

SYMPOSIUM

**The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute Then and Now...:  
Commentaries on *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community***

**“Nothing Changes”: Community Mapping Practice in Detroit**

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Fresh on the heels of the Detroit uprising in July 1967, simmering tensions continued to play out in civic and community spaces. Many organizations attempted to construct a response, a program, a strategy to ensure racial tension and rioting never happened again. White businessmen, including J.L. Hudson, formed New Detroit Inc. (<http://www.newdetroit.org/>) to address racial issues from a business perspective. New community organizations were formed as well, in particular Focus: HOPE (<http://focushope.edu>), with an emphasis on job training and racial healing, opened near the neighborhood where rioting started. Others came together with a research perspective and in 1968 William Bunge formed the Detroit Geographical Expedition as an opportunity for researchers and community members to work together on critical issues of access and survival in the city.

The same things we did then are the same things you’re doing now. Nothing changes.  
(Gwendolyn Warren, November 2014, CUNY Graduate Center)

In her November 2014 talk at the City University of New York (CUNY),<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Warren shared

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<sup>1</sup> Available online: <https://gcees.commons.gc.cuny.edu/gwendolyn-warren-cindi-katz-conversation/> (last accessed 22 February 2017).

insights into her pivotal role as a young, black community leader in the evolution of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI). Warren shared that the important issues of the DGEI were focused on high rates lead poisoning, high numbers of rat bites, and the many children dying just trying to cross the street. The rats may have left the city, but Detroit still has the highest lead poisoning rate in the State of Michigan and the city regularly lands near the top of the list for cities with the highest number of pedestrian deaths. Nothing changes.

Everything changed. In the last decade, Detroit has seen dramatic political, social, and economic changes. Nearly 50 years of disinvestment, loss of opportunity, and population out-migration led to the city filing for the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. However, city services that had been discontinued are coming back, programs handed off to nonprofits are returning to city departments, and the rapidly reorganized local government is focused on generating as much economic development as possible in order to keep the post-bankruptcy momentum going. The central city corridor of Woodward Avenue is essentially unrecognizable from what it was in 2006 let alone the 1970s.

Yet, amid redevelopment, many areas of Detroit have seen no change at all. Bankruptcy was simply a label for longtime problems that have persisted for many in Detroit's black community. In a similar way, it could be argued that mapping has not changed much either. The basics remain the same in that data is collected, analyzed, and prepared for geographic display. However, the tools used in mapping have become broadly accessible and ubiquitous, yet a skills and knowledge gap persists in a city wrought by the saga of a gutted public education system.

### **Shifting Models of Community Engagement**

The typical role of researchers is as outside actors interested in knowledge extraction. Often "participatory action research" is utilized to bridge this knowledge and skills gap with varying definitions of "participation" Warren was a critical and engaging young, black leader who spoke up for the community control of research that has not been seen in recent years.

It became obvious that they were getting a lot more out of this than we were: they wanted to write the book, the paper, the dissertation, run this or that model, they were hungry to be able to get in inside. (Gwendolyn Warren, November 2014, CUNY Graduate Center)

In her November 2014 talk Warren noted that the relationship with university researchers was often paternalistic. Similarly, Warren spoke of how faculty interested in Detroit from across the country needed access to organizations that had influence within communities. Warren's group and eventually the DGEI became just such a vehicle for university researchers to gain access. Eventually, Warren organized a meeting with 30 community members and some 22 university researchers to discuss the unequal benefits of the DGEI program.

After *Field Notes No.1* (Horvath and Vander Velde 1969) was published, the community participants recognized that the university researchers were benefiting far more from the project than the people living there. The young people of the community did not benefit from the publication of academic articles, but rather from learning the skills and tools to research and articulate the issues for themselves. Warren's efforts were the main reason that the letter "I" exists in the DGEI name. The university researchers agreed with Warren and began offering free college-level courses which culminated in the research used in *Field Notes No.2* (Colvard and Cozzens 1970) focused on "School Decentralization". At the time the DGEI became one of the first groups to use community members to study and design policy based on community needs.

Currently in Detroit, urban planning and geography departments from all of Southeast Michigan's dominant universities have regularly brought students to complete capstone projects with various community "partner" organizations which invariably generates a dearth of one-off reports that are created to never be seen again. In the best examples, these reports are somewhat collaborative with the leadership of partner organizations and copies are given to adorn the partner organization's office table or bookshelf. Regardless of the intention or merit of these projects, they are a long way off from the DGEI principles.

### **Mapping Detroit: *Field Notes No.4***

The fourth installment and lesser known “Field Notes” arrived during the tumultuous years when the DGEI’s partnership with Michigan State University (MSU) ended. The black student leaders, including Warren, had relocated to MSU’s campus in East Lansing to pursue their studies and fight for the continuation of the program. The DGEI continued with community education and workshops, but engagement with the black community became non-existent and community control of research lost its champions.

The work of the 1971 Detroit Geographical Expedition was different from that of previous expeditions. Instead of providing educational and technical services to the Black community of Detroit, the idea behind the expedition was to assist a specific geographically defined community by providing 1) technical assistance for tackling crisis situations, 2) training in geographic and planning methods, and 3) analyses of some of the problems facing the community. (Society for Human Exploration 1972:1)

One of the outside university participants who conducted the research on “The Geography of the Children of Detroit” for *Field Notes No.3* (DGEI 1971) was Robert Colenutt. The year following *Field Notes No.3*, Colenutt reached out to Bunge to bring students from Syracuse University as “explorers”, however Colenutt notes Bunge largely left them to make their own connections with help from local DGEI member Andrew Karlin. Bunge was not as engaged in putting together the *Field Notes No.4* publication on the Trumbull Community, save for some ideas for maps.

Colenutt wrote that their primary community partner for *Field Notes No.4* was the Cass Trumbull community group, but that they also had a great deal of support from the Detroit-based Wayne State University (WSU) Geography Department. A few of the more widely known DGEI maps came from *Field Notes No.4*; in particular, an environmental comparison map of a neighborhood in inner city Detroit offers stark contrast to the environment in a Bloomfield Hills suburban neighborhood. Particularly interesting in *Field Notes No.4* is the research that supported community

efforts to fight WSU and ensure public access to recreation space. The impact of “urban renewal” programs was still playing out as the university attempted to expand its athletic programs by acquiring public land.

The dissipation of the DGEI during Colenutt’s years of participation demonstrate the shift to the now standard model of engaging communities in research practice. While Colenutt’s group actively engaged a community in need of research for community advocacy, this was a major shift from the “fair exchange” and community control that Warren discussed.

### **The Current Geography of Community Controlled Mapping**

Detroit has a fairly small number of mapping organizations that have regularly worked to engage communities. One infamous project was Detroit Future City (<http://detroitfuturecity.com>) where a community table strategy was carried out by the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (<http://www.dcdc-udm.org/>) known for its deep community connections and housed at the University of Detroit Mercy Architecture School. A community engagement team traveled around the city with a mobile table and invited residents to sit at the table to share their insights into the city’s future. In the final 319 page Detroit Future City report, there are only 24 pages dedicated to the topic of community engagement. Another well-known Detroit mapping effort was the Motor City Mapping (<http://motorcitymapping.com>) project where community members were employed to survey every land parcel in the City of Detroit. Beyond short-term nonprofit and university projects, there are a handful of examples of community-based and -driven efforts to use mapping and data to advocate for issues through community-centered research.

The Grace Lee Boggs School (<http://www.boggsschool.org/>) teaches children mapping while walking around their neighborhood (see Figure 1); the Detroit Community Technology Project (<https://www.alliedmedia.org/dctp>) hosts community “discotechs”—discovering technology fairs where residents can learn about data and mapping tools (see Figure 2); the Detroit Food Map (<http://detroitfoodmap.com>) engages residents and university students to assess accessibility of healthy foods in Detroit’s neighborhoods; and #Maptime Detroit (<http://detroitography.com/maptime>) offers

free community workshops on mapping topics each month.



**Figure 1:** Photo taken during a workshop I ran with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders to understand maps and different spatial patterns (see <https://detroitography.com/2015/07/17/the-future-geographers-of-detroit-havent-yet-made-a-map/> )



**Figure 2:** Photo taken during one of the “Data Discotechs” where children and adults made hand maps to tell their Detroit stories (see <https://detroitography.com/2016/07/01/all-detroit-hand-maps-are-accurate/>.)

The Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD) (<http://cdad-online.org/resources/strategic-framework/>) works with its member organizations to draw on the knowledge and power of Detroit residents by conducting public exercises that help community groups define the strategic framework for their neighborhoods. These activities give community residents an understanding of the data about their neighborhoods so that they can better advocate and articulate the

needs that they see every day. CDAD is a collective of over 100 community organizations that reach into every neighborhood of the city. Their focused engagement of residents in the urban planning process is unheard of in the City of Detroit, let alone other large cities. In the spirit of the DGEI, CDAD gives residents an opportunity to participate in a generally restrictive process typically controlled within historically inaccessible municipal institutions.

The Riverfront East Congregational Initiative (RECI) (<http://www.miroundtable.org/riverfronteast.html>) was formed as part of a program under the Michigan Roundtable on Diversity and Inclusion. The organization is comprised of 17 churches and a synagogue on Detroit's Lower Eastside. The core initiative of the organization was the "Luv D Eastside" campaign where community and congregation members canvas and survey local businesses to assess how they treat customers, support community groups, and generally serve as an asset to the community at large. Through the effort, the RECI has completed regular trainings for community residents and has developed a true community research model for assessment. Through the initiative the RECI has identified six strong community businesses as well as six healthy food access points. The RECI "Luv D Eastside" initiative has also served as a model for other community-based programs hoping to better engage residents in understanding their neighborhoods and assessing their environments.

We the People of Detroit (WPD) (<https://wethepeopleofdetroit.com/>) formed in 2008 after the State of Michigan, due to financial crisis, placed an emergency manager over control of Detroit's public schools. Most recently WPD has gained attention for their efforts to document and study the impact of water shutoffs on Detroit residents. The organization has conducted community trainings with its 38 member groups in order to launch door-to-door community canvassing as both research and immediate response for residents who have had their water shut-off. The organization's recent publication "Mapping the Water Crisis" was covered in numerous local and regional media outlets. The organization has been protective of its data, which demonstrates its resolute commitment to community-control. WPD has also engaged university researchers, but holds them strictly accountable for keeping the data solely for community analyses.



## Conclusion

Nothing changed, and everything changed in Detroit. The process of mapping is more widely available, but gaps remain in data literacy and skill levels. This is perhaps the most obvious area where DGEI had success in offering free courses even if it was always a temporary arrangement. Universities have a strong presence in Detroit related to urban planning and architecture research projects, but in many ways the difficulties that Gwendolyn Warren had running her community organization on limited resources remain the same. Even the mapping organizations and initiatives highlighted struggle with funding, time, and ongoing support, especially for data-driven research. Organizations, both large and small, should look to adopting a research justice framework for their efforts with the hopes of employing a “fair exchange” like Warren secured for the young people in her neighborhood in 1968. Community research is critical to ensuring a focus on people when there is such a renewed interest in data as a solution in Detroit.

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