Eight-Mile and Woodward:
Intersections of Difference
and the Rhetoric of Detroit

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This is a series of snapshots, snapshots that imagine various artists and agents in a particular urban setting negotiating a complex cityspace and at the same time negotiating their own complex selves. The cityspace, Detroit, resists a stable identity; the city's "walkers," likewise, rage against the notion that their identities are fixed or static. That is not to say that the inhabitants of these Detroit snapshots are not mindful of identity. On the contrary, they foreground their own identity markers in blunt and aggressive fashion. Indeed, they work to mobilize identity in their rhetoric to remind themselves and others that no matter how chaotic the meanings of identity markers may be, those identity markers still matter. Many folks in Detroit find themselves at intersections. Race and class intersect when we think about the population drop in the city, for example. We are constantly at locations like Eight-Mile and Woodward, the site where the key north-south and east-west roads come together, separating east side from west side, city from suburb. In the face of liberal imperatives to obscure, homogenize, or romanticize difference, these Detrioters at intersections show us all how attention to the materiality of identity can be disruptive, agonistic, and productive. These snapshots of poets, garage rockers, and memoirists portray a material urban space but, more importantly, portray persons who exist within that urban space and whose existence, words, and actions suggest strategies for resisting liberalism.

Examples of agonistic rhetoric in Detroit and other city spaces abound. Indeed, urban spaces boast numerous agents who practice material and rhetorical resistance and dissent in the face of dominant
culture and its apparatuses (Cintron; M. Davis; Kinloch; Marback, “Closed”). The city, writes Mike Davis, is “the terrain and subject of fierce ideological struggle” (20). Detroit certainly is not alone in its aggression or its agonism. However, close examination of agents within Detroit suggests the productive value of simultaneously mobilizing multiple markers of identity in order to cause a little discomfort. As Ralph Cintron writes, “Some of the most important human encounters are those that cause anxiety, even anger” (130). Critics interested in upsetting the orderliness of liberal decorum—not just in Detroit but in Boulder and Buffalo and Phoenix and anywhere else where liberalism may be squelching resistance—may wish to look at ways that the Motor City fosters a blunt and intersectional rhetoric of identity.

In what ways is liberalism holding back material change? In “The Rhetoric of Awareness Narratives,” Jill Swiencicki critiques “the ideologies of liberal antiracism, the limits of which are a focus on the pain of racist awareness” (338). Swiencicki points out that feel-good narratives by whites about their own burgeoning race consciousness frequently rely on tropes of guilt and shame to provide comfort for the authors of the texts, but often fail to effect change. While guilt and shame can foster critical reflection and “a profound self-consciousness of how one’s notion of self is contingent upon others in a power dynamic,” Swiencicki also highlights the imperative to deconstruct the liberal tendency in awareness narratives to trade “injury for racial transcendence” (339, 347). How, indeed, to put critical awareness of identity in service of praxis instead of in service to the desires of liberals to feel better about themselves?

The liberal narrative of awareness is ultimately a clichéd, linear, and reductive narrative—a narrative that assumes evolution (now I am finally enlightened), posits the existence of something fixed and stable called identity, and subscribes to the notion that we can understand identity in monolithic and generic ways. In the stories that Swiencicki analyzes, the white authors play stable roles—namely, that of the oppressors. Persons of color are cast in these narratives as victims who eventually inspire the oppressors, bringing them to consciousness. Swiencicki optimistically sees this burgeoning consciousness as a starting point for practical action, provided that all parties listen critically and contextually and remain open to “reflectiveness and curiosity” (350, 354). Yet, Swiencicki fails to
account for the dynamic interplay among multiple markers of identity, not questioning the multiple roles that the agents in awareness narratives play. If these narratives rely on simplistic, essentializing tropes of racial identity, why not complicate the static notions of identity by allowing various markers to collaborate with one another? Moving in and out of race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability and disability, and so on, can offer an alternative to linear and reductive narratives about identity; indeed, intersectional analyses can create useful, theoretically engaging narratives of post-identity, the kinds of narratives I see on the streets of Detroit.

In fact Swiencicki’s critique adds to a growing literature on the rhetoric of critical whiteness studies, a body of work useful precisely for its foregrounding of markers like race and class as contingent identifications in constant communication with one another (see Barnett, Beech, Keating, Kennedy et al.). Unfortunately, Swiencicki sees class as a “tangent,” citing for example a participant in an internet discussion of race who sees social class as a “blithe” white commonplace meant to deny the existence and persistence of racism. Swiencicki does not challenge this formulation, instead arguing that we move out of such “tangents” toward “authentic antiracist work” (338). But social class is more than a tangent. Class can help mediate the very limits of “liberal anti-racism” that Swiencicki critiques. A working-class consciousness can reveal an awareness of systemic power structures, an awareness of how those power structures place groups in contest with one another in order to prevent social change.Positing one identity marker as a metaphor for another reveals the imperative to consider who benefits from oppression and what mythologies maintain social divisions. These types of intersectional analyses—readings of phenomena that refuse to isolate identity markers from one another—can allow juxtaposition and metaphorical thinking.

Persons in urban spaces like Detroit illustrate how to juxtapose identity markers in ways that are brash and agonistic. In order to resist liberal impulses to obscure difference, in fact, we might look to confrontational persons in urban spaces like Detroit, spaces where difference tends to have greater visibility. In urban spaces, diverse agents interact with one another out of material necessity, “walking”—to borrow Michel
de Certeau's language—through the city in ways that often defy order. Individuals who populate cities behave in an unpredictable, disorderly fashion, deploying "tactics" in response to their own material conditions, crashing into one another, as the recent Oscar-winning film *Crash* formulated. According to de Certeau, inhabitants of cities constantly rewrite city space by resisting and accommodating the orderly plans of corporations, the state, and other apparatuses. Dominant cultural mythology might present imperatives to become part of a homogenous entity, and liberal ideology might wittingly or unwittingly advance that imperative, but the city retains heterogeneity as embodied, for example, by racial diversity, or by visible markers of class conflict like abandoned centers of manufacturing and homeless persons. This article creates snapshots of several distinct cultural moments in order to demonstrate how persons in one particular cityspace, Detroit, embody agonistic and intersectional awareness of identity, thereby showing us all tactics for confronting and problematizing liberal narratives.

**Poets of Color**

A snapshot. My campus last Spring hosted an explosive night of poetry featuring Detroit-area writers of both African-American and Arab-American descent performing politically engaged, spoken-word art. A meeting of two of the most visible racial groups in metropolitan Detroit, the evening boasted a line-up of young writers tackling raw, sensitive topics including the racism undergirding U.S. intervention in the middle east. One of the final poems of the night, read by Chantay "Legacy" Leonard, gave voice to perceived mistreatment of female African-American shoppers at the hands of Arab-American shopkeepers in Detroit. The room filled with tension and discomfort, feelings that intensified during the question-and-answer session that followed the reading. An Arab-American audience member self-identified as a Detroit shopkeeper and announced that several violent crimes had been committed at his store and that he was always careful when he discussed the crimes to avoid attaching a race to the perpetrators of the crimes. "I don't tell people an *African-American* man held up my store at gunpoint," the
man explained, "but rather that a thief held up my store." He wondered aloud why Leonard's poem was about an Arab shopkeeper leering at the protagonist and not about a sexist shopkeeper leering at the protagonist.

Vigorous discussion followed. Participants in the conversation raised numerous concerns—for example, the tendency among some African-American community members to resent Arab-Americans who own businesses in Detroit but live in the suburbs and/or send money to relatives in their native countries. Those gathered at the poetry reading found little consensus. In short, there was no easy or comfortable resolution. The discussion exposed a point of contention that is part of the Detroit landscape—namely, a racialized tension reminiscent of conflict between Asian-American storeowners and African-American community members in other urban centers. The events of that evening in many ways typify a rhetoric that often characterizes urban centers like Detroit, a rhetoric of blunt and honest exchanges that acknowledges intersections of difference and revels in discomfort. Difference has a great deal of visibility in most urban spaces in this country; Detroit is not unique in that respect. However, Detroit distinguishes itself as a particularly chaotic urban space—often the default locality for thinking about both blight and racial conflict—where multiple markers of difference intersect in unpredictable ways. The evening of Detroit poetry by Arab-American and African-American writers constructed an uncomfortable but potentially productive model of difference, where racial categories like "black" and "middle-eastern" intersected with socio-economic categories like "store keeper" and "inner city shopper" to expose and give voice to conflict, injustice, and anger.

The discomfort that the poetry and subsequent question-and-answer period provoked stands in stark contrast to the narratives that Swiencicki describes. Nobody felt comfortable. Not the poets. Not the audience members. Nobody managed to obscure an uncomfortable phenomenon in order to "get along" or feign a sense of sameness. The reality of racial (black, Arab) and socio-economic (shopkeeper, entrepreneur) categories converge. These markers of heterogeneity juxtapose in urban spaces, presenting de Certeau's "walkers" with numerous intersections of difference. Identity in the city is tangled. Just as individual agents resist linear
paths—what de Certeau describes as the “strategies” of municipal planners—so too do their identities resist linear narratives. Race and class mingle; neither remains what Swiencicki might dismiss as tangential.

Instead, markers of identity that night intersected at major grid points: customers and shopkeepers, black and brown. Here we see the city of Detroit as an urban model of intersectionality, where identity markers juxtapose in unpredictable and tactile ways, crash into one another, and serve as mutually informing metaphors. The poets of color gave voice to intersections of difference by at once mythologizing and performing racial identity and class identity. They resisted liberal impulses to forge singular identities and provide comfort. Detroit’s model of intersectionality defies liberal impulses and many of its tenets, particularly the move to obscure difference, but also the essentializing move to isolate, for example, race from class and class from race.

**Detroit as Urban Space**

The population drain on the city is one discursive and material example of race-class convergence, though, of course, the drain is usually framed as either a “white flight” or “green flight” problem. The white flight narrative says that whites are leaving the city in huge numbers. The green flight narrative says that anybody with money is leaving the city in huge numbers. These liberal narratives, both of which are consistent with material reality (see especially Hartigan), nonetheless create a simplistic, even comforting opposition, as if either race or class issues can serve as the catch-all explanation for urban decline. Only one identity marker may be the reason for a shift in the urban landscape of Detroit, according to this logic. As Swiencicki points out, the liberal narrative creates comfort and catharsis but fails to prompt social change. Specifically, such a dichotomous model results in a failure to form critical coalitions; African-American community members, Arab-American community members, and working-class and working-poor white community members rarely coalesce or find opportunities to work for a common cause. Fiction writer Joyce Carol Oates famously captured this failure—the divide between
Detroit's white working poor and Detroit's persons of color—in her brilliant and epic early novel *them*, a tragedy depicting a rural white family that moves to Detroit and encounters one urban defeat after another. On the ground, de Certeau's "walkers" (the everyday community members) embody intersectionality, but the top-down "strategists" don't seize those intersections, having tragic material effects—as depicted by Oates, for example—on oppressed populations. The city's conflicting mayoral archetypes provide a further instance, limiting the possibilities by either subordinating issues of class to issues of race (in the case of longtime, vigilantly race-conscious mayor Coleman Young) or articulating the same brand of liberal rhetoric Swiencicki critiques (Young's successor, the more moderate Dennis Archer). "Walkers" like the poets of color, though, know that simultaneously mythologizing categories like "black" and "brown" as well as categories like "shop owner" and "urban customer" both serve cathartic functions. Theirs is a consciousness of juxtaposition, an intersectional awareness.

Is Detroit unique in this regard? Detroit, according to Jerry Herron, is "the most historically representative city in America" ("Niki’s" 46). An academic and cultural critic based in Detroit, Herron points to the Greektown section of the city as a symbol of the ways urban communities obscure history in favor of a generic, vaguely nostalgic "pastness." Herron argues that Greektown, a tacky, tourist district, erases Detroit's past and present by giving suburbanites and out-of-towners a comfortable space, "an urban theme park" (47). Herron critiques the area for rewriting the physical landscape, revising the neighborhood's history for profit. The area was populated by Native Americans, and then the French, and then Germans, and finally by African-Americans. So why celebrate the space as *Greektown*, Herron wonders. "Patrons," Herron writes, "pay happily for the privilege of condescending to a past made to seem comfortably contrived and therefore no longer implicated in their lives and fates" (52). But the rewriting of history that Herron critiques is part of what gives Detroit its contradictory identity. The city's false history becomes another venue for the intersection of difference, especially if we believe de Certeau's claims about the ability of the urban masses to resist the narrative imposed by state apparatuses. Diverse community members occupying the urban space of Detroit—even the commercial and com-
mercialized space of Greektown—fail to fall in line. Detroit’s material­
ity—and by extension its rhetoric—distinguishes itself for its dynamism,
even brands of dynamism that may fall into traps of commercialism and
gaudiness. And thus, materially, even in Greektown the visible markers
of race and class retain visibility. Rhetorically, we might read Greektown
not as a site of “humiliation,” as Herron suggests, but rather as a site of
dynamic change, flux that continues to highlight difference. Community
identity shifts due to its instability.

As Herron himself acknowledges, change is itself a trope of moder­
nity, a notion that leads Herron to conclude that “Detroit is the capital of
the twentieth century” (“Three” 41). But gazing at Detroit and its
landmarks through a rhetorical lens provides glimpses of Detroit chang­
ing in ways that transcend the limits of modernism. On the question of
how to read rhetorically Detroit’s changing identity, Jeff Rice posits that
the city embodies and exemplifies a “turn to the digital,” a shift toward
a cyber identity signaled by digital forms of urbanity like tagging—a
double signifier referring to both the art of graffiti and the practice of
categorizing information on the internet (“21st Century”). Such a shift
does not signify mere humiliation but rather a shifting signification. And
even the blogs and social bookmarking sites Rice hails as markers of
“techno salvation” continue to highlight visible difference. 7 Both the
Greektown neighborhood, as Herron argues, and Detroit’s emerging
cyberlife, as Rice argues, point to the city’s shifting, unstable, never­
fixed identity. By virtue of re­vision, the city illustrates the futility of
essentializing identity: the identities of individuals as well as the
identity of the place itself. Detroit’s identity is no more stable than the
identities of the community members who live and/or work there.

Rhetorical theorist Richard Marback makes a similar claim about
another Detroit site, the Heidelberg Project, a public art installation on
Detroit’s eastside where artist Tyree Guyton has used abandoned objects
like car parts and dolls to re-write several city blocks. Marback argues that
at the Heidelberg, “meaningfulness is achieved through multiple objects,
actions, and discourses” (“Speaking” 148). The Heidelberg can elicit
anger from community members and visitors. Spray-painted hoods of
abandoned cars and baby dolls nailed to abandoned homes clearly do not
provide feelings of comfort to those who engage with Guyton’s art.
Marback continues, "As an act of place making, the many objects collected on Heidelberg Street have heightened awareness of issues of life for the urban poor and have challenged the ways we talk about inner cities" (149). Marback urges rhetoricians to see identity as an intersection of materiality and agency in urban spaces. The refuse that Guyton uses challenges community members by revising history and contributing to the chaotic urban narrative. "Guyton has transformed rhetorics with which we speak for and about inner cities," Marback writes (150). In a recent *JAC* article, Valerie Kinloch has extended Marback's analysis of the Heidelberg Project and revealed ways that the installation intervenes in civic conversations about definitions of urban space. I would add that Guyton's art has collaborated with other features of the Detroit cityscape to offer a blunt and agonistic version of intersections of difference.

**Detroit, Rock City**

Dance to the beat of the living dead.
—Iggy and the Stooges

I don't think any of us come from money, so it's like our parents didn't go out to dinner and dancing on the weekends, they had house parties... We didn't grow up in the suburbs, so it's like you've got [African-American] music all around you. You grow up with it and it's just kind of an afterthought in your subconscious.
—Rachel Nagy (Detroit Cobras frontwoman)

Another snapshot. Another site for considering how Detroit acts as a locus for intersecting identity markers is the city's indie rock scene, especially the most recent wave of garage rock bands. The members of the bands are mostly white but they work within a black aesthetic: southern blues. In this way they cultivate a hybrid, shifting racial identity, in a manner similar to 1960s white rock bands from the Detroit area like Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels and Iggy Pop and the Stooges who co-opted, re-invented, and re-vised African-American musical genres. This recent, critically acclaimed movement of garage bands largely rejects the values of liberalism, liberal anti-racism, and essentialized narratives of
race and class. Such a rejection serves to construct the “Detroit identity” these bands project. Race and class consciousness are elements of the collective ethos constructed by many of the bands; again, there is an antecedent in the 1960s when Detroit bands like the MC5 adopted radicalism as a component of their aesthetic. The contemporary bands wear the dual, intersecting consciousness on their sleeves, often in self-conscious and self-referential ways. In this way, their version of Detroit rhetoric is both public and reflexive. For example, the band Soledad Brothers, technically from outside Toledo, Ohio, but closely aligned with the Detroit scene, borrows its name from an offshoot of the Black Panthers, the militant Marxist prison collective of the late 1960s and early 1970s known as the Soledad Brothers. So their name invariably invokes a radical version of race awareness. In a recent interview with The Guardian, members of the band pontificated on intersecting identity markers and blues music:

The blues is nothing to do with colour. It’s to do with intelligence and cultural awareness. . . . There are loads of white guys who’ve made shitty blues music, but there are loads of brothers who’ve made shitty blues music. . . . Women can be bluesmen, absolutely. Some of our favorite shit is by women—Memphis Minnie, Jessie May Hill—in the 1930s, they were singing songs about “every married woman’s got a backdoor man.” They didn’t give a fuck, man. In 2006, there’s Erica Wennerstrom from the Heartless Bastards, and Rachel Nagy from the Detroit Cobras—nobody can mess with her. The blues is about if you’ve been through some shit and you feel what you’re playing. (Barton)

It would be easy to dismiss the comments of the band members as the kinds of tangents that Swiencicki describes, as attempts to articulate a mythology of equality in which race doesn’t matter. But they foreground something vague that they call “cultural awareness,” certainly a signifier for musical and artistic credibility, but also a possible referent to a consciousness that exists independent of the racial identity of the individual. They are not necessarily saying that race does not matter; rather, the Soledad Brothers suggest that race is about something much larger than the individual. The band refuses to fetishize identity as an aspect of individuality.
Similarly, the Soledad Brothers refer to gender as an interlocking component of the futility of identifying solitary markers of difference as essential signifiers. Gender need not craft a particular narrative about empowerment in this worldview. But the band does not ascribe transcendence of gender disempowerment to individual achievement, but rather through connection to the music and connection to a broader awareness. The blues are transcendent in a way that the liberal notion of the individual is not. Indeed, the band references Rachel Nagy, frontwoman of garage rock covers band the Detroit Cobras, who creates an agonistic, aggressive persona on the stage, performing traditionally masculine rituals like swearing and referencing sexual conquests. As the Soledad Brothers suggest, "nobody can mess with her." Like the poets of color, Nagy is disconcerting, rejecting the imperative to create art that comforts.

The same is true with Wendy Case, the frontwoman for another band associated with the Detroit scene, The Paybacks. Case writes lyrics that reject liberal notions of propriety and decorum. Gritty lyrics are not at all unusual in the worlds of rock and roll, but Case’s lyrics specifically take up intersecting identity markers. For example, the song “Black Girl” appeared on the influential 2001 compilation Sympathetic Sounds of Detroit, produced by Jack White of the White Stripes in the months before the band gained national attention from the international rock and roll press and from MTV. In the song, Case sings lines like “The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice,” in a build-up to a chorus that repeats the line, “She’s a real black girl.” Throughout, Case, a white woman leading a band of white males, extols the sexuality of African-American women—a postmodern moment of post-identity, rejecting liberal narratives about who does and does not possess cultural power, and who can and cannot take part in objectification. Once again, a blunt moment of discomfort, a moment of shifting signification.

Another song on the same compilation, the self-explanatory “I’m Through With White Girls” by The Dirtbombs, takes up the same theme. The Dirtbombs track is filled with lines about “brown-skinned honies dancing” and “watching Soul Train on a Friday night,” all sung by a band comprised mostly of young white men but fronted by Mick Collins, a veteran of the Detroit rock scene who happens to be one of the few
African-Americans associated with the movement. In their current incarnation, The Dirtbombs also feature an Asian-American woman playing bass. So whose perspective does a song like “I’m Through With White Girls” come from? From the perspective of the white band members? The African-American band member? From the perspective of the primarily white audience? Is the song racist and/or sexist? Detroit garage rock likes to distance itself from earnest, socially conscious pop music, yet the Dirtbombs track foregrounds race and gender, stressing difference, emphasizing that both race and gender signify something. The Dirtbombs are race conscious in the ways that Wendy Case and Rachel Nagy are gender conscious. To liberal ears accustomed to platitudes about equality, the Dirtbombs lyrics sound harsh and bombastic, more than a little offensive, perhaps reminiscent of Sly Stone in the 1960s, singing “Don’t Call Me Nigger, Whitey.” Key for the Dirtbombs lyric is the postmodern subversion of point-of-view, as the band loudly calls attention to markers of identity (the multi-racial band, the “white girls” they sing about, the audience) in order to juxtapose shifting loci of attention. The song references Collins’ own African-American identity as well as the racist mythology of black men as a threat to white women. In the meantime, the lyrics highlight the white identity of much of the indie rock audience, allowing them to live vicariously the stereotypical markers of black life that the song outlines, holding up a mirror to the process of co-optation.

The latter relationship—the one between Mick Collins and his white fans—stands in as a synecdoche for the contentious relationship between city and suburbs, perhaps the defining conflict of Detroit identity. Members of the Dirtbombs, like many members of Detroit’s rock scene including Jack White and Rachel Nagy, refer to growing up in the city (unlike Eminem and Kid Rock, both white kids from the suburbs), whereas their mostly white fan base resides mostly in Detroit’s suburbs. In the liner notes of the Sympathetic Sounds compilation, The Dirtbombs include in their list of band members Coleman A. Young. Instead of an instrument, Young’s band duties read simply “Mayor.” The cheeky liner notes joke alludes to Detroit’s long-time mayor, a polarizing figure loved by many African-Americans within city limits but despised by most whites living in the suburbs (see Clemens; Hartigan). Young utilized a
rhetoric that sounded radical to most white ears, as he challenged the
suburbs for siphoning resources and jobs from the black community in
Detroit (see Marback, “Detroit”). When the compilation was released,
Coleman Young’s successor, Dennis Archer, was in office, so the
Dirtbombs reference to Young is even more conspicuous. Furthermore,
Archer used a much more conciliatory rhetoric and advocated coopera­
tion between city and suburb. A moderate democrat, Archer embodied the
liberal values of equality and tolerance. Like the Soledad Brothers
associating themselves with a radical race consciousness, so too do the
Dirtbombs suggest an aesthetic connection with a more radical political
program, albeit in the context of a liner notes joke. One of the common
bonds between these acclaimed rock and roll acts is the sense of play they
bring to identity. They enjoy mocking liberalism’s faith in narratives of
equality, preferring to provoke, challenge, and highlight instability of
identity.

Few figures have illustrated the instability of identity in as public an
arena as another pop music figure associated with Detroit: hip hop star
Eminem moves between “Slim Shady,” “Marshall Mathers,” and
“Eminem,” alternating identities in his lyrics and in his public appear­
ances. A scene from Eminem’s vaguely autobiographical feature film
debut 8 Mile suggests a shifting consciousness of both race and class
similar to the consciousness that bands like the Dirtbombs embody. Late
in the film, the protagonist—an amateur white rapper in Metro Detroit—
“battles” an African-American rapper at a local club. Knowing his
vulnerabilities as a white outsider to much of the rap community, the
character played by Eminem freestyles a rhyme that belittles his opponent
for hiding the fact that he attended an elite private school in the suburbs.
The climax of the film, this sequence offers the slyest moment in the entire
narrative, a moment when the character subverts his own identity, going
from outsider to insider by juxtaposing his race (white) and class
(working class), and simultaneously juxtaposing his opponent’s race
(African-American) and class (presumably middle class, based on his
attendance at a private school north of Eight Mile Road). Race and class
intersect thanks to the character’s dual consciousness of the materiality
of both race and class.
Persons in Geographic Locales

It's no coincidence that Detroit's garage rockers tout where they come from. When they foreground their Detroit origins, they are not merely keeping it real or establishing credibility (although they are certainly engaged in both of those ethical constructions). They are also articulating the context for their own lived experiences and building a spatial structure in which to house their own identity markers. Nedra Reynolds writes, "Identities take root from particular sociogeographical intersections, reflecting where a person comes from and, to some extent, directing where she is allowed to go" (*Geographies* 11). Detroiters tend to possess acute awareness of place; nearly everyone in Metro Detroit knows borders and intersections, after all. When one is in the city, urbanity is all around. When one is in the suburbs, the trappings of suburban life have a material visibility. Members of the garage rock bands, like the poets of color, know their surroundings and by extension they know themselves. When they represent their origins, they represent who they are.

Reynolds argues in *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference* that being aware of location and spatial relationships can inform a host of social and rhetorical practices. Knowing where one stands in the physical world can foster an understanding of where one stands ideologically. Spatial—and spatially aware—agents have a stance, an identity, and a point-of-view. For Reynolds, the "street" is a provocative site for understanding the rhetorics of difference. Yet, while I value Reynolds' shift away from static notions of individuality to spatial and collective understandings of difference, I want to extend her analysis of the materiality of place to foreground *persons-in-place*, persons who have learned to understand identity in ways that are critical and contextual. Having a place-based understanding of agency should not decrease the materiality of people and their day-to-day existence as persons at intersections.
Autobiography, Detroit Style

I am whatever you say I am. If I wasn’t, then why would I say I am?

—Eminem

A third snapshot. Two recent autobiographies written by two very different Detroiters illustrate a model of intersectional identity awareness similar to the consciousness represented by the indie rock scene. Erma Henderson, an African-American activist, educator, and veteran of local politics, published her memoir in 2004, when she was 87. Paul Clemens, a white man and aspiring novelist, published his memoir the following year, at the age of 32. The two memoirists represent different genders, races, ideological commitments, religious beliefs, and generations, united by both working-class background and the same hometown: Detroit. Both writers offer seamless yet conflicting juxtapositions of myriad identity markers, perpetually conscious of their own respective races, classes, genders, and ideologies. These markers are material facts for both Henderson and Clemens and neither has any interest in obscuring such facts. They refuse to gloss over difference, foregrounding with a blunt rhetoric how race and class in particular contributed to their senses of self, and how larger cultural mythologies of race and class shaped their lived experiences. They both resist numerous liberal impulses, notably the tendency that Sciencicki outlines: the tendency to use shame and guilt as sources of individual comfort and catharsis. Both Henderson and Clemens, on the contrary, seem to want to make readers, and perhaps themselves, a bit uncomfortable.

Erma Henderson’s *Down Through the Years* covers a great deal of ground. Henderson offers an engaging narrative of growing up in Detroit’s Black Bottom (an area of vibrant arts that was largely decimated by freeway expansion) and becoming active in various local civic and political groups, as a union organizer, as a young Republican, and then—after a dramatic political conversion—as a member of the Progressive Party, and as a campaign manager for various local politicians. Henderson outlines numerous accomplishments such as organizing a sit-in at her first political convention to protest discrimination at the conference hotel, working to integrate the Elks, campaigning against police brutality and
racism within the Detroit Police Department, and helping to found groups such as the Women's Conference of Concerns and a woman's division of the Michigan League of Cities. Her long list of accomplishments is telling in that Henderson never limited herself to race activism or feminist activism or the labor movement. Rather, Henderson refused to play hierarchical games in terms of her political commitments, seeing identity markers as being mutually influential. Not only are her interests and commitments legion, they are part of a common fight for justice. Class inequality, racism, and sexism are material realities for Henderson that cannot be parsed out, separated, or built into a hierarchy of concerns.

Yet, Henderson situates this tangled pile of identity markers within the realm of the spiritual. While her critique is materialist in the sense that she foregrounds the concrete implications of societal inequality, her notion of consciousness (race consciousness, class consciousness, womanist consciousness, and so on) is a solution to a problem of the spirit. Early in her memoir, she says, "Spirit will make a way for anyone who stands up for justice" (4). She goes on to write:

It is important to be very careful when you make a statement that begins, "I am." As you read my story, pay careful attention to who I declare myself to be, using I am. When I ran for Detroit City Council in 1972, opponents tried to tell me who I was and why I would not win. They said I was poor, that I was African American, and that I was a woman. I replied to them that "I may be poor, and I am African American, and I am a woman, and I am going to win this election." So think carefully about who you say you are. Again, spiritually, you and I are alike. It is only in our thinking that we are different. (8)

Social inequality, for Henderson, is a spiritual and a material problem. In this quotation and elsewhere in her memoir, Henderson does not resort to liberal platitudes or clichés about sameness. She declares herself a woman. She calls herself African-American. She acknowledges her social class position. Like Eminem, she juxtaposes identity markers in a playful, tangling fashion. One might cynically cite this rhetoric as an instance of demagoguery, another example of a political feigning (or at least emphasizing for political gain) the appearance of being one of the
masses. But by naming herself a member of a class, gender, and race, Henderson is avoiding a liberal mode of assimilation; she is instead acknowledging difference as a material reality and juxtaposing markers of difference as a means of self identification. Discussing her work in a psychiatrist’s office, she states, “Healing involved dealing with a person’s whole life” (89). While her work there is a kind of day job to pay her bills while doing activist work, the experience has an impact on her complex notion of self.

Hers is a movement toward intersectionality. She recounts an experience fighting for her niece’s admission into lucrative technical training programs and recalls butting up against sexist expectations. “She was one of those brilliant little girls stuck in a man’s world,” she writes, explaining the challenge to get her niece into a high school drafting class (111). Later, critiquing her niece’s rejection from engineering school, she suggests that legacy admissions policies—“the wealthy person’s affirmative action”—may explain the rejection (112). Class and gender weave and intersect to shape life experience. This weaving and intersecting—this intersectional consciousness—informs Henderson’s political activism and, indeed, her life’s work. Yet, she does not see these intersections as barriers; she rewrites narratives of oppression with a radical, material awareness of societal constraints but a spiritual awareness of the productive possibilities of consciousness. On her political career Henderson comments, “Leadership has nothing to do with one’s formal education, one’s wealth, one’s race, or one’s age. There is a leader within each of us, waiting to emerge” (119). Later, she adds,

You see, a little child from extremely humble beginnings grew up as an African American woman, during a time in our nation when there was discrimination against both African Americans and women. Yet she climbed to great heights and overcame significant obstacles, and hopefully made the world a better place. (199)

These are not mere platitudes for Henderson. Nor are they statements solely about clichés of individual accomplishment. On the contrary, Henderson situates her achievements within the context of her own community, the broader network of classed, raced, and gendered Detroit groups within which she claims membership. Her life story is intertwined
and interdependent on the place where she grew up and the identity markers Detroit bestowed upon her.

Paul Clemens offers a more ambivalent narrative of the convergence and intersection of race and class and spiritual (and, to a lesser degree, gender/sexuality-based) identity markers. In *Made in Detroit: A South of 8-Mile Memoir*, Clemens writes about growing up as a white, working-class Catholic on Detroit’s eastside. Like Henderson, Clemens represents his own intersecting markers as being constantly dependent upon location—inamely, the city of Detroit. Clemens’ identity markers ultimately construct a counter-intuitive narrative of place, and counter-intuition gives Clemens an insight into what makes Detroit tick. Identity markers—more so than experience and knowledge even—establish Clemens’ ethos. Identity markers become the discursive material that builds Clemens’ credibility. For Clemens, being Catholic and being white, for example, allow him to seize authority while characterizing Detroit. His Catholicism certifies his non-WASP status. He describes going to college in a rural area of the state and feeling less connection to white protestants there than to the African-American neighbors he grew up with. His sense of humor, his values and attitudes, and his sense of self all build identifications with racial minorities.

Even his whiteness positions him as “other.” Growing up in Detroit, he is ironically a racial minority with white skin. Clemens somewhat ironically invokes reverse racism tropes, deconstructing the rhetoric of Coleman Young as well as his white family’s disdain for Young. He grows up aspiring to write a novel about Detroit that borrows Young’s swagger but also “dramatize[s] the way in which the usual racial dynamic was inverted in Detroit” (19). Again, his identity moves against established narratives, a dynamic Clemens symbolizes by describing the infamous “Michigan left turns.” He names his first chapter “Right to Go Left,” riffing on the phenomenon that requires drivers in Metro Detroit who reach busy intersections that disallow left turns to turn right and make a U-Turn. Going right to go left. Moving against established norms and expectations. Clemens also points out in this opening chapter that from Detroit one can head south and end up in Canada. Detroit becomes a city of irony, a locus of counter-intuition. On the racial inversion that comes to typify the counter-intuition, Clemens writes,
There is a theory that goes something like this: blacks can't be racists, no matter how prejudiced their feelings, because they lack the power—the institutional power—to act on those feelings. This was true of the white minority in Detroit: you might have disliked Coleman Young, but you couldn't do a damn thing about it....[Whites watched] the local news, cursing Young's image on their television screens. Their cursing might have made them feel better—though, in fact, it made them feel worse—but, in any case, it had absolutely no effect. Was this racism, then or was it something else? (19–20)

This passage stands out as one of the moments when Clemens has the potential to upset liberals, to disrupt the liberal search for comfort. Throughout his memoir, Clemens adopts this kind of blunt tone. Like Henderson, race and class are material facts for Clemens and he never hesitates to describe the conflict and the contradictions or urban life that he sees around him.

The moments of irony that Clemens articulates are the discursive dynamics of Detroit, moments of what Henry Louis Gates calls “signifyin.” In his memoir, Clemens takes part in the rhetorical act of signifyin’, repetition with ironic difference, troping in order to spin a kind of opposite—again, counter-intuitive—meaning. He spins above a narrative of reverse racism not for the purpose of advancing the argument himself, but to call attention to the contradiction of such an argument. Clemens—ironically, as a white man—plays the role of the signifyin’ monkey, pointing out the material realities of whiteness and blackness in Detroit. Clemens is white but finds himself growing up a racial minority. White members of his home community perform their minority status by resisting the politics and the rhetoric of the black mayor, Coleman Young, lamenting the absence of their own cultural capital and institutional power.

That racial contradiction finds further clarification, and simultaneously further complication, in Clemens’ working-class identity. Clemens narrates his own father’s affinity for hot rods and characterizes the hobby as a pursuit that typifies his family’s working-class status. Many of his father’s friends also enjoy working on cars as a leisure-time pursuit and hobby:
The men were possessed of a variety of useful, necessary skills that would keep them in a low-income group all their lives. There was nothing these men couldn’t build, nothing they couldn’t fix, no problem they couldn’t solve—and it would never do them a damn bit of good economically. They could fix other people’s cars, but such work couldn’t be relied on to provide enough money for them to fix their own, let alone trade up to nicer one. Though largely uneducated, they were skilled enough to go into business for themselves, running towing services, bump shops, and pinstriping places, only to find that being self-employed meant long hours, huge headaches, a lack of health insurance, and—when one’s clientele is also working-class—being entirely at the whim of an economy in which very little ever trickles down.

(34)

Clemens once again adopts a blunt, agonistic, Detroit tone of voice. Class is a material fact, something Clemens is always aware of. With a sense of respect and pride, Clemens alludes to Bruce Springsteen records and his father’s car magazines as artifacts of his working-class life in the 1970s and 1980s, artifacts that at once empowered by providing a set of reference points, but also disempowered by stripping away cultural and material capital. He points to Catholicism as another cultural divider, the divider between “working class” and “white trash” (40). Again, Clemens plays the role of signifyin’ monkey, drawing attention to cultural stereotyping, as he narrates familiar cultural mythology about the rural southern whites who flocked to Detroit for auto industry jobs a generation after ethnic, largely Catholic Europeans made a similar migration.

When Clemens goes away to college in a rural area of Michigan, he is aghast at the way the academy treats race and racial minorities with kid gloves. Accustomed to urban Detroit as a rhetorical stance, he is not used to race being touchy or taboo. For Clemens, race is materiality, a sentient fact, but for the academy, race remains a kind of theoretical space, absent the lived experience Clemens boasts. More ghastly still is the notion of white liberal guilt, a concept he discovers at college, hours from Detroit city limits. Clemens writes, “I was sick of feeling guilty. As both a Catholic and a white American, I’d been born with original sin—the difference being, in the latter case, that there was no baptism to wash it
away” (135). He concludes that his religion is incompatible with the brand of social and cultural progressivism espoused within the academy, and he feels more at home with Catholicism’s version of guilt, a version that possesses, in his view, “a frankly realistic view of human failings” (136). Liberal guilt, for Clemens, possesses a vague, insipid sense of human goodness: *I’m feeling guilty, but I can reform myself and members of my race and do good works.* In contrast, Catholicism dwells in material reality: *I’m a sinner.* The latter, “Detroit” worldview, steeped in materiality and agonism, makes more sense to Clemens the “Detroiter.” Yet, he also emphasizes Catholicism’s foregrounding of hopelessness as the ultimate sin. Academics and suburbanites blur together in Clemens’ conception of liberalism, reproducing “lazy prejudices” about the hopelessness of African-Americans, eventually situating his family’s decision to stay in the city as a kind of Catholic-cum-civic duty—another example of tangled allegiances and markers, counter-intuitive movement through Detroit’s intersections (138).

Clemens thinks he has found a worldview (Catholic, left-leaning political ideology, critical of white liberals without much material experience with race and class conflict) until he falls in love. One night, in the shadows of his girlfriend’s Amnesty International stickers and her picture of Kurt Cobain, his girlfriend tells Clemens that she was raped two years prior. Like the Arab-American shopkeeper at my campus’ poetry reading, Clemens’ girlfriend does not disclose the race of the assailant. But a mutual friend later informs Clemens that the rapist was African-American. Clemens finds himself full of rage, doubting his assumptions and ideologies: “But a black man didn’t rape her, I told myself; a man who happened to be black did” (180). Clemens refuses to provide much closure or much comfort to this final struggle of the narrative arc contained in his memoir. He wrestles with his own memories of Detroit, eventually moving back to the city himself. He reads lots of African-American writers. He marries the young woman whose own narrative prompts his crisis of faith. He decides to write nonfiction instead of the great Detroit novel he had been planning since his adolescence—a fitting, messy end to Clemens’ version of Detroit materiality.
Based on diverse textual representations of the city, Detroit boasts a unique rhetoric often characterized by blunt, raw agonism, acknowledging the material realities of various identity markers in ways that make audiences uncomfortable. As McComiskey and Ryan suggest, urban spaces distinguish themselves as useful texts for understanding the practices of everyday community members. From Detroit, we learn that the everyday “walkers” through cityspaces know more than representatives of state apparatuses, performing their identities in ways that are playful, disquieting, critical, and intersectional. Rhetoricians invested in destabilizing liberal notions of propriety and decorum and rejecting essentialized versions of identity markers may benefit from positioning themselves as what de Certeau dubs “walkers,” moving through the intersections of Detroit—like the poets, memoirists, and musicians I have discussed—with a consciousness, all in order to witness the visibility of intersections of difference. Composition theorist Richard Marback has suggested that Detroit as an urban text demonstrates a “rearticulation of civic space and rhetorical agency through another gesture [beyond the Ciceronian open hand], the closed fist” (“Detroit” 75), outlining public reaction to a monument in Detroit commemorating boxer Joe Louis and depicting the aforementioned gesture. Marback argues for the usefulness of the closed fist by suggesting how the iconic image symbolizes materiality and agency. The icon “participates in an alternative representational strategy, a strategy that invokes African-American agony in Detroit so as to transform it” (80). Marback suggests that rhetoricians might look to this icon as a model of material rhetoric, a model “gesture” of “strategy” for locating the rhetorical agency.

I want to push forward Marback’s thinking and suggest that the busy Detroit intersection of Woodward and Eight Mile provides an equally useful site, not merely for locating agency, but for locating critical, material, and visible iterations of identity. When community members find themselves in the middle of an intersection, they find themselves in perilous situations, exposed to the elements, the danger of multiple lanes of speeding cars. They also find themselves on multiple paths. In the middle of Woodward and Eight Mile, a community member is situated on
the main east-west and north-south arteries. At the intersection of the city and its suburbs. The intersection of the Eastside and Westside. Two paths move against one another, neither taking a subordinate role. Woodward and Eight Mile, race and class and other points of identity, shifting markers. Describing race in Detroit, anthropologist John Hartigan Jr. says that a racial identity marker in the city is an “interpretive medium” whose “contours . . . are formed by an array of interests with varying degrees of coherence and stability—class and gender to name the prominent examples.” Meditations on Detroit, Hartigan goes on to write, show critics “how to listen to the interplay of race and class in place-specific discourses that shape the articulation of social positions, and how to hear the multiple inflections that these positions generate” (282).

Community members in Detroit are rooting their oftentimes complex understandings of the materiality of race and class, for example, in precisely this kind of specific context, showing rhetoricians how to avoid abstraction, political correctness, and the impulse to comfort audience members. I drive through the intersection of Eight Mile and Woodward each day, witnessing the visible confrontation between Detroit and suburban Detroit, the visible confrontation between the homeless men on the corner and the commuters in their cars. Difference is a material reality, not an abstraction. Poets of color, garage rockers, and autobiographers all converge at Detroit’s intersections and engage with their shifting, place-specific identities and the shifting, place-specific identity markers of their audience members, creating narratives of blunt agonism, what Iggy Pop—icon of Detroit rock and roll—called “Raw Power.” If we are to attend to the materiality of place, “our task,” Nedra Reynolds wrote in the pages of JAC, is “to cross boundaries and to challenge territorial conceptions of identity” (541). There is “reluctance,” says Reynolds, to engaging with those borders and those crossings (545). The reluctance grows from the desire to find a comfortable existence but, if we listen to urban spaces like Detroit where many agents cannot escape the materiality of socio-economic life and other conflicting and conflicted aspects of identity, we hear a call to tell honest stories of the intersections. Rhetoricians inside and outside Detroit ought to pay attention.

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Notes

1. In her recent analysis of civil discourse, Sharon Crowley provides a useful definition of liberalism, suggesting that liberal ideology involves an allegiance to reason and rationality as persuasive appeals. In addition to a logocentric notion of rhetorical efficacy, Crowley writes, liberals value personal freedoms, tolerance, and equality (4–5).

2. Thanks to Jay Dolmage and Stephanie Kerschbaum for helping me to think about the productive possibilities of intersectional analysis.

3. One recent example of the dangers of isolating markers of difference from one another is the public activism of disability studies scholar Lennard Davis, who in his critiques of the film Million Dollar Baby has implied that the culture has solved some problems while prejudices against disability remain. Davis used classist, patronizing characterizations of the film’s protagonist while invoking her Appalachian roots, all the while questioning how the film could offer such problematic portrayals of disabled persons. See DeGenaro and Dolmage for fuller critique of the film’s version of intersectionality.

4. McComiskey and Ryan demonstrate how compositionists might make use of de Certeau’s conception of “walking.” I am indebted to their model of such a practice.

5. See de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life.

6. The tension between Koreans and African-Americans took on mythic status in the 1980s and 1990s as the conflict became subject matter in numerous rap songs, as well as the 1989 Spike Lee film Do The Right Thing.

7. Consider, for example, “The Snowsuit Effort,” a prominent Detroit photoblog featuring stark images of the city’s homeless.

8. Leader of the (original, non-musical) Soledad Brothers, George Jackson, penned a collection of letters, Soledad Brother, articulating his dissatisfaction with the penal system and with the broader realities of racism. Jackson was a polarizing figure, a cultural antecedent of contemporary death-row activist Mumia Abu-Jamal.

9. In Is Rock Dead?, cultural critic Kevin J.H. Dettmar points out that the field of psychiatry worked in the 1950s—during both the Cold War and the birth of the genre—to paint rock and roll music as the mindless sacrificing of individuality, the “mass surrender of personhood” (68).

10. Henderson’s career is a model of rhetorical praxis and her work could be characterized as a feminist rhetoric, a class-conscious rhetoric, and/or a race-conscious rhetoric—better, an intersectional activist rhetoric.

11. In a lecture at the University of Michigan in Dearborn organized by the school’s campus literary magazine, Clemens referenced Orwell and Eliot as noted literary figures who both pointed out that writers who engage in autobiographical writing must reveal fundamental flaws in their own characters and
avoid at all costs futile attempts to make themselves seem appealing.

12. Clemens writes, "Working-class whiteness was all over these albums, so much so they they came to define, indelibly, that whole stratum of American culture. The sociological impact of these albums was not at all diminished by the fact that Clarence, the black saxophone player, was pictured prominently on the back of Born to Run. On the contrary, I felt an affinity for him. His last name was Clemons: close enough" (44).

Works Cited


