»City of Conscience«

Fragments, Empty Spaces, and the Psychogeography of Detroit in Kristin Palm's *The Straits*

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Throughout the past three decades, the city of Detroit, Michigan, has received significant media attention due to what is oftentimes subsumed under the header of ›spectacular urban decay‹: In the US context, Detroit is, to speak with historian Dora Apel, »the central locus for the anxiety of decline« (5). Detroit's urban decline is visible in the city – from its grandiose (mostly) abandoned sites such as the Packard Plant to its smaller left-behind structures such as neighborhood stores and family homes. Detroit's status and state as a city has become subject to a variety of academic studies but has also been made visible via the photographs and accounts of urban explorers, for example. The images of decaying buildings and infrastructure that can be found on blogs or in the shape of coffee table books show Detroit's supposedly ruined landscape and promote the idea of a city that has not only seen its best days, but that is also by and large abandoned: devoid of both, people and possibility.

Without offering much clarification as to why the city of Detroit, which was once known for its economic power and its large-scale auto production, has fallen into this state, these images contribute to hiding the reasons behind decline and abandonment. Such publications showing staggering decay without any textual explanation appear to suggest that the city of Detroit and its population are to blame for the »hypercrisis« (Smith/Kirkpatrick 2015, vii). And indeed, all too often, Detroit's »dramatic decline is [....] dismissed as either the result of a pathological subculture or as an inevitable outcome of deindustrialization« (ibid., xii). This in turn means that other relevant factors – such as strategic disinvestment into Detroit's businesses or the significance of racial discrimination – are routinely left out of the equation.

Detroit is a city that is both, challenging and charged; and one where »contentious land politics [...] follow socio-historical fault lines« (Safransky 2017, 1090). More often than not, Urban Planning, the discipline commonly tasked with finding a solution to the city's problems, uses a deficit-oriented language in order to make a case for how to deal with its ›uneven‹ checker-board style urban landscape shaped by abandoned and burned-down homes, empty lots, newly inhab-

ited skyscrapers, industrial ›ruins‹ and colorful art projects. This deficit-oriented language is not only to strengthen an economic (investor-led) or developmental argument behind new projects to be completed in the city (or on the supposedly empty canvas that used to be the city), but also due to the fact that, as a discipline, Urban Planning »has only little to say about what cities should become following decline« (Dewar/Kelly/Morrison 2013, 289). At the same time, to assume that the postindustrial city of Detroit is an urban planning challenge alone is beside the point: it is a multidisciplinary undertaking that also includes fields like economics, agricultural sciences, sociology, and even literary and cultural studies.

The interest in Detroit and in postindustrial cities generally among scholars of the literary and cultural fields is not only because Urban Planning and other disciplines regularly borrow from popular culture in their proposals (Buchenau/Gurr 2018, 136), or because »urban theory uses literature and culture as analogies of the city« (ibid., 140). It also has to do with the understanding that »texts contribute to unconscious and collectively shared building blocks of understanding and behavior« (ibid., 136), and thus offer new pathways to approach the challenge of the contemporary postindustrial city more generally, and Detroit specifically. In addition to this, the literary and cultural disciplines can possibly contribute to finding a new, and much less failure-oriented language to address the situation one the ground, which is characterized by »population and employment loss, property disinvestment, and property abandonment« (Dewar/Kelly/Morrison 2013, 289).

Poetry and Radical Urban Transformation

In recent years, poetry has developed its own strategies of investigating the radical changes in the city of Detroit. Faced with the city's conditions, the genre has begun to confront the question of how Detroit's intensely divisive history can and should be told, and by whom. Poetry can work as a powerful force of unbuilding and rebuilding the city, of re-imagining it beyond economic investment strategies, and of uncovering its hidden layers and secret caverns. Much like urban exploration, a poem can enter into abandoned sites and zoom in on a place's unique features and expose the reasons behind decay.

Detroit poetry, and specifically the poetry I term the ›poetry of radical urban transformation‹ has enabled a different way of looking at the city. This type of writing openly confronts the so-called ›ruins‹ but without sensationalizing them or opening them for future investment; it thus also speaks up against the utilitarian approaches to art that some investors – such as Dan Gilbert, who at this time owns a significant number of buildings in downtown Detroit (Runyan/Mondry 2020) – have brought to the city in their regeneration efforts. The poem thus offers a re-assessment of existing ›versions‹, literary and other, of the city. Taken seriously, re-reading Detroit via its poetry is an intertextual and interdisciplinary

undertaking, and one that requires careful study of terms, of their history, of the contentions associated with them. It also requires attention to form. The poetry of radical urban transformation pays attention to the different ways in which Detroit is charged. It simultaneously speaks to the built environment and urban form as well as to the city's different layers of memory and meaning. It critically comments on the way language shapes the perception of urban processes in the past, present and future.

In the following, I will explore an example of this poetry. Set in Detroit, Kristin Palm's »City of Conscience« is part of a volume called *The Straits*, published in 2008, and thus at a point when Detroit's urban crisis had reached a new low. At this time, in the middle of the worldwide financial crisis, images of the ›fall of the Motor City‹ went around the world. In summer of 2013, Detroit became the largest US city to declare bankruptcy, arguably the culmination of these earlier developments. Together, the two poems in Palm's volume offer a portrait of the city that amounts to a »poetic investigatory tour de force«, as fellow poet Rodrigo Toscano describes it on the book cover. The first text in the volume, an epic-like poem titled »The Straits«, explores Detroit's urban history based on the claim that it is characterized by a continuous chain of displacement, disappointment and injustice. It argues that there are parallels between the colonial foundation and the auto industry's aggressive taking over of the land, between the violent removal of Native Americans and 1950s urban renewal; between 19th-century racial violence and the 1967 rebellion that killed 43 Detroiters and that is often referred to as the beginning of city's radical downfall. The follow-up poem »City of Conscience« addresses the different narrative layers of the city of Detroit and establishes a psychogeography of the city in decline. It is not shy of asking whether it is worth staying in the city despite all its problems. In this poem, the answer is negative, and the speaker decides to leave the city behind.

The poems in *The Straits* insist that while Detroit was built on land, on dreams and on promises, the factor that was constantly ignored, whether in the 18th, 19th, or 20th centuries was that »there are people here« (Palm 2008, 60). The city is not just its materiality, its structures, or its buildings, its profit or the lack thereof, but its people – those it rejected, removed and neglected over centuries. Incorporating photographs and maps, quotes from newspaper articles and other publications, as well as a number of idiosyncratic lists of materials, occupations, places, both »The Straits« and »City of Conscience« are artistic investigations of what happens when a city is built on »*a speculative frame of mind*« (ibid., 26; italics in original), when its sole focus on big industry and money making (quite literally) blocks the view of what the city actually can and should be, and when its structures, »the tireless handiwork of craftsmen and laborers« (ibid., 56) become nothing but »mournful testaments to ›better days‹« (ibid.).

In its negotiation of the manifold layers of the postindustrial city, the poetry of radical urban transformation finds ways of »addressing the interrelation between the planned, built environment of the city of Detroit and the process of literally

›spelling out‹ this specific place in a text« (Sattler 2018, 121). In that sense, it is at once locally specific and simultaneously opens up a connection between art and the world at large, what Adrienne Rich has called the »permeable membrane between art and society« (2006, 210). By the same token, the poetry of radical urban transformation is not and should not be understood as a way of depicting a supposed ›reality‹ of Detroit – or any other transforming city – at a particular moment in time. Rather, it constitutes a mode of research on and analysis of the situation at hand, as well as a strategy of resistance to conceptions for the future city that look at its transformation merely from an economic standpoint. In short, it offers a different way to think about the city, one that is not obliged to any specific agenda, e. g. in terms of having to come up with a strategic plan for a site in the city – a poem is not a development plan, after all. Understood as documentations of the urban experience in their own right, urban poems can »expose aspects of urban experience invisible to other modes of analysis, propose alternatives to the status quo, and politicize the need for change« (Mickelson 2018, 4).

Poetry thus conceived is then not just part of the ›world‹ (or the city) as it is, but it also has the opportunity to contribute to and generate change. Via its work with words, but also with their absence, this kind of writing contributes to the visibility of relationships between things, between people, between events and between different layers of time and space that are not obvious at first sight, or that are repressed. It can also establish new relationships or connections that do not immediately come to mind: it has constitutive power. Via the representation of Detroit, of daily life in the city, or even just the careful linguistic analysis of singular built structures in the city, poetry offers the opportunity to re-assess the process that is subsumed under umbrella terms like ›turbulent urbanism‹ or ›urban decline‹. In contrast to the photographic ruin porn genre that does not ask for the reasons behind decline, this kind of writing is able to explore the mechanisms leading to it and their long-term consequences. The poetry of radical urban transformation is processual, and it is simultaneously creative and archival. It relates to and builds on the documentary impulse. As a fictional composition, it is able to dive into the past and construct a different future. It can offer explanations for the city's decline that are not part of any sociological or economic evaluation. Thus, ideally, this kind of writing can help make sense of the postindustrial landscape in different ways compared to official documents, be they planning proposals or masterplans. It speaks to the affective, emotional dimension of the city and can thus also generate hope or at least perseverance.

»Yet structures exist« The Psychogeography of Detroit

»City of Conscience« provides an insight into the multiple spatial and narrative layers that make up the city of Detroit: It is set in the early 21st century, but also considers earlier phases of the city's history and development; it speaks to the different ways how a specific image of Detroit is constructed in the media and beyond. This commentary is achieved via the inclusion of photographic images and the mentioning of important events for the city, but also via the use of line breaks and almost empty pages throughout, leading to the impression of Detroit as an accumulation of fragments and recollections of what it used to be. Here, the reader is confronted with ideas about Detroit that are well-known, but this time, gains an insider's perspective on what is happening in the city. This is achieved via the inclusion of statements relating to everyday life in Detroit and by exploring how the community deals with its environment, including abandoned spaces or decaying buildings. »City of Conscience« comments in some detail, for example, on the way the city and its inhabitants »use the land« (Palm 2008, 81) – meaning the land that has become available due to the transformation of Detroit. It becomes clear that it is difficult to reduce Detroit to just one specific image or idea, as is often the case in media reports about it. While it is true that abandoned sites across the city have become dumping grounds for a variety of unusable items and even »*human feces, bodies*« (ibid., 81, italics in original), Detroit's citizens have also learned to »turn detritus into art« (ibid.) or use abandoned land for »farming« (ibid.).

Therefore, it can be argued that the poem amounts to a kind of psychogeography of Detroit. Guy Debord describes psychography as the »study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals« (»Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography«), which comes very close to what »City of Conscience« accomplishes due to its play with content and form, but also due to its allusions to the way the city affects those living in it: »›space commands bodies‹« (ibid., 70), as the text proclaims, adding that these are »people with bodies/ space to be lived in by people with bodies« (idid). By way of its irregular layout, the poem does not only comment on the way Detroit looks in the early 2000s, but it also alludes to the way in which human behavior and human reaction are unpredictable in the face of the situation.

In essence, the poem is a type of collage made of tidbits of daily life in a stream-of-consciousness style. It includes the speaker's reflections on language, takes into account people moving in space and shaping their surroundings, offers commentaries on the physical form of the city of Detroit, and ways to make use of this space. It works with repetition and with passages that re-appear throughout, but in slightly altered form, leading the reader to seek for connection and, indeed,

for structure. »City of Conscience« lists and adds up, defines and re-defines. In that sense, the poem shares many characteristics with the American urban long poem, e. g. Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* or William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and even quotes from these earlier works. While a detailed analysis of its dialogue and relationship with this form would provide enough material for another essay, »City of Conscience« can productively be described as a »compound mosaic« – a term John Wrighton (2012, 28) has used in connection with Olson's *Maximus*.

It quite literally picks up the materials and materiality of the city from its predecessor poem *The Straits* by listing its

> alluvial earth
> geodiferous limestone
> lias limestone
> salt
> quicksand
> yellow clay (Palm 2008, 66) –

the materials of the city at its origin. It also refers to the defining markers of Detroit's growth and decline, which are discussed at length in *The Straits* (»assembly line / urban renewal / what's good for _____ / is good for the nation/ police raid on a blind pig«). The first lines are thus not random lists of words relating to Detroit; rather, they point to the different layers of its development over time and their meaning, answering, possibly, the question of what the city is, what defines and shapes it. It is, of course, the physical ground it is built on, but it is more than that: Detroit is held together by specific events and processes – industrialization and mechanization, the profit principle, racial unrest. Early on in the poem, the text establishes the speaker's positionality in relation to these key words or key events (»you are here ••«). Here, the speaker, despite her decisive role for the text's perspective, is just one little dot on the page, literally – the poem offers one specific point of view on the situation.

In its entirety, »City of Conscience« is fragmentary instead of cohesive, associative rather focused on a particular style or topic or thing, »a field / (open)« (ibid., 65) rather than a result of fixed structures. In that sense it is much in tune with the physical condition of the city at the time of the poem's publication – and with the idea that Detroit is no longer a city, but something else entirely. Remarkably, most pages of »City of Conscience« center around emptiness – there are several pages with fewer than 20 words on them, and not even these few words stand closely together in all cases (see fig. 1). There are structures that look like a regular poem with verses, but there are also parts that look like prose or that can even be described as a more or less coherent narrative. There are line breaks and empty lines, brackets and passages in italics, blanks, arrows and crosses. The empty space can be read as an allusion to one of the most popular narratives about De-

troit: The idea of an abandoned or mostly abandoned city, or as Jerry Herron has explicated, the »un-city« of Detroit (»Motor City Breakdown«) – a city that does not fulfill the central parameters of urbanity anymore. It also lends much weight to the few words that *are* on the page. At the same time, the poem recognizes that »no space disappears completely« (Palm 2008, 91), but that even structures – and people – that are no longer there have left their mark: here, it becomes clear that the city is even more layered than its visuality might give away. This presentation is well in tune with Jerry Herron's observation that Detroit »exemplifies our careless delinquency when it comes to whoever and whatever gets left behind« (Herron 2007, 671) and establishes a new angle on the city or, rather, its remains.

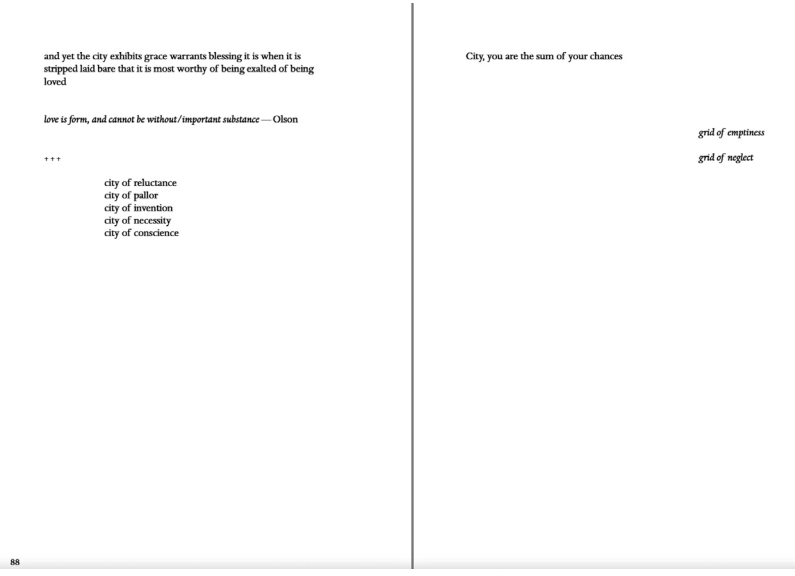
Certainly, the complex and irregular structure of the poem shapes the reader's interpretation of Detroit – there is, for example, no apparent order to the different types of fragments. Rather, their disorder resembles the experience of the physical city of Detroit in which it is difficult to orient oneself. Often, the visual experience of walking or driving through the city is akin to finding different pieces of a puzzle – a situation where the visitor never knows what comes around the next corner: A luxury hotel or an abandoned and burned-out home. The poem in that sense tries to convey this experience via language and form – not in the form of an accusation, but from an ›equal‹ perspective with the city.

»City of Conscience« speaks from the point of view of a white female person with a background in the arts. It is taking the stance of a member of a population in Detroit that is, at least in the early 2000s, feared or hated as much as it is needed in order to preserve some semblance of economic stability. At times, the poem also uses the pronoun »we,« standing in for the larger group of young, educated and rather privileged people in the city who have developed specific coping strategies – from »never leav[ing] returnables in the car« to »treat[ing] stoplights as optional« (Palm 2008, 87): An urban postindustrial *habitus* of young white people in Detroit to deal with a situation that can be experienced as unsafe or threatening. These parts generally focus on activities or concepts that drive collective identity in the city: Shopping, making friends, spending time studying. In addressing the young people's *habitus*, the fragments also speak to the way »→space commands bodies←« (ibid., 70).

In the latter part of the poem, the speaker begins to carefully weigh her options in relation to her future, and whether she can image spending this time in Detroit. In this part, she reflects about what she likes about the city, and what terrifies her about her experience in it, and decides to leave – thus establishing the most coherent storyline in the poem if one were to search for it: Recalling her perceptions of and experiences in the city, a young white woman decides to leave Detroit: »City, I could write about you until the end of time and it would not make me able to return to you« (ibid., 90). This ambivalent narrative sublayer of »City of Conscience« and its psychogeography of Detroit both contests and confirms the assumption that young white people come to the city to profit and then leave. If the speaker profits, then this profit is not of the financial sort – it is the freedom to

be able to leave, to have a choice, that marks her as privileged. By introducing the reader to her strategies of moving around in Detroit, of interpreting the sites and the people she encounters, the speaker offers her – however inconclusive – interpretation of the city. In that sense, she becomes a reporter, an observer, a commentator, social critic, and, finally, historian; and one more interpreter of Detroit and its challenges. She can also be read in line with the early Situationists on a *dérive* and encountering and dealing with a variety of everyday situations.

Fig. 1: Pages 88 and 89 from Palm's The Straits *(2008), illustrating the text's dialogue with Olson as well as its various comments on the city of Detroit and its perception.*


and yet the city exhibits grace warrants blessing it is when it is stripped laid bare that it is most worthy of being exalted of being loved

love is form, and cannot be without/important substance — Olson

+++

city of reluctance
city of pallor
city of invention
city of necessity
city of conscience

88

City, you are the sum of your chances

grid of emptiness

grid of neglect

89

»The city is not a conversation« Discursive Layers of Detroit

In talking about the daily experience of Detroit from this particular point of view, »City of Conscience« introduces one angle on Detroit's postindustrial urbanism. In its attempts to find adequate words to address the experience of Detroit, »City of Conscience« alludes to and at times even quotes from the work of Henri Lefebvre. This is certainly worth noting, as it was Lefebvre who, in *The Production of Space*, looked at the different modes of spatialization in their relation to capitalism and production, and reflected about the relationship between language and space, which is another important layer of Detroit as depicted in

»City of Conscience«: There is more to Detroit than its physical experience that shapes its spatial practice, to borrow yet another term from Lefebvre (1991). The page with the least text on it states this quite plainly: »The city is not a conversation« (Palm 2008, 68), but rather, as the poem shows, has become a collection of discourses that contribute to the interpretation of physical space, and the human experience of it.

The poem confronts the reader with several explanations for Detroit's decline. It includes ideas that circulate in the media and elsewhere in relation to »Detroit«, which in some ways has become a chiffre, a symbol of urban decline and »modernity in ruins« (Apel 2015, 6). Detroit is both, »city of accumulation« and »city of lack« (Palm 2008, 69) – its contrasts are staggering. To complicate this apparent contrast between »accumulation« and »lack,« it can be argued – with David Harvey – that accumulation in the capitalist system has produced lack in the first place: the process Harvey describes as »accumulation by dispossession« which in turn produces a new kind of imperialism. This is a process that overall is well in tune with Detroit's current tendency of both the gentrification and »imperialization« of downtown into spaces owned by a small group of large-scale investors, and the persistent poverty and decline in the surrounding areas. It is certainly not a coincidence that in relation to these projects, in recent years, colonial terms have been used by both citizens and the media (Sattler 2018, 131).

»City of Conscience« considers that the language used to address the city matters, as do memories and interpretations of its urban spaces: »City, you are what I read and what I remember« (Palm 2008, 74). Both of these types of associations – what the speaker reads and what she remembers – play into the poem. Her memories do not only include everyday encounters or events that she recalls fondly (e.g. »biking on Belle Isle«, ibid., 76) or not so fondly (e.g. »wild dogs«, ibid., 77), but also events that have been formative for the city of Detroit at large, e.g. the demolition by implosion of Hudson's department store in 1997, that also marked the end of department stores in downtown Detroit. This crucial event is not only remembered in the speaker's direct address to the city, recalling, in prose, the moment she »watched [...] as they wrested that building away from you, its ashes raining into the street, onto cars, over people, into the river« (ibid., 82), but it is also recalled in the form of three photographs that are part of the poem's visual layer: one of the implosion, one of the building falling down, and a third of the empty Hudson site (ibid., 84). Not only was Hudson's iconic as a department store – but its implosion and the emptiness it left behind have changed the outlook of the city, its economic opportunity, and its attractiveness to investors, tourists and citizens alike. The Hudson site is thus not a neutral site, nor was it ever one.

The speaker alludes to different reasons why Hudson's was torn down: it was deemed an »eyesore« (ibid., 82), it had »water damage« (ibid.), and »it holds too many memories« (ibid.). These memories are certainly not just of middle-class Detroiters and others shopping in the large-scale department store, but also of the racial discrimination that was and is part and parcel of Detroit. In Detroit, memo-

ries are contested, as they run along racial fault lines (e.g. Eisinger 2017)– African Americans will remember urban renewal as a time of upheaval and loss, for example, and not as a time of reinvention in the interest of economic uplift – a »*city of erasure*« (Palm 2008, 75, italics in original) rather than one of support, as the demolition of the African American neighborhood during urban renewal attests.

In a similar manner, the reasons for Detroit's decline are a matter of contestation: whether one blames the city's sole focus on the auto industry, for example, or decisions relating to its urban layout, or outmigration of the more prosperous – and generally white – population into the suburbs following the racial unrest of the 1960s is not only a matter of politics, but also of experience. Detroit is, indeed, a »city of perception« (ibid., 92) and in many ways one of »circumstance« (ibid.), as the speaker describes it – and the spatial structure and landscape that emerges due to this situation can be understood as both, a disaster or »(an object emerging from the hands / of an artist« (ibid.).

There are even those who would like to consider Detroit as a city on the way to recovery, as the city's motto, which »City of Conscience« includes both in Latin and in English, indicates, albeit in reversed order. This motto, »We hope for better things / it will arise from ashes«, attests to Detroit's perseverance and its »rebirth« following devastation by fire in 1805. In reversed order, these lines – »it will arise from ashes/ we hope for better things« (ibid., 74) – indicate that while hope exists, Detroit's rebirth is not a certain fact this time around, an observation that will certainly be shared by many scholars of the city: »What has risen in Detroit is a human disaster that makes it difficult to sustain a belief in our common decency as people« (Herron 2007, 671). In the early 2000s, the city is plagued by so many problems and issues that it is unclear whether it can be rebuilt or restructured via urban regeneration programs or neoliberal investment tactics. This understanding of the city's condition is certainly hard to grasp given the fact that in essence, in the early 20th century, Detroit was where the modern world and the American Dream came into being – it was known for its wealth, and the comparative well-being it offered to the workers, who rose to the middle class, until these people departed, »rushing along the world's first concrete highways out into the green world of suburbia« (ibid., 674).

Detroit, as the poem highlights, is »a linguistic act« (Palm 2008, 73), but it is also a physical reality – a place that can be experienced, explored, and photographed in all its beauty, but also in all its decay. Its layout can be read as a »grid of memory« (ibid., 83) recalling its reconstruction following the fire of 1805 as well as the industrial and working class history explicated above, for example, but it is simultaneously also a »grid of chaos« and »grid of loneliness«, thinking of its abandoned structures, its manifold instances of racial unrest, the economic pressures faced by the citizens, and the feeling of isolation that can emerge in a place that has lost both, citizens and structure. From this perspective, »the city is not a conversation« because it has become impossible to talk about it: The city is »the sum of its chances« (ibid., 89), but, at the end of the poem, it seems in a

stalemate with no future direction clearly pointed out, and no past to look back to without significant pain or contestation – a »*grid of emptiness*« and »*grid of neglect*« (ibid., italics in original).

The processes of construction and erasure that simultaneously make and unmake Detroit – both in the past and in the present – are, to argue with Jerry Herron, exemplary for the American condition at large (2007, 675). Modernity and modern production led to the workforce giving up on their individual pasts and exchanging it for mass cultural consumption, producing, as it were, »a melting-pot culture of sameness« (ibid., 676) via capitalist practices. But in the postindustrial age, Detroit »becomes a junkyard of no longer relevant forgetting machines« (ibid.), an urban landscape full of reminders of a time when the city was still a site of hope and of growth. In the present, however, it no longer stands for American aspirations, but for their neglect, which necessitates, in a sense, a new way of dealing »with the visible remains of history« (ibid., 677). This process is a matter of addressing memory and trauma more than anything else and as such, needs a new productive language – and is, hence, the subject of poetry at large and of »City of Conscience« specifically.

Poetry – A New Way of Writing the Postindustrial City?

In »City of Conscience« the speaker – or the poem at large – does not come up with any readymade explanations for what ails the city, or solutions how to fix it. While the speaker knows Detroit well enough to be aware of »all its attendant problems (broken streetlights, failing schools, Crazy Larry pushing his shopping cart down the left turn lane of Woodward Ave., come here, he says, and me all belligerent, no you come here, and he does to show me a picture of a baby girl – can he have a dollar – who may or may not be his)« (Palm 2008, 90); these are listed in a stream-of-consciousness in prose style, without judging and without alluding to any strategies to react to them. There are problems relating to the physical structure and financial situation of Detroit, problems rooted in these financial issues, as well as problems relating to the population and its physical and mental health, including but not limited to far-reaching poverty and lacking social security.

Rather than suggesting about what is to be done, in its attempt to speak to the lack of words for the situation, the poem asks »What takes precedence? What do we view together and in isolation?« (ibid.), suggesting that what ails the city and what would potentially cure it is a matter of interpretation and of language, of expressing what indeed »takes precedence.« The idea that there needs to be a definition before there can be a solution suggests the necessity of a scripting process akin to the one the settlers experienced in the colonial period, and one that »The Straits« refers to as a process of becoming »*cartog-*

raphers« who »*made up names*« (ibid., 7). This is a process of taking control over the land – though in this latter rendition of the narrative of Detroit, the question of who is able to take this control is left open: the speaker, the white settler, leaves the city behind.

In speaking to the complication of finding the right language to address the contested past, present and even future of the postindustrial city, the poems in the collection *The Straits* still answer to the calls of, for example, Peter Marcuse, who advocated for progressive urban planners to understand themselves as interpreters of urban life instead of as constructors of space who can find a solution to a problem via a technical approach. Instead of finding an answer in construction, an approach like the one promoted by Marcuse calls for exposing the root causes of the problem, the proposition of alternatives and politicization of both problem and solution (Mickelson 2018, 3). This process necessitates archival work as well as paying attention to personal experiences and practical knowledge in order to identify what is not working. The poems, in their attempt to find a language and a form for the psychogeography of Detroit and uncovering the different layers adding to the city's decline can possibly find terms that go beyond those with negative connotations, such as »abandonment,« »decline« or »decay.«

In the long run, including poetry into processes of planning could transform existing notions of knowledge and its bearers in the field of urban planning. Poetry can help expose the urban complexity (ibid., 181) that needs to be considered when working with a site. It points to those affective dimensions of space that too often are not considered, but that could bear much significance in a city like Detroit, in which postindustrial and other sites bring back memories of segregation, and in which urban planning has contributed to the city's decline. It would also do justice to the fact that »confronting injustice requires more than theorizing and articulating visions of a better urban future in isolation« (ibid., 179) and allow for a bottom-up reading of the city, doing justice to those layers of the city that may up to now be invisible to the eye.

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