

Work, Community, and Activism in a Gentrifying Factory Town

By Ornov Ganguly

Pam Sporn's 2020 documentary, *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route*, is a people's history of the Motor City that aims to depict the city's triumphs and struggles from the Great Migration onwards. As far as lending voices and historical accuracy go, the documentary is an admirable effort, granting a wide-lensed view into Black life and achievement. However, the film's purpose gets muddled when it turns to its main focus--the history of Black property ownership and how to fight for it. Such a thesis demands economic analysis, but very often the film's interview style is too casual to inform an audience beyond anecdotes and it settles for simplistic depictions of gentrification. If this were the documentary's only problem, it might be forgiven, but the film is also unable to advocate for a future, failing both as a call to action and as an informational work. At once, Detroit is too fundamentally ruined, but there are also people fighting for its betterment, although the specifics of either are hardly discussed.

Detroit 48202 trails postal worker Wendell Watkins, who worked in the postal service for over two decades. A lifelong resident of Detroit, as he documents his postal route and interviews his neighbors. His perspective highlights the structural pains of Detroit's financial system. The documentary begins with Watkins introducing Detroit as a multifaceted city, at once abandoned and prosperous at the whim of property-owning giants; this opening challenges the myth of a monolithically decrepit Detroit, and it foreshadows the film's final section on gentrification. This is an effective and grounded beginning which leads into the interviews that counter prevalent narratives of Detroit as a failed city.

Unfortunately, this promising opening loses purpose. The series of interviews assemble a people's history but do not illuminate class or economic institutions such as the Federal Housing Administration or local government. Many of the interviews are short anecdotes about how residents' families emigrated from the South to the booming automobile industry, as well as the hardships of being Black in a city with a history of systemic racial discrimination. Moreover, no individual story blends into the next, and only one woman being is granted extended time to explain the significance of the affluent, Black Hastings Street. One may believe that her recollections would invite discussion of Black business development or a Black middle class, but her memories remain nostalgic childhood ones, rather than the exploring the role of Hastings Street as a place of Black prosperity against a harsher Detroit backdrop.

Nor does the documentary flesh out the fight for Sojourner Truth housing or how the construction of the M-102 against 8 Mile and the I-95 through Hastings Street displaced thousands and began the rise of crime.

Detroit 48202 then shifts to mention redlining. However, the architects of redlining are not brought out, either in the public nor private sectors. The historic population of Hastings Street during the 1800s, well-to-do Black elites and later the Black middle class, is ignored; and no connection between labor and housing is ever made. All of this leaves a viewer confused as to how all this matters in the grand scheme of Detroit history.

The film's opportunity to better explore economic history lies in the section on the M-102. As one interviewee argues "When they leveled Black Bottom, when they built expressways inside of our town, these are very deliberate kinds of things. You know, I mean a road didn't just roll out. You have planners who sit down and plan it." But the documentary lets the opportunity slip away and a close history of this process is not offered.

Next, the film turns to the riots of 1967, which it frames as a response to structural racism and the slow decline of the automotive industry. Viewers hear accounts of Black men who were harassed or pushed out of the industry by white supervisors and managers. Unfortunately, there is little insight into these critical issues, despite the recollections of unionist General Baker Jr. and his wife. Worse still, Baker's radical politics are glossed over in favor of Watkins' skepticism and apathy. While Watkins does not see how the world around him is changing, besides that it is for the worse, the documentarians believed his outlook deserved more time than Baker's union activism.

Watkins' apolitical approach fails most when the film turns to an interview about the Boggs School, an activist charter school borne of Detroit's emergency closure of thousands of public schools after decades of mismanagement. Christina van Houten praises the school's activist approach to teaching children in a way that empowers them to change their landscape. The school is meant as an example of Detroit working for itself. Yet Watkins himself plans to leave the city. The documentary concludes by showing Watkins moving to California to live with his children. That is, the film's primary narrator does not believe in the potential of the city.

Even the Boggs School does not have an opportunity to represent itself well. Certainly, the audience understands that the school is a form of community collaboration. But Watkins' questions to Putnam lead her to a defanged commentary on what it means to be a Detroiter rather than the necessary discussion of how Detroit's emergency management of public education allowed for privatization. The Boggs School is a remarkable example of community activism steeped in place-based education. Had the school been showcased in another documentary, it may have been studied longitudinally. At the very least, the documentarians could have examined some literature on place-based learning and whether it benefited students.

The final scenes fail to explore the history of the monopolization of Detroit by the architects of gentrification. One company and its billionaire owner are assigned singular blame: Dan Gilbert of Blackrock. His actual decisions are not investigated to any meaningful degree, nor is the city's responsibility in the process of gentrification really investigated. A discussion of the fact that the city government overtaxed Detroiters over \$600 million or that it privatized public schools would greatly help ground the film in something more substantial. Instead, the audience is quickly told about Detroit's 2013 bankruptcy and its effect on pensioners, as well as Barack Obama's superficial promises to aid the city. An image of a Shake Shack somewhere downtown stands in for the gentrifying effects of these failures of government support. But what can be done about these political and economic forces? Where do they fit in the larger trend of American politics? Detroit 48202 does not answer these questions. This section shows how the costs of living for many residents increased, pricing them out, but there is no wider context for this.

In the conclusion, the audience is brought into Watkins' house to observe his own foreclosure, where the realtor nervously rushes through the terms of short selling the house, occasionally side-eyeing the camera. Good cinematography is on display in this section, but it seems that Watkins is also having trouble understanding how he ended up here. The audience no doubt shares in his frustration, so the documentary would do well to explain how Detroit crafted these specific laws and who they are in service of.

It should be noted that Watkins' reasons for leaving Detroit – foreclosure – are obviously entirely understandable, and the stresses of living in a city such as Detroit are otherwise reason enough for so many to have left. However, in conjunction with the film's lack of explanation for Detroit's current situation, the choice to end on Watkins seems unearned. He remarks that he wouldn't stay in Detroit even if he won the lottery, and the audience is confronted with two ideologically contrasting arguments: Detroit can either be improved from the Boggs School, or Detroit is not worth living in.

Activism and pessimism are a poor coupling, but this pessimism is compounded by the documentary's lack of serious investigation. What should the audience be motivated to help fix? The audience has seen property wrested from citizens' control, but not the actions they might take to change the situation. They might conclude that older methods of protest and activism are relics of the past, rather than launch pads for future movements.

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