



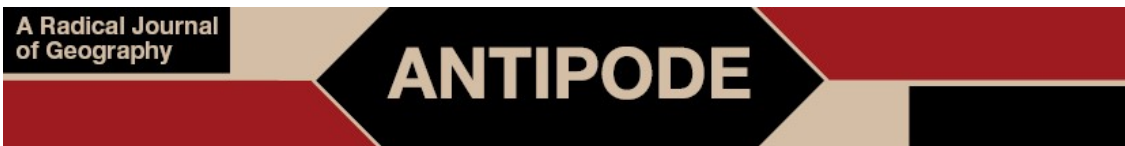
Linda Campbell, Andrew Newman, Sara Safransky and Tim Stallmann (eds), *A People's Atlas of Detroit*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780814342978 (paper); ISBN: 9780814342985 (ebook)

In the days immediately following the 3 November 2020 presidential election, media attention turned to the TCF Center in Detroit, where Wayne County, Michigan, ballots were being counted. Republicans staged rallies to protest what they claimed was election fraud, as an early Michigan lead for Donald Trump shrank and eventually turned into a win for Joe Biden. The orchestrated chaos enabled Trump to fabricate a narrative that the election was “stolen” by “politically corrupt” officials in Detroit (in a tweet on 27 November). Based on this narrative, Trump pressured, first, White suburban members of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers, and then Republican members of the Michigan legislature to invalidate the Detroit results and, therefore, declare him the winner of the state’s 16 electoral college votes. Ultimately, he failed, but in the uncertain interim Democrats and mainstream news were aghast that Trump had the audacity to attempt to undermine the vote and ask state-level officials to cancel democracy in Detroit. Yet as anyone familiar with the city’s recent history knows, local democracy had been suspended in Detroit as recently as 2013, when, in the wake of the economic crisis, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Emergency Manager with extraordinary powers to govern the city by fiat, effectively taking away Detroiters’ ability to choose their own local leaders and negating the basis of their citizenship and self-determination. Orr presided over an era of austerity and restructuring that accelerated a corporate and elite-driven urban development agenda at the expense of the majority-Black residents. Thus, Trump’s attempt to quash democracy in Detroit can be seen as one in a long line of attacks by White elites on the ability of Black Detroiters to exercise control over land in their communities and achieve a measure of self-determination.

News coverage of the weeks-long controversy over the counting of Wayne County ballots at the TCF Center amounted to an advertising windfall for TCF Bank, which has a 22-year deal for the naming rights to the convention center. Rights to the name of the former Cobo Center were purchased for \$1.5 million per year in 2018 by Detroit-based Chemical Bank just prior to its merger with TCF Financial Corporation, a \$50 billion company. The naming-rights deal came on the heels of a \$279 million bond-funded redevelopment of the facility after management was transferred to the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority from the City of Detroit in 2009, under a new state law. At nearly the same time as Chemical Bank was closing the naming rights deal, it secured \$30 million in state and local subsidies for its new \$105 million headquarters in downtown Detroit. Thus, while Detroiters were dealing with a suspension of democracy and cuts to essential services, including thousands of water shutoffs, public resources were being diverted to serve the interests of private profit.

This account, focused on a single location – the TCF Center – captures some of the crises faced by Detroiters in the past dozen years; a foreclosure crisis, a general economic crisis, a water crisis, a governance crisis, and the ways that those crises were manipulated by powerful interests to wrench control of land, assets, and the machinery of government in Detroit to further elite speculation, extraction, and accumulation. And yet this account misses something crucial that *A People's Atlas of Detroit* makes clear: Detroiters are organizing in myriad grassroots ways to “re-appropriate urban spaces in order to shift the social function of the city from a profit-making engine for elites to instead serve the direct, everyday needs of residents” (p.4).

Those not on the ground in Detroit who rely only on headlines and mainstream media coverage of developments in the city might fall victim to accepting the powerful mythologizing that represents the city as a deindustrialized, abandoned, and “politically corrupt” urban wilderness, a landscape timorously waiting for entrepreneurs and their capital to rescue it, a narrative freighted with racist and colonialist overtones. Yet, as the editors and contributors to this book insist, this mythmaking is intended to erase the stories of marginalized residents and

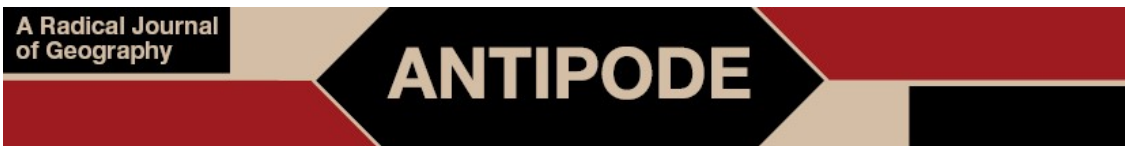


(re)shape realities on the ground. This “crisis of representation”, then, can be added to the others that Detroiters face in their struggles for self-determination and justice.

A People’s Atlas of Detroit is a powerful counternarrative to the elite myth. A collection of maps, timelines, essays, interviews, poems, and images from Detroiters engaged in struggles for their “right to the city”, the *Atlas* combines critical analyses of the intersection of crises with documents, profiles, portraits, and voices that document the many ways that residents of Detroit are actively responding to them. The picture that emerges of Detroiters engaged in housing justice struggles, land custodianship, urban agriculture, creating People’s Plans for governance of the city and its water system and more, directly challenges the view of Detroit as an abandoned wilderness. Speaking pointedly to this “crisis of representation”, Malik Yakini, director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, argues “we actually have the capacity to define our own reality” (p. 127); this book is part of redefining Detroit from the perspective of residents rather than capital. For example, in introducing a section on environmental justice, the editors insist that “the path to environmental justice is closely tied to the capacity to economically and socially reimagine what a city is and for whom it is ultimately built to serve” (p.258).

The book is one product of a participatory research project, *Uniting Detroiters* (partly funded by the Antipode Foundation),¹ to strengthen organizational infrastructure in this “movement town”, through a series of workshops and oral history interviews with people from various social justice organizations and neighborhood initiatives (such as Malik Yakini quoted above). Comprised of activists, community leaders, scholars, students, and other residents, *Uniting Detroiters* brought people together to collectively analyze national and global processes in their historical context with an eye towards identifying opportunities for social transformation, “to engage in collective analysis, grapple with hard questions about resistance, and expand the kinds of grassroots political formations that the new conjuncture required” (p.2).

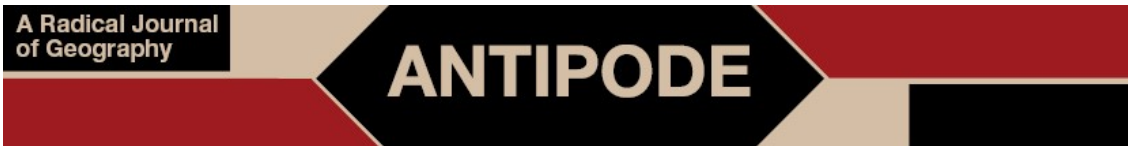
1 See <https://antipodeonline.org/2015/09/17/a-peoples-story-of-detroit/>



In part inspired by the work of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute and *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*,² the book is evidence of the best kind of academic-community collaboration, conceived as an organizing tool clearly driven by a community, rather than academic, agenda. It shows how academic knowledge production can be harnessed to the business of building grassroots power, by joining the tools and theoretical analysis of academia with the struggles of residents for justice and self-determination in order to advance the work already being done on the ground. No doubt, the book will prove to be useful for people engaged in social justice struggles in Detroit (according to the copyright page, all royalties from the book will go to the Transforming Power Fund to materially support such work and also to purchase copies of the book to be distributed to local community organisations).

But the book will also be valuable to people in other places engaged in similar struggles over land, agriculture, infrastructure and governance; as the editors argue, the “*Atlas* points to the ways that these efforts are fundamentally rooted in place” (p.299). While the collection is bursting with local details from what could be seen in other contexts as disparate struggles, the editors insist that, instead, “[c]ombined in the aggregate, they might be read as constellations signaling possible routes for cultural change and social transformation” (p.244). As with traditional atlases, this one could function a guide, but more in the tradition of countermapping: a guide for building community power by linking up struggles, building coalitions, increasing capacity of existing groups, fostering critical analyses, and reimagining the future of cities from the perspective of marginalized residents instead of capital. This book provides a chart for those interested in engaging in such a project. We need *A People’s Atlas* of every city, as an organizing tool and a document of struggles everywhere.

² See <https://antipodeonline.org/2017/02/23/dgei-field-notes/> and Bunge W (2011 [1971]) *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*. Athens: University of Georgia Press



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