

Abstract

My dissertation, *Anarchy in Detroit: Rock and Radicalism in the Rust Belt, 1967-2013*, explores the political and cultural movements that saw opportunity in Detroit during the decades following the city's infamous urban rebellion. I expose connections between music scenes, radical politics, and postindustrial spaces to argue that Detroit's rich history of popular music is intertwined with its equally rich but less well-known history of political radicalism. Through an exploration of hardcore punk, techno, and anarchist subcultures, this work will bring into conversation the fields of cultural history, urban history, popular music studies, and social movement history to provide a lineage of contemporary new social movements and refute narratives suggesting that the 1980s were a nadir period for the Left and for Detroit. My research will also tell a different story of the urban crisis, focusing on how Detroiters creatively resisted predatory practices of capital and the state by using the imagination as a radical tool to reshape the city. I suggest that city-dwellers today look to Detroiters for inspiration on how to cope with ongoing hardships presented by neoliberal disinvestment. My research methodology will involve archival work with self-published "zines" housed at the University of Michigan as well as personal collections of scene participants in addition to oral histories with artists and activists involved in these movements.

After surviving the Armenian genocide and fleeing their homeland, my great-grandparents immigrated to the United States and eventually to Detroit, Michigan to pursue the American dream in the city's industrial factories. Henry Ford had announced the Five Dollar Day in 1914, at the same time the Ottoman Turks were beginning their systematic destruction of the Armenian people, and folks from all over the world flocked to Detroit for the promise of unbelievably high wages. Much of my family has remained in the metro-Detroit area, from its period as the "Arsenal of Democracy" through its postindustrial decline. For my great-grandparents, Detroit was the quintessential land of opportunity, but I learned a very different story about the city when growing up in the 1990s. In both popular narratives and urban histories, Detroit is often portrayed as a symbol of failure. Historians have used Detroit to study the flaws of the U.S. real estate market, labor unions, industrialization, and Black capitalism. My dissertation project will refute this jaundiced narrative, arguing that city dwellers should look to Detroit's history of radical art and politics for ways to resist neoliberal disinvestment and reclaim the right to dignified life in the city. My dissertation ultimately suggests that in the same way the city was a land of opportunity for my great-grandparents, postindustrial Detroit also offered opportunities—albeit in a different way—for the urbanites living there after the 1967 Rebellion.

My dissertation will elevate the works and voices of those who looked at Detroit during the decades following the 1960s and saw that opportunity, or "otherwise possibilities"—the "infinite

alternatives” to conditions structured by racism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism.¹ This story includes the suburban teens who created music scenes in the inner city that were not possible in their own neighborhoods, a few of the most venerated anarchist thinkers and activists of the twentieth century, and the folks who published the longest-running anarchist newspaper in North America, *The Fifth Estate*. By combining the city’s music history with its history of political radicalism, I hope to demonstrate that the people involved in music scenes and political activism influenced each other, and that all of these actors used Detroit’s postindustrial space to practice “prefigurative politics,” essentially living the different world one wishes to manifest.² For example, one chapter will discuss the influential hardcore punk scene that blossomed in the Cass Corridor neighborhood during the early 1980s. Hardcore punk first came to Detroit through an activist effort, a “Rock Against Reagan” show organized by the antiracists in Rock Against Racism.³ With bands like Negative Approach, the Necros, Bored Youth, and the Meatmen, as well as the label/zine Touch and Go, Detroit became a major center of early hardcore. The Cass Corridor was known as a bohemian enclave during the 1960s, but was hard hit during the Rebellion and by the 1980s was ground zero of the crack epidemic. In 1981, primarily white teenagers from Detroit’s suburbs began traveling to the Corridor to attend hardcore punk shows at a short-lived venue called the Freezer Theater. The venue was able to host the all-ages, raucous shows the hardcore scene required because the surrounding neighborhood was so desolate and police rarely monitored the area. Detroit hardcore raised a critique of life in the suburbs, with songs that fumed over the alienation and acquiescence those spaces required to maintain their homogeneity. My dissertation will follow hardcore fans and others who used Detroit’s postindustrial space to recreate the world as they wanted it to be.

¹ Ashon Crawley defines “otherwise possibilities” as “the fact of infinite alternatives to what is.” Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2.

² The concept of prefigurative politics was first theorized by Carl Boggs and was later embraced by anarchists and the “new social movements.” Carl Boggs, “MARXISM, PREFIGURATIVE COMMUNISM, AND THE PROBLEM OF WORKERS’ CONTROL,” *Radical America* 11, no. 5 (November 1, 1977); David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Paradigm (Chicago, Ill.) (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press ; distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³ Flyer posted to the Instagram page @detroithardcoremovie on December 29, 2020. The concert was co-sponsored by Rock Against Racism, United Marijuana Smokers of Michigan, and the Yippies, and featured bands including hardcore predecessors Bad Brains and D.O.A.

The funds from the Dolores Zohrab Liebmann fellowship would release me from teaching obligations at the University of Virginia, allowing me to relocate to Michigan to perform archival research and oral history fieldwork. My archival research will lean heavily on “zines,” publications created with a do-it-yourself ethos that share information about a subculture or spur political action, made by the activists and music fans under study. I will explore well-known music fanzines like *Touch and Go* alongside anarchist publications like *The Fifth Estate* as well as more obscure publications. Many of these zines are housed at the Labadie Collection of Radical Ephemera at the University of Michigan and others are held in private collections. I plan to create a digital humanities project that will display the zines in a digital archive built using the open-source Omeka platform, so that activists and those interested in Detroit history can view these publications. It is important to me that my research is public facing so that people without the privilege to access databases or university libraries can engage with this work. I will also conduct oral histories with surviving activists and artists including counterculture icon John Sinclair, hardcore pioneer John Brannon, and past and present zine writers and artists. Establishing these connections will enrich my dissertation with the lived experience of participants in these movements.

Relocating to Detroit would also allow me to participate in activism and expand my role as a “scholar-activist” within the communities where I study or work. When writing about marginalized peoples and places, scholars can often be extractive, parachuting into the community to collect source material before disappearing. This is not something I want to replicate, but my degree requirements will not allow me to be part of Detroit’s community without external funding. Finally, I hope to move to Detroit permanently after obtaining my doctorate, therefore the opportunity to build connections there before I graduate would be important to gaining future employment. Detroit institutions like Wayne State and Oakland University are places I can see myself, where professors teach a diverse body of students and can organize to fight the disinvestment that has wreaked havoc on the city’s education system. It is important to me to return the knowledge and expertise to the community that was integral to my scholarly and professional development.