



SOUTHWEST DETROIT AUTO HERITAGE GUIDE

Highlighting a Century of Auto History in a Neighborhood that Built the Car

Exploring Southwest Detroit Cultural Community Auto Histories

Louise-Hélène Filion, PhD (with Ron Alpern)

In her research and teaching, Dr. Filion focuses on cross-cultural issues, including migration narratives, theories of cross-cultural communication, intertextuality, reception, and comparative studies. During the course of her postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan, sponsored by the Research Fund of Quebec in Society and Culture, she was a key contributor to discussions that informed the Guide's effort to highlight the ways the cultural communities of Southwest Detroit powered the growth of the region's 20th century auto industry. This essay was adapted from a presentation designed to help the Guide research team understand some of the challenges that are associated with exploring the area's Latino/a history as well as that of the area's communities of color.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is no simple undertaking to write a local history of one of Detroit's neighborhoods, capturing the legacy of automotive entrepreneurs, workers, businesses, and unions. The broader story of Southeast Michigan's essential contribution to the development of the automotive industry is well known. But that broader story is nearly always told in one voice, too often as a shallow textbook history of great men and the companies they founded. That is not, of course, the full narrative. To understand the fuller story, we are obliged to find ways to give a voice to people whose experiences in this nationally important landscape have too often been overlooked and to examine how such experiences are inextricably bound up both with specific ethnic and racial identities and physical places.

The task before those researchers seeking to broaden the Guide's historical horizon will be invigorating, and it may not be an easy one. Although some of these community events unfolded decades ago, researchers will need to ensure that stories are told in a fashion that appeals to today's younger generation.

Those who aid the Guide's initial effort to highlight the stories of African American, Arab American, Irish, Italian, Latino/a, Maltese, Native American, Polish, and other Eastern European communities will need to trace:

- How did they come to be there?
- How did they contribute to the rise of the auto industry in Southwest Detroit?

II. IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN THE EARLY AUTOMOBILE ERA

In the United States, the early automobile era coincides with the enactment of immigration policies explicitly driven by race. In his study of the Maltese Community in Detroit and Toronto, for example, Marc Anthony Sanko explains how the rapid growth of industrial might gave birth to a truly global labor market in the second half of the nineteenth century. As immigration grew to meet the demand for workers in America's auto, steel, mining, and textile industries, the nation's sense of identity was increasingly contested. For many (white) Americans the "ideal" had always been an America composed of white Protestants who were content to deny full citizenship to formerly enslaved Africans. After the Civil War understandings of what constituted American citizenship came to be less restricted on the basis of race or religion. Despite that partial broadening, the post-Civil War influx of immigrants from Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe (viewed as suspect in terms of race and/or religion) led to efforts to restrict immigration from those areas.

The beginning of a formally restrictive immigration policy may be dated to the Page Act of 1875 (which banned Chinese women from entering the US) and then the even broader Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Several other immigration laws based on race were enacted in their wake, the most significant of which was the Immigration Act of 1924, which created a new quota that provided immigration visas to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 national census. Because there were relatively few immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe counted in the 1890 census, the quotas that emerged for citizens of those countries were extremely restrictive. The 1924 law also completely excluded immigrants from Asia.¹ It is important to note that the 1924 law set out no quotas for Western Hemisphere nations; immigration from Mexico was not significantly constrained,, although Mexicans were required to follow other immigration rules, such as passing through a border station upon entry to the US. It is in this era that the opportunity of work in northern industrial cities attracted African Americans who chafed under the hardship of the Jim Crow south.

In ideal circumstances, we would hope to identify voices that can speak to the impact of these and other immigration laws. Are there diaries or letters that present reactions to these immigration policies driven so explicitly by national origin? Can we find stories in our diverse diaspora communities that evoke increasingly these and other racialized immigration laws? Can materials be located that testify to a perception by some Latino/as that their darker skin tone and Catholic religion excluded them from the "ideal" of national American identity? Did the writers of testimonies perceive themselves as "foreign" and/or discriminated against as workers in the auto industry? Did they share views that might have affected subsequent generations that came (or chose not to come) to the United States? In other words, how

¹ "The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)." *The Office of the Historian (Department of State/United States of America)*: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act> (accessed May 22, 2022).

much was migration influenced by how previous generations perceived their own racial or ethnic status in the US?

III. THE HISPANIC EXPERIENCE AND THE CRISIS OF VISIBILITY

In the automotive industry, first-generation immigrants were often restricted to working semi-skilled production jobs – in foundries or on the assembly line. In the early years of the industry, the stories of the men and -- until the World Wars of the 20th century, only a few women -- who worked in the factories were overshadowed, in much of the scholarly and popular auto literature, by a focus on the industry's founders and innovators. It would take decades before the scholars began to look at the ground-level experiences of some Southwest Detroit communities.

There is now a more substantial body of literature on the Hispanic experience in the industrial Midwest². Detroit storyteller, lawyer and filmmaker Alicia Diaz offers a word of caution in her video presentation "Rebellion: Latinx Detroit"³ Díaz reflects on her youth in Southwest Detroit, focusing on themes of visibility and invisibility. She recounts the challenge of reconciling her identity as the child of a Puerto Rican father and an African American mother. At home, she says, both parts of her identity could be productively "knit together"⁴, but she felt awkward when she left her home:

When I stepped outside of that door I became chameleon-like, and invisibility would become a central part of my identity. I was educated in Southwest Detroit, which is our city's barrio (neighborhood) ... So you know, every day I was surrounded by latinidad. However, it was a latinidad that did not look or sound like me because most of our community was mexicano⁵.

In her barrio, being Black, she felt invisible if she did not speak Spanish. But she also felt invisible as a Latina outside the barrio because she looked like the majority of African American Detroiters.

Rodriguez, Valdes, Vargas, and Diaz encourage us to take a close look at the diversity of experiences within each community. What can we learn about where Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, or others found work? Were all these communities more or less proportionally

² The list of references at the end of this paper includes useful books and articles by, among others, Suarez Findley, Rodriguez, Casey, and Vargas.

³ Alicia Díaz, "Rebellion: Latinx Detroit," *The Secret Society of Twisted Storytellers*, event hosted by Satori Shakoor at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, 20 September 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiBPhzCQVvc> (accessed May 27, 2022). Shakoor is an instructor at the Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies (CLLAS) at Wayne State University.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 8:19 minutes.

⁵ *Ibid.*, at 8:20-8:48 minutes.

represented in major auto plants? Were they clustered in smaller parts suppliers, or did they first find employment in related industries, like steel? Answers to questions like these may be best explored in a graduate student's dissertation and may prove too detailed to be easily summarized in the Guide. However, our efforts could provide a valuable service by raising these types of issues and encouraging others to explore them further.

IV. NO SINGLE LENS

Since neighborhood histories, by definition, pay special attention to particular physical places, one should carefully avoid associating some of these places with a specific community, however central they might symbolically be for that community. Ms. Díaz shows how the Detroit River, a symbolically important place for African Americans — since it had represented freedom from American slavery for those who had crossed into Canada — held similar meaning for the numerous Central Americans in the twentieth century who followed another underground route to Detroit and reached their own freedom as they, too, crossed into Canada.⁶

In the context of immigration narratives, silenced experiences are often related to arduous, painful events. For many Mexican and Mexican American workers in Michigan, the “Repatriation” (1931-1933) was a deeply traumatic event: millions of people in both groups, US citizens among them, were deported (often extrajudicially) to Mexico in response to a US economy shrunk by the Great Depression. Beyond the hardships associated with being displaced from the United States, when Mexican and Mexican American families arrived in Mexico they found the promises of a better life for them there weren't fulfilled. Many repatriados found it difficult to talk about this intensely troubling period.

The interpretation of such difficult moments in the histories of these and other communities will require care and sensitivity. Any effort that highlights those experiences will ensure that the sacrifices and tribulations of that era are recognized and honored by these groups' descendants and by the larger community.

V. DISINVESTMENT & SUBURBANIZATION

Local histories must consider periods of both boom and bust, as the auto industry was both plagued by and the cause of, severe business cycles in the metro Detroit economy. The early automotive industry in Detroit fueled a period of extremely rapid economic and residential growth. From a city of 23 square miles at the turn of the century, Detroit expanded to 139 square miles by 1927.⁷ Auto manufacturing began to overtake what previously had been a

⁶ Alicia Díaz, *op. cit.*, at 18:40-19:20 minutes.

⁷ Steve Babson, with Ron Alpern, Dave Elsila, and John Revitte, *Working Detroit. The Making of a Union Town* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), p. 23.

diversified economy that produced railroad rolling stock, stoves, marine engines and Great Lakes ships, pharmaceuticals, clothing, and other consumer goods, a consequence little understood (and even less worried about) in the automotive heyday.⁸

In his 2023 Wayne State University dissertation⁹, Guide Team member Mitchell Fleischer notes that most observers see deindustrialization — defined as “the departure of manufacturing from the cities of the northeast and north central states to the American south and to low-wage countries such as China and Mexico” — as the main cause of Detroit’s and Michigan’s economic hardships of the 1970s and 1980s:

The decline of manufacturing in Michigan and the Midwest in general is well known. What is less often discussed is why that has presented such a challenge to these local economies. The real problem was that there was relatively little of any other type of employment, besides that in the auto dependent sector in these communities. Thus, there was no place else for workers to turn when their plants closed. Ever since the rise of the automobile industry, Detroit has been heavily concentrated in that one industry. As early as 1930, scholars showed that Detroit was among the least diversified major cities in the US.¹⁰

The shrinkage, and then closing, of GM’s Fleetwood, Cadillac Fort Street, and Turnstedt plants had a devastating impact on Southwest Detroit residents, and especially on lower-seniority workers from the area’s ethnic communities.

The challenges of addressing the impact of suburbanization parallel those of discussing deindustrialization. The wave of post-World War II auto factory construction in Detroit’s suburbs fueled the boom in residential development in those communities. The combined impact of both trends figures prominently in Detroit’s devastating loss of jobs, businesses, and residents, with grave consequences for the city’s tax base. The impacts of white flight, rising poverty, and crime are also factors that enter into the discussion of the challenges confronting the neighborhood, but these may largely be beyond the scope of the Guide.

In his groundbreaking 1996 book, “The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit¹¹,” Tom Sugrue highlights another challenge facing anyone studying the metro Detroit region:

⁸ See for example Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis. Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 13.

⁹ Mitchell Fleischer, “Technology-Based Efforts to Diversify Michigan’s Economy, 1953-1990”. Doctoral dissertation, Wayne State University, 2023. Dr. Fleischer is also a contributor to the Guide, having crafted the profile on John James of Renaissance Global Logistics.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter 1.

¹¹ Thomas J. Sugrue, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

My examination of Detroit in the quarter-century after World War II suggests that the origins of the urban crisis are much earlier than social scientists have recognized, its roots deeper, more tangled, and perhaps more intractable. No one social program or policy, no single force, whether housing segregation, social welfare programs, or deindustrialization, could have driven Detroit and other cities like it from their positions of economic and political dominance; there is no simple explanation for the inequality and marginality that beset the urban poor¹².

Perhaps by studying the histories of Southwest Detroit's communities, researchers will find new points of access and forge alternative interpretations that can highlight the bonds of culture and place that contribute to the neighborhood's resilient spirit.

The Guide's "Deindustrialization and Revitalization" essay will offer additional detail about aspects of this essay's last section. Guide researchers welcomes the engagement of scholars who may wish to contribute to these discussions.

REFERENCES

Babson, Steve, with Ron Alpern, Dave Elsila, and John Revitte, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986)

Casey, Genevieve, *Father Clem Kern: Conscience of Detroit* (Detroit: Marygrove College, 1989).

"A painful period." *Detroit Metro Times*, Wednesday July 28, 2004, at <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/a-painful-period-2179249> (accessed June 11, 2022).

Díaz, Alicia. "Rebellion: Latinx Detroit." *The Secret Society of Twisted Storytellers*, event hosted by Satori Shakoor at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, 20 September 2019, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiBPhzCQVvc> (accessed May 27, 2022).

Fleischer, Mitchell. "Technology-Based Efforts to Diversify Michigan's Economy, 1953-1990." Doctoral dissertation, Wayne State University, 2023.

Jones, Aldwyn Allen. *American Immigration*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹² *ibid.*, p. 5.

"History of Latinos in Michigan and Detroit." Los Repatriados. A Decade of Mexican Repatriation (website created by Adonia Arteaga, Nicole Cervantes, Brittani Hernandez, Viviana Lopez, Efraín A. Merchán, Emelia Mondragon, and Maria E. Cotera), website completed 14 December 2007, at http://websites.umich.edu/~ac213/student_projects07/repatriados/history/mihistory.html (accessed June 11, 2022).

McLaughlin Green, Constance. "Changes in the Community," in Carol Kammen (ed.), *The Pursuit of Local History. Readings on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), p. 199128.

Ryan, Brent D., "People Want These Houses": The Suburbanization of Detroit", in *Design after Decline. How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 84-127.

Sanko, Marc Anthony, *Britishers in Two Worlds: Maltese Immigrants in Detroit and Toronto, 1919-1960*, West Virginia University, PhD Dissertation, 2018, at <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7606&context=etd> (accessed May 21, 2022).

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis. Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

"The Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act)." The Office of the Historian US Department of State), at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act> (accessed May 22, 2022).

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READINGS

Rodriguez, Maria Elena, *Detroit's Mexicantown*, in series *Images of America: Michigan* (Mount Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2011).

Suarez Findlay, Eileen, *We Are Left Without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

Dennis Valdez, *Barrios Nortenos: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

_____, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-70* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

Zaragos Vargas, *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

_____, *Proletarians of the North: Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933*, #1 in series *Latinos in American Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

_____, "Life and Community in the 'Wonderful City of the Magic Motor': Mexican Immigrants in 1920s Detroit," *Michigan Historical Review*, 15:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 45-68.