitigate social isolation in old age, as they should consider the role that environments play in the process, beyond simply a backdrop where lives are lived, but the meaning that relationships with and based around these spaces provide the individual as they age.

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**ABSTRACT****“I CAN SEE MY VALUES IN PLACES”: RELATIONSHIPS, PLACE, AND GROWING OLD IN DETROIT NEIGHBORHOODS**

by

**WENDY D. BARTLO****December 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Andrea P. Sankar**Major:** Anthropology**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

The central focus of this dissertation is to examine the inextricable link between persons, their social worlds, and their environments. I do this through an ethnographic study of senior members of non-biologically based kinship groups with an affiliation to place. Critical to this examination is the city of Detroit itself, as members of these groups ultimately collectively identify as Detroiters through space and time. It is this collective identity, strengthened mostly through their defense of an outsider deemed unsuccessful city that renders Detroit a good place for the older person to maintain connections, participate socially and civically, and to organize around as both a physical and psychic space. My ethnographic study of growing older in Detroit allows me to examine the neoliberal considerations of both aging and cities in a local context from which I can make important contributions related to literature in gerontology and the anthropology of urban aging. I argue that linking urban spaces, old age, and social connections allows for individuals to construct a view of old age that is shaped by both structural factors, but, imbued with meaning and values, in a way that gerontological discourse on successful

aging which is narrowly focused on personal responsibility without attention to individual metrics for aging or satisfaction. To further the linkage of old age, urban spaces, and social connections, I demonstrate that urban spaces are not just the backdrop where persons grow older and both cities and lives emerge as intertwined processes. For the older person in Detroit, their neighborhood, or former neighborhood is linked to their sense of identity and personhood. The inextricable link between persons, their place-based connections, and environments emerges not only as form of non-biologically based kinship, but reveals space as a critical component of these relationships.



## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Wendy D. Bartlo is a doctoral candidate in the Anthropology Department at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. During her doctoral program, Ms. Bartlo was a predoctoral training fellow at the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology and Editorial Assistant for the journal *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. She earned her B.A. in Anthropology from the University of New Mexico and an M.A. in Applied Anthropology and a Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Memphis. Prior to her time at Wayne State University, she worked as an ethnographic researcher in industry, non-profit, and healthcare settings. She is currently the Proposal Development and Outreach Specialist at the Center on Health, Aging, and Disability in the College of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Ms. Bartlo lives in Champaign, IL with her husband and daughter.