

Pam Sporn, *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route*, New York: Grito Productions, 2018. <http://www.gritoproductions.com/detroit48202>

Mark Jay and Philip Conklin, *A People's History of Detroit*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0834-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-0788-3 (cloth)

Two works, the documentary *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route* (directed and produced by Pam Sporn) and the book *A People's History of Detroit* (by Mark Jay and Philip Conklin), signal an important shift in the way Detroit is being represented on film and in print. Both move beyond the well-worn tropes of Detroit and urban decline while still confronting inequality and anti-Black racism head-on. *Detroit 48202* and *A People's History of Detroit* steer the conversation towards the history-making capacity of Detroiters rather than viewing the city and its residents as victims in need of saving. In doing so, these works make the case – implicitly and explicitly – that Detroit's history of Black-led social movements have made an impact that stretches far beyond the history of the city itself. In both the documentary and book, albeit in quite different narrative styles, Detroit emerges as a wellspring of Black protest that predates and underlays Black Lives Matter and the global protest movements against systemic racism and colonialism that have proliferated in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route is about far more than the straightforward title may suggest. The film follows mail carrier Wendell Watkins along his route in Detroit's New Center district, and in the process, articulates a people's geography of Detroit that complements the people's history provided by Jay and Conklin. Watkins' Detroit emerges as a cinematic space that is far more nuanced, contested, and intimate than many recent treatments of Detroit, which tend to focus on the visual melodrama of depopulated landscapes. To follow Watkins is to see Detroit in terms of friendly exchanges with neighbors on porches and in apartment building vestibules; we meet Detroiters both middle class and poor, at all stages of life. Many share stories and anecdotes about the city's past as well as struggles of the present, including the city's bankruptcy and gentrification. The fact that Watkins is a mail carrier means his perspective privileges people and relationships, but he has a keen eye for spotting the materiality of structural forces as well. Fittingly, he often pauses in front of unoccupied

structures as well as buildings under renovation and uses those moments to talk about the impacts of disinvestment on neighborhoods as well displacement caused by gentrification.

Detroit 48202 traces routes through time as well. Watkins moonlights as a historian, and the camera follows him into archives and interviews with important historical figures. We hear of the history of Detroit's Black community since the Great Migration as told through, appropriately enough, letters mailed between family members. *Detroit 48202* is one of the few documentaries about the city to deeply explore the importance of kinship and relatedness between individuals as well as social movements within the Black community. In one exemplary scene, Watkins interviews General Baker, a leader of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) who is also a key figure in Jay and Conklin's *A People's History of Detroit*. During the conversation there is a brief panning shot over Baker's birth certificate – ostensibly to offer humorous proof that he was named “General” at birth – but the camera also silently reveals the certificate was signed by a doctor named Ossian Sweet. Sweet, whose name will be recognized by students of the history of race and housing in the US, was a Black physician who was tried and acquitted for a shooting that occurred in 1925 when he and his family fought back against a crowd of white attackers who set upon them after they purchased a home in an affluent white neighborhood. That Ossian Sweet was the doctor present at the delivery of General Baker attests to the intimate and overlapping connections between struggle, community, and movement in Detroit.

Throughout the film's exploration of Detroit's past and present, Watkins shines as narrator in part because of his charismatic presence on screen. He shifts seamlessly from lighthearted affect to reflections on systemic racism and predatory dispossession targeting the Black community, and back again. His personal story and its connection with the city's history unfolds gradually, and ultimately we learn that Watkins, despite his indelible personality and presence, is himself not left unscathed by the forces of oppression described in the film.

Watkins would likely enjoy reading Mark Jay and Philip Conklin's *A People's History of Detroit*. Jay and Conklin's work is evocative of the same city we find in *Detroit 48202* – a vibrant political landscape of union halls and neighborhood associations with a proud lineage of radicalism. As in *Detroit 48202*, *A People's History of Detroit* makes the case that the present

relevance of Detroit's radical history is why it merits global attention. Jay and Conklin's framing of Detroit history is shaped by a lineage of 20th and 21st century Marxist thinkers such as Mario Tronti, Alberto Toscano, Massimiliano Tomba, and David Harvey. In many respects a *A People's History of Detroit* reads like a primer of critical concepts from the broader Marxist tradition such as the formal and real subsumption of labor to capital and the dialectical relationship between creative destruction and mythologization. Despite its title, the first third of the book dwells primarily on the city's present, focusing on the inequalities exacerbated by the city's pattern of urban real estate development, the impact of emergency management, the bankruptcy, the water shutoffs, as well police brutality. Jay and Conklin argue that these injustices thrive upon mythologizations of the city's past which their book seeks to puncture.

The core of the book, however, is its history of social movements. Jay and Conklin's work is a synthetic effort that pulls together varying strands of scholarship in labor studies, urban history, social movement history, and research on policing and incarceration along with their own critical analysis of media discourse. Students of urban history, labor history, and social movements will likely be familiar with strands of the narrative Jay and Conklin weave, but such a broad ranging, critical account of Detroit's history since the First World War has never been presented in such an accessible manner in one text before. The book begins with an analysis of Fordism as it emerged at the Ford Motor Company itself and traces the rise of the UAW, following struggles within labor and between it, the state, and capital through World War II and into the Cold War. It does an effective job of detailing specific episodes in Detroit history and placing these events within the context of national and global shifts. For example, an account from Detroit activist and autoworker James Boggs on the increased surveillance and punitive treatment of production line workers in the 1950s is understood in terms of the broader repression of labor radicalism during the Cold War – much of which was the result of the UAW policing itself at the behest of the US government. In this manner, the book moves through time by shifting between fine grained observations of working conditions in Detroit and descriptions of geopolitical and political economic change impacting the US and the world at large.

Jay and Conklin's narrative is at its most gripping during their account of the revolutionary 1960s and its aftermath. In addition to providing a detailed blow by blow account

of Detroit's 1967 uprising, they also argue – in contrast to most left-liberal narratives of the Great Rebellion – that arson and looting should not be viewed as chaotic side effects in contrast to morally justified political unrest, but as part of a broader direct confrontations against the institutions of private property and the state. In an extremely timely discussion about societal calls for “responsibility on the part of the protestors”, they argue, provocatively, that the “truth is, throughout US history and up through the violent uprising in Ferguson, Missouri ... riots have in fact often been catalysts for social change” (p.130). These interrogations of memory and history make Detroit's past feel like anything but past; as a result the city's radical history blends with today's global present.

The authors also pay close attention to the formative effect that Detroit's Great Rebellion had on social movements such the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) and the associated Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs) that emerged in automotive factories in the wake of '67. As with *Detroit 48202*, Jay and Conklin focus heavily on General Baker's involvement with the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. DRUM and other RUMs were a Black-led, Marxist insurgency within the UAW that engaged in dozens of wildcat strikes starting in 1967. The authors carefully trace the trajectory of the LRBW as well as the Black Panthers over time, paying special attention to the direct and indirect impacts of the movements as well as internal and external barriers to their expansion.

While focusing on movements, the authors also follow the “counter-revolution” which includes direct police repression such as the FBI's COINTELPRO program as well as attempts by the municipality and federal government to temper radical organizing through co-option and incorporation. Jay and Conklin's detailed emphasis on policing alongside labor and social movement history is probably one of the book's most important and timely contributions. This is in keeping with the book's dialectic approach: the '67 uprising began, after all, as a response against horrendously racist police repression. Amidst this historical framing around revolution and counter-revolution, the tenure of Coleman Young, Detroit's first Black mayor (in office from 1974 to 1994), is the subject of an intricate and complex discussion. Young's uncompromising rhetoric against White supremacy has led him to be labeled as a Black radical by white suburbanites in Metro Detroit, and he made important strides in hiring and training Black

leadership in Detroit's city government and, in particular, the Detroit Police Department. However, Jay and Conklin place an uncompromising focus on the neoliberal austerity programs Young enacted while in office along with the aggressive policing strategies employed under his watch, which for all practical purposes launched Detroit on a trajectory towards racist mass-incarceration that continues into the present.

Taken together, one could imagine *A People's History of Detroit* and *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route* as a useful pair for informing students about urban history, labor history, social movements, and for that matter a genealogy underlying the current wave of racial justice protests sweeping the globe. The fact that a single city's story can so effectively provide a frame for understanding these various movements and histories is perhaps the greatest testament to Detroit's global relevance today. Additionally, both works allude to a continuing radical lineage that still very much informs the present. At one poignant moment in *Detroit 48202*, the viewer accompanies Wendell Watkins to General Baker's memorial service. While one could imagine how such a scene could turn into a symbolic funeral for radicalism in Detroit, the opposite proves true. It occurs in a Detroit union hall packed with people who are both young and old, providing a reminder of the lasting impact of DRUM as well as its continuing human legacy. In this way, both works prompt a reflection on the meaning of 1960s and 1970s radicalism in Detroit and elsewhere today. Black-led movements such the Black Panthers and DRUM helped to form a political vocabulary around themes of Black life and survival that is now shaping protests and popular culture around the world. This political idiom and the practices associated with it are being reshaped again by a new generation of activists who increasingly identify as female and LGBTQ, and who are successfully overturning heteronormative, patriarchal categories of previous movements. As Jay and Conklin point out, such attitudes were found in both the LRBW and RUMs (and were systemic in 1960s-era radicalism in general) but even with those limitations, these movements helped to pioneer the concept of a revolution within a revolution led by people of color. 50 years later, the speed at which global protests grew and spread in the wake of George Floyd's murder seems to highlight the effectiveness of – and desire for – this vision. Thus, if Detroit history is also the history of Black-led movements

seeking to re-imagine the world in which we live, then the city's story has never been more relevant than today.

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