

Entretien avec Melba Boyd (poète, professeure à la Wayne State University) et Saffell Gardner (artiste) Detroit, avril 2017 (extraits)

Sur l'histoire générale de Detroit et de ses suburbs

Melba Boyd : You know the United States and Detroit is not that different than a lot of cities in the United States right now but for whatever reason, there's probably a number of reasons, it's getting a lot of attention. It was at one time the fourth largest city in the US about 2 million people lived here, that was back when I was a little girl, in the 1960s. So it's an interesting situation. Of course you know that Detroit as a formal, communised city was founded in 1701 by the French. So by North American standards it's a very old city and a lot of people don't think about that. It's older than Cleveland, Chicago, you know, and it's in a very unique position because it's on the river that connects the Great Lakes, which means shipping, which means commerce. So, common sense told us that the city wasn't going anywhere, it was just going through a transformation. And in order to do that you make a place as uninhabitable as you possibly can because the goal was to try to get the people out. By the people we're talking primarily about black people, and reclaiming the space. Because in the 1950s, not just in Detroit, but in all of the US there was this movement towards the suburbs. You know, the dream home in the suburbs, blah, blah, blah. And so they were building these subdivisions as my mother used to say, these little ticky tacky houses. And the Federal Government also encouraged (...) and put a lot of money into those kinds of things.

Droit au logement, discrimination raciale et spéculation immobilière

M.B. : At the same time, in the 1950s there was a big case, « Sipes vs. McGhee »¹, which was a housing discrimination case, which was filed by the NAACP², and in Detroit, because there were these ordinances and housing contracts that you could not sell your home to the black people, or « negroes » as it was, Jews, "Orientals", and these were provisions that at the time were regarded as legal (...) restrictive covenants. And so, consequently, that has struck down the Supreme Court and so neighbourhoods began to open up and so black people were able to move into more and better neighbourhoods. And that of course was exploited by real estate speculators who would then encourage, scare the white people, you better leave 'cos all the black people are coming, so they would buy their property cheap and then

¹ Orsel et Minnie McGhee étaient un couple d'afro-américains (employés du Detroit Free Press et des services postaux). En 1944, ils s'installent dans une maison au 4626 Seebaldt Street, un quartier blanc au Nord-Ouest de Detroit. Bien qu'il existât des restrictions « raciales » limitant l'accès à la location aux personnes de type caucasien, les propriétaires avaient choisi de louer à des afro-américains à cause du besoin d'argent lié aux conséquences de la Grande Dépression. Lorsque les McGhee ont envisagé d'acquérir la maison, ils se sont confrontés à des tentatives d'opposition de la part de blancs racistes, mais comme ils étaient globalement appréciés des habitants du quartier, seuls Benjamin et Anna Sipes, des voisins, se portèrent plaignants afin d'interdire aux McGhee l'accès à la propriété. Un procès devant le tribunal de Detroit eut lieu, et bien que les McGhee aient été défendus par un avocat lié au NAACP, le jugement fut favorable aux plaignants. Deux autres procès s'en suivirent : devant la Cour du Michigan, qui délivra le même jugement, puis devant la Cour Suprême des Etats-Unis, à Washington. Le 3 mai 1948, cette dernière donna raison aux McGhee, statuant que les « accords raciaux » dans l'accès au logement étaient contraires à la Constitution. Après l'issue de ce procès, les McGhee ont continué à vivre à Seebaldt, dans la maison qu'ils ont acquise. Ils sont devenus amis avec les Sipes. <https://blogpublic.lib.msu.edu/red-tape/2017/may/may-3-1948-us-supreme-court-rules-housing-racial-covenants-unconstitutional/>

² National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, organisation de défense des droits civiques, fondée en 1909. <http://www.naacp.org>

they would sell it high to the black people who would be moving in. This wouldn't have been such a bad situation because Detroit had at that time, probably to a large extent still does, the largest black middle class in the country because the automobile industry was profitable, education was accessible and affordable and so, really, it was just becoming a black city. That would have been fine, would have been cool.

Detroit comme « black city » et « one industry town »

M.B. : However, what happens then is pretty much the end of the Industrial Revolution, automobile jobs begin to go away, an assault labour, so they're building factories in non union states, yadeyadeyada. You know, capitalism is greed, all that begins to take over and so. And also there's the election of a black mayor and things actually for about ten years, from the time Coleman³ was elected in 1974 until probably about ten years later, the city is still holding very nicely and maybe even up to the 1990s, but it was tight, and things had changed. They were a lot better. Better had a political voice, really a significant voice, they got the police under control to a large extent so there wasn't a lot of this brutality and so there was just this brief period of maybe twenty years where things were pretty good. But then when the consequence of the automobile industry moving its profits away, that affects almost every other institution because that's, you know, Detroit is largely a one-company, not one but three companies, you know (...) a one-industry town.
(...)

Melba's friend : A lot of people moved down to Texas... a lot folks moved...

M.B. : Yes, because they were following factory jobs, and all jobs. So, but in the meantime, you know, General Motors moved down to the Renaissance Center⁴. You know if you look at big money and you see that big money's not leaving, you know it's just a matter of time. They're just waiting, bidding their time so they can just sort of come in and do that. So I think that largely happened when, tricker loans, I'm sorry, Quicken Loans came...⁵
(...)

Dan Gilbert, le « Tsar »

M.B. : You know, I just read an article the other day that, I did not know this, that they are under investigation by the Federal government for mortgage fraud and I don't know if they're still under investigation because that was under the Obama administration, I don't know what these folks are gonna do but, yeah, all of that has happening. Then they start, during the time we had black mayors there was no interest in other industries, really, investing in building the city. There was a little bit because nothing's completely gone away

³ Coleman Young, 1918-1997, maire de Detroit (Démocrate) de 1974 à 1994, premier Afro-Américain à occuper ce poste.

⁴ Construit sur les rives de la Detroit River en 1977 par John Portman & Associates, grâce au financement de Ford, le Renaissance Center abrite notamment un hôtel Marriott, une galerie marchande ainsi que le siège de General Motor depuis 1996. <http://gmrencen.com>

⁵ Jeu de mots sur le nom de la société de prêts Quicken Loans (cf note 6).

but then Gilbert comes in⁶, he already owned downtown Cleveland, you know, then he comes to Detroit. Now he own downtown Detroit. He owns what 60 buildings downtown ?

Saffell Gardner : He just bought the Phoenix Center... Pioneer too.

M.B. : Small buildings. He owns the Cleveland Cavaliers, you know, that's a major basketball team in Ohio. And downtown Cleveland. It's a bit like having a feudal lord, you know...

S.G. : A tsar.

Devil's Night et disparition du patrimoine architectural

M.B. : Yeah, really. So then you began to see Compuware and all these other companies coming in, and then we had the problem, which of course when everything goes wrong they blame the black people, but the fact of the matter is, which was not really publicised a lot but there was this thing called the Devil's Night⁷, which is the night before Halloween, and there would be fires set all over the city. In these houses, these abandoned houses, and basically what they found out in many instances but they didn't really talk about it, was that people, obviously people in the neighbourhood aren't going to set houses on fire in their own neighbourhoods, it was basically these people who owned these houses who wanted to collect the insurance because they no longer wanted to deal with the property. It also was useful for destroying a whole community and subsequently what you see is the coming in and tearing down of all the rest of the houses because people leave. There was no, next to no, policing of these communities, so you had a lot of people coming in and still staying in abandoned houses and totally stripping all of the value out of the copper and the minerals. Because some of the other houses, these are seriously built houses. We're talking about old school, European craftsmen, black builders. Much better than the stuff built out in the suburbs, so there's more value in the property in actuality than what they would value it in the real estate market. So the whole sort of stripping of these houses, even bricks, old bricks that would be confiscated and they'd sell them and they'd put them on their new houses in the suburbs and just so, like I would call a raping...
(...)

« Être son propre gouvernement »

M.B. : And what's happening now is that people are moving into the city. I think there's more people moving in than going out. Sounds like a Temptations⁸ song. But that's kind of

⁶ Dan Gilbert, homme d'affaires né à Detroit en 1962. Propriétaire de plusieurs franchises dans le monde du sport, il est le fondateur de Quicken Loans, une société de prêts immobiliers et d'hypothèques recourant aux fonds de pension, très largement impliqués dans la crise financière de 2007-2008, qui a entraîné la ruine de nombreux épargnants et mis à la rue des familles américaines dont les maisons avaient été saisies par les banques.

⁷ *Devil's Night*, ou « Nuit du Diable » : nom donnée à la nuit du 30 octobre, précédent Halloween. Elle trouve son origine aux Etats-Unis dans les années 1940. Les jeunes s'adonnaient alors à des plaisanteries de mauvais goût, ou à de petits larcins sans grandes conséquences. Mais au cours des années 1970 et jusque dans les années 1990, les actes de vandalisme, (d'abord dans le centre ville, puis dans les faubourgs) ont pris de l'ampleur, particulièrement à Detroit où l'on a pu compter jusqu'à 800 départs de feu en trois jours. Le phénomène a décliné au cours des années 1990, notamment grâce à la mise en place en 1995 par la ville de Detroit de l'Angel's Night, qui organise des patrouilles de surveillance au cours de ces nuits.

⁸ Groupe de *soul* et de *rythm & blues* créé à Detroit en 1961 et produit par la Motown. Leurs morceaux les plus célèbres sont *My Girl* (1964) et *Papa Was A Rollin' Stone* (1972).

what's happening and we are holding on because at the same time there's a trickery to it as well. When we bought our house in Rosedale Park⁹, which is another older, classic neighbourhood off the Grand River, in the northwest... First I need to check that you understand how big in terms of area Detroit is. It's 139 square miles. It's as big an area as Los Angeles, bigger than New York, I mean, it's huge because unlike many cities where people live in apartment buildings, in Detroit people live in houses. They build houses, because it's a car city, they build a garage to park your car, you have a yard, a playground, so it has a very different character because of that. It also, we have to make a decision, like we did when we bought our house in 2000, it was appraised at 200,000. I'd say like five years ago it was appraised at 100,000, so the value of the property had literally gone in half. But now it's starting to go back up again because they play these games and if you get caught up in it then you 'it'll be hard to sell this house,' but then everything you invested in it is lost, including the fact that you try to have somewhere to live when you stop working, right? And you want to pay for it and that's not going to happen if you keep jumping from house to house. But that's another problem in terms of sticking it out, as they say. But in the interim, the city is it's people, and Detroiters have a very unique, I think, character. It's kind of hard to describe but it's the consequence of access to good education, creativity...

Melba's friend : I think it's effectively got a lot of southern immigrants, a southern character, the work ethic... a strong sense of community.

M.B. : Yeah, and a strong sense of class consciousness because of the labour movement. So there is a resistance to this attitude that getting richer makes you better, but more that you wanna do something substantial with your life. (...)

You also need to talk to the white people who stayed (...). There are some, because there are some very interesting, the other sort of sense of identity and character also, in terms of white people staying, you find that commitment but they also tend to be good independent thinkers, a lot of artist friends, people that I've worked with in photography, music, and they just transcend the bullshit. (...)

There's a whole different way of thinking in Detroit and then we cannot underestimate the importance of being on a national border. And being able to basically live on both sides of the street and we're able to see the US from the view of Canadians and also experience Canada¹⁰, which also keeps you from being so nationalistic, so, you know, we're not big flag wavers, yeah whatever, everybody got their thing, so calm down, you're not the greatest... (...) I think it's important to have an international perspective because it keeps you from falling, but anyway, I've talked enough, I just wanted to lay out the sort of historical patterns of what's going on and then obviously now there's a lot of rebuilding.

I want to say one more thing too about how we survived. When the city had no money what we did, like neighbourhoods would organise, and we would police our own communities so

⁹ Quartier résidentiel historique de la banlieue de Detroit, situé à environ 17 kilomètres du centre. Il est essentiellement constitué de maisons individuelles en briques, construites entre les années 1920 et 1940, où vivent des familles des classes moyenne et supérieure.

¹⁰ Le Canada non-esclavagiste a longtemps constitué une terre de refuge pour les afro-américains fuyant les états du Sud et leur condition d'esclave. Parce qu'il était possible d'y trouver du travail et pour sa proximité géographique avec la frontière canadienne, Detroit était l'un des points d'arrivée de l'*Underground Railroad*, un réseau clandestin d'abolitionnistes, qui a contribué à la libération d'environ 100000 esclaves. Le fait que Detroit soit aujourd'hui une ville dont la population est à forte proportion afro-américaine n'est pas étranger à ce passé historique. Un autre interlocuteur nous dira qu'il préfère vivre à Detroit parce qu'en cas de problème, il pourrait se rendre au Canada en quinze minutes. Au sujet de l'*Underground Railroad*, cf le roman éponyme de Colson Whitehead (Albin Michel, Paris 2017).

we'd have what is called Neighbourhood Watch (...), you know, you worked as a community. In Rosedale Park we have a large park where the kids play soccer, baseball and so we have dues, community dues, so we pay a grounds keeper to keep the grass cut and keep the trash picked up, and that happened in a lot of these neighbourhoods because you had to become your own government, really. Because the city wasn't coming out, didn't have the resources in some instances, and in others didn't give a shit in some respects. And to a large extent you wanted to leave because you're not getting any city services so we were like, hell, we'll just service ourselves. And sometimes people, my neighbours say 'why don't we just go out the city'. We'll be our own city, become a township...

Histoire de Saffell Gardner

M.B. : Anyway, I'm gonna stop talking (...). Saffell, you wanna talk a little bit about (...) our history here and talk about yourself...

Saffell Gardner : Well, always when I talk about myself I talk about I was brought up in Detroit, growing up in a proper school system, working through that and becoming an artist through that and just noticing throughout that time how the powers that be try to take art from schools and art music therapy, there as a constant drumbeat every time finances get tight, they don't go for sports, they take art and music and cut that down. And I think probably the last music class I had was probably in the sixth grade (...). It had to be like '66, something like that. So that's when they started taking stuff out and then even when I went to college, I went to university for a little while and that was one of the things that, we had the oil embargo in '72¹¹ and then they cut art again, even in universities, they cut back on that so I left for a year and went to Wayne State¹² and so I got my MFA there and took another little break and got my MFA at Wayne State. So throughout all of that I managed to be in the city and this is something that I have ... someone asked me to put together a map of places that I like around Detroit and what they really wanted you to do was put the restaurants and the bars you like to hang out at, but I've had like fifteen studios around the city so I just made a map of Detroit and, you know, some of them I've lived in growing up, you know, I've lived on the East side and, you know, my parents, if this was the front door, always had an easel or a drawing table in the middle, so I called that my studio, so that was my first studio, so subsequently I had different studios around the city where I rented, studios that were sold and nobody knew about it and you'd go back and the door was locked, you gotta break in to get your stuff and two weeks later the whole building's torn down. That happened over behind Cass, Cass Tech¹³, the building over there, it's still vacant. So going through all of those and having all these different studios and then hopefully this'll be my last studio, because you know the last studio I had every time I would get a commission for something the landlord would think I got more money and see maybe go up with the rent. And so it's just a matter of being in the city and being part of the city

¹¹ En 1971, la production pétrolière américaine connaît un pic important, ce qui provoque la chute du cours du dollar, et par la même occasion, du pétrole. Ce phénomène, associé à l'embargo sur le pétrole décrété par l'Organisation des Pays Producteurs de Pétrole (OPEP) sur fond de Guerre du Kippour, provoque la montée en flèche du prix du baril (désormais indexé sur le prix de l'or), entraînant le premier choc pétrolier.

¹² Fondée en 1868, la Wayne State University est située entre le centre-ville (downtown) et le « New Center », un peu plus au nord. Elle accueille aujourd'hui près de 30000 étudiants.

¹³ *Cass Tech*, abréviation de Cass Technical High School. École publique fondée en 1907 et située dans Midtown, elle délivre des enseignements dans les domaines des arts, de la communication, du marketing, du management, de l'ingénierie... Le département de musique y occupe une place importante.

and you see a lot of things that transpired politically, throughout the city. I remember a lot of people were saying because of the riots in '67 that a lot of white people fled to the suburbs but that wasn't true, maybe in part, but not solely because I do a tour at the DIAY show and know a lot of African American work, and one artist in particular, Hughie Lee Smith¹⁴, he was painting pictures of abandoned buildings like in the early '50s. So industry really started leaving the city around that time, and then also if you worked downtown you have to pay to park so I know at one point maybe in the '80s we had anywhere from 1,700 to 2,500 dollars for parking fee, things like that, so that's part of what I talk about that involves an artist, the reflections of the city. Hugh Lee was a big part of Detroit, the city, and so this place here, North End, that's what this location is, I think from the boulevard all the way up, maybe a few more blocks over toward the freeway, and this is where a lot of Motown people were raised...

M.B. : Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson...

S.G. : Some of the Gordies¹⁵ lived on Boston, in fact, I think Buddy owns a studio that's like a mini mansion, so this area is really trying to, in a way it's coming back. I give it maybe another ten years...

M.B. : It might be sooner than that. It depends on what the speculators do...

« le voisinage est vraiment en train de changer... »

Melba's friend : They just put a major rail system up at Wood Avenue¹⁶ that's just short of this area but it's close enough...

S.G. : Just short. Yeah, this area's been changing since maybe 2005. I've now got neighbours that moved in from like Ohio and the suburbs. I think there's a guy right there, a couple of doors over, you know, couple of years ago they were in the street playing hockey and I said 'this isn't normal for this neighbourhood', and you know some kids, I don't know where they're from but they're really nice, and they got the American flag up and they go over to play on the lots and so this neighbourhood is really changing.

M.B. : Tell him about the visit you had the other day.

S.G. : I had someone come by and they live downtown...

M.B. : Just be honest with us. This is not a black person, it's a white person...

¹⁴ Hughie Lee Smith, peintre américain né en 1915 et décédé en 1999. Diplômé de l'Art School of the Detroit Society of Arts & Crafts de Detroit, et de la Wayne State University. Son œuvre, marquée par la Grande Dépression, peuplée de grandes figures solitaires sous de vastes ciels, témoigne de ces préoccupations sociales, sur un mode parfois surréalisant.

¹⁵ La famille de Berry Gordy, Jr. (né à Detroit en 1929), producteur musical. En 1959, il fonde à Detroit le label Tamla et la compagnie Motown Records, qu'il consacrera à la promotion des artistes *rythm & blues*, c'est-à-dire afro-américains.

¹⁶ « Wood Avenue » : surnom de Woodward Avenue, la principale artère qui relie downtown Detroit au Cultural Center, au New Center puis aux banlieues.

S.G. : No, white, white. She says, 'I been looking at this building for a while, I got a crush on this building, I want to buy it, and if you sell it you can still work here until I decide what I want to do with it, and...' And so I just like ushered them out the door...

M.B. : Just show upon on your doorstep.

S.G. : You know, 'don't hold it against me, but I'm a lawyer, don't hold it against me', so I just got her name, she left her name and her number and everything, I set a match to it and so, yeah, that's the kind of stuff. So now, I just don't let people...

M.B. : So does this happen on a regular basis ?

S.G. : Yes! Once a month somebody wants to come by and buy the building or they'll send somebody : 'my boss wants to know if you want to sell this building', and you know I have people sending notes and stuff and I think probably since we've had this building we've probably put close to 100,000 dollars into it, I mean just out of pocket...
And it's been almost ten years so when people say they've been looking at it for a while, I don't know how long a while is because when we first got here this was not the chichi, let's get into this neighbourhood place, this was still looking like, let's get through here fast, don't stop the car...

Récit du meurtre

S.G. : Yeah, when I first started working over here, you know, it was about the first six months before I started moving all of my artwork in and before I started working. It was almost like constant gunfire, after dark. One time my son and I, we were in here, and there was like, I swear it was AK47 fire¹⁷, 'cos it was so loud you could hear the firing pin go to the shell and, so we just froze and, you know, I own the lot back there, so there's like eleven bullet holes back there, in the sign, you know, from somebody trying to shoot somebody down the street. So that was like in 2010, so it's kind of a little bit better and...

M.B. : Talk about the cross...

S.G. : Yes ... so some kid, he was like twenty years old, he got, somebody, they said he wasn't the target but you know he's the one (...), you know, he was a dope guy, he had a stack of money, he was just 20 years old...

M.B. : And he died...

S.G. : Yeah.

¹⁷ Le AK47 est un puissant fusil automatique d'assaut, une arme de guerre (surnommée Kalashnikov, du nom de son inventeur). Avec la chute de l'Union Soviétique puis surtout à l'issue de la guerre en Yougoslavie dans les années 1990-2000, les stocks d'armes de ce type ont fait l'objet d'un important commerce clandestin. Par ailleurs, la législation américaine sur les armes à feu autorise encore les particuliers à détenir des armes lourdes de ce type. Elle s'appuie sur le deuxième amendement de la Constitution, et les tentatives de contrôle des armes à feu font l'objet d'une opposition constante de la NRA (National Rifle Association), en dépit des fusillades de masses qui se produisent régulièrement partout dans le pays.

M.B. : He died over here...

S.G. : Yeah. I guess he was shot down the street and he managed to fall in front of here. I wasn't around but, you know, they wanted him, whoever wanted him, because it was like an AK47. Whatever shot him, the bullets went through the house. And into people's appliances.

« Zone de guerre » et gentrification (Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Harlem)

M.B. : Let's talk about that whole subject too, because the influx of drugs into Detroit, especially after the '67 rebellion, not just in Detroit but in most major (...) urban areas, was actually purposely done in order to basically quell political descent and it worked to some extent with the heroin, but it didn't work as well as crack. 'Cos with the heroin you had to use a needle and you know everybody's not into needles, especially black people because of needles. So that didn't sort of do the trick but the crack cocaine, I call it an epidemic. So when they talk about people using chemical warfare, I call it crack cocaine, chemical warfare on your own people, and that is what really forced a lot of people to leave because the neighbourhoods became unsafe...

S.G. : A war zone...

M.B. : It became like a warzone, no jobs, strung out, so that created an unsafe situation so a lot of people said 'I gotta leave, I can't live like this', you know, especially if they had young children, and didn't have a strong neighbourhood network. Call the police, tell them there's a dope house down the street and they don't care, you know, so it's basically another way of emptying out the city. You know the surrounding country, this whole gentrification that's going on in Detroit also like, I was talking to a writer friend of mine, Quentin Troop, 'cos they live in Harlem, and he was talking about when they moved, when they bought their apartment in Harlem, they came right in time because now they're almost too expensive to buy. So you see them coming in and moving black people out of these centre areas. Whether it's... Chicago they never got too far...

Melba's friend : That's right, they sure didn't.

M.B. : They keep it like sequestered.

Melba's friend : South Side...¹⁸

M.B. : South Side, don't even go there. Go in, do your business on the other side of town, then go back home. But you know, that's a gangster city so, you know. But you see that kind of situation all over the country. LA, Detroit, Cleveland and I've seen like my cousins who live in different cities leaving because they can't, pursuing their careers, they can't, you know too much destruction of young people their age and like, 'I've gotta get out of here', 'I could be in the wrong place at the wrong time' and, you know, that's the end of that story. And so it's rough, you know, a lot of what you see is not an illusion but at the same time they never

¹⁸ South Side est le nom donné à la partie sud de Chicago, où pour l'essentiel vivent des familles afro-américaines. La violence y demeure très présente, même si les centres communautaires contribuent par leur travail de terrain à la réduire.

show you the parts of the city that, you know, are still intact. You don't see that. They just show you the destruction, the devastation, they don't show you those parts that are still intact. Otherwise they wouldn't have anything to come back to.

Melba's friend : Right. It's the cultural community that really has held this thing together. The writers, the artists, musicians, the dancers, poets, all those. They're the ones that really held the framework of the city together so there is something to come back and talk about. And we've raised two boys in this city, right ? About a mile north of here. Our boys are 27 and 20. The oldest one has graduated already from Wayne State University where Professor Boyd teaches, and he's back in grad school there, in the art department, and we have one that's third year at the University of Michigan as a percussion major. And we raised them right inside the city so it's highly possible to do.

Situation des artistes face à la spéculation immobilière

S.G. : (...) Capitol Park¹⁹ : there were buildings there that had been abandoned like back in the '60s so families still owned it, like Grinnell building²⁰, and over the years you know, as artists, and you know people actually come into these places as artists to kind of revive things like that and so, I really didn't get into it because, there were really like no windows and stuff, there were a few but not really good, and there was no plumbing, and so maybe a couple of years ago a couple of artists moved into one of his buildings and, it wasn't his building, but he bought it, and he bought it in like December and they told him he had like until (...) February 28 to move out. And some artists had been there for like 16 years, and doing work. So that happens in New York and a district becomes popular and they develop it...

M.B. : And then they kick the artists out...

S.G. : Yeah. So that's happened all over Detroit. And a lot downtown. As a matter of fact, right over here at Russell Industrial²¹ there were a lot of, a bunch of artists that had been there for thirty years.

M.B. : They got put out of there ?

¹⁹ Capitol Park fait partie des quartiers historiques de downtown Detroit, construit autour d'une parcelle triangulaire devenue espace public à la fin du XIXème siècle.

²⁰ Conçu par Albert Kahn, le Grinnell Building a été érigé en 1908 sur Woodward Avenue. L'immeuble abritait, depuis son origine et jusqu'à la mise en faillite de la société en 1981, le Grinnell Brothers Music House, un important magasin d'instruments de musique.

²¹ Russell Industrial Center, situé au 1600 Clay Street, à proximité du secteur de North End, est une usine construite entre 1915 et 1925 sur les plans de l'architecte Albert Kahn. Elle abritait à l'origine et jusqu'en 1960 les activités de la Murray Autobody Corporation, un sous-traitant de la Ford Motor Company. Après le départ de Murray, les bâtiments ont accueilli d'autres industries, avant d'être rachetés par Dennis Kefallinos, un investisseur et promoteur immobilier de Detroit, qui en 2014 s'est également porté acquéreur de l'ancien Michigan Building dans downtown Detroit (transformé en parking automobile, il apparaît notamment dans le film *8 Mile*) qu'il souhaite convertir à l'événementiel. Russell Industrial est devenu un lieu où coexistent des ateliers qu'il loue, des espaces d'exposition et des locaux pour diverses petites entreprises. Les locaux comptent environ 140 occupants. En février 2017, Kefallinos a été accusé de violation de la loi pour avoir loué des appartements non-conformes aux normes de sécurité, ce qui a mis de nombreux artistes et créateurs dans une situation d'incertitude et de précarité. <http://russellindustrialcenter.com>

S.G. : Some of them left before everything was fin-, some of them had big businesses, I know a guy I went to glass school with Al, you know, he's a glassblower and he's got like five furnaces in there so he stayed because he said 'I can't turn my ovens off', cos he's doing glasses, 'cos they burn 24/7 doing glass, and there's another guy who does woodwork and I don't think he moved, so I think they're trying to work something out with the owner because the owner he owns like these little lofts and stuff around the city, and so he owns that building but he hadn't made improvements on the sprinkler system, you know all kinds of fake walls that catch fire and there's no way out. So he hadn't improved the elevator, so he's been collecting money for 34 years and he doesn't make improvements. So that's been going on around the city but artists we're the ones that ends up getting pushed out...

M.B. : And that's really hard too 'cos when you don't have, now the city's under emergency management by the state²², I understand the political dynamics of that is that basically the governor is in charge of the city, which means we've been disenfranchised.

S.G. : It's like martial law.

M.B. : Yeah, and so when these situations happen, these kinds of injustices, these aggressions, that people have to deal with regarding these real estate moguls and so forth, you don't have anyone you can go down to the city government, you go and complain, but they don't really have any power, so that's another major... so we feel like we're under siege.

S.T.R.E.S.S. : Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets

S.G. : We had an operation called *Stress in the City* where, you know, it was like a police operation. We had a cop that was out somewhere like faking he was drunk, somebody would run up and shoot him. That was what was going on. Cavanagh²³, it was before Coleman...

M.B. : Cavanagh was the mayor in '67 during the rebellion. He was a liberal democrat but he was unelectable after '67 and then Roman Gribbs²⁴ he became the mayor. *Stress* was a response to '67, so instead of dealing with the issues that caused, 'cos basically '67 was a result of police brutality and people just got tired of it, so instead of dealing with the issues, even after we had a report that came from Washington DC explaining 'these are some problems', but instead of dealing with the study they decided to become more repressive, and so *Stress* was the answer to '67...

²² Les conséquences de la crise financière de 2007-2008 se sont conjuguées au lent déclin industriel et économique de Detroit depuis les années 1950-1960. En 2013, la ville, qui avait accumulé une dette de plus de 18 milliards de dollars, a été déclarée en faillite et mise sous tutelle de l'état du Michigan.

²³ Jerome Cavanagh (1928-1079), avocat élu maire de Detroit (démocrate) en 1962. Favorable au mouvement pour les droits civiques, il accueille en l'année suivante Martin Luther King pour la *March for Freedom*. Mais en 1967, alors qu'il occupe toujours ses fonctions, éclate la Grande Rébellion. Réticent à faire appel au gouverneur républicain de l'état du Michigan qui souhaite envoyer les troupes de la Garde Nationale. La gestion de la crise sera reprochée à Cavanagh, et il refusera de se représenter aux élections de 1969.

²⁴ Roman Stanley Gribbs (1925-2016), maire de Detroit (démocrate) de 1970 à 1974. L'année précédant son élection, il a été l'instigateur du programme STRESS (« Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets », qui en fait d'aide au maintien de l'ordre s'est surtout focalisé sur la communauté afro-américaine, aggravant les tensions entre celle-ci et la police.

S.G. : I forget, that was an acronym for something, Stress, but it was...

Melba's friend : Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets !

S.G. : So that was like a bunch of undercover cops that just...

Melba's friend : Right, right, they caused crime when they were supposed to be fighting crime...

La Grande Rébellion de 1967

Cédric Loire : You talk very often about the 1967 Great Rebellion and seeing (...) from France, it's always, or very often shown as LA riots, and just everything is burning around, people fighting, but a couple of months ago I found a book, the English title is "Detroit: I Do Mind Dying"²⁵.

M.B. : Yeah "Detroit: I do mind dying", Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin...

C.L. : It has been translated in France and I found it was really interesting because when I read this book and the story of the Great Rebellion and how it started and how it goes, it reminds me of Paris at the end of the 19th century, there was a great moment called « La Commune », and La Commune it's a popular rebellion but it's also a moment where people try to find political issues. So I read that during the Great Rebellion people tried to do something like a political newspaper, kind of popular universities, to educate people to political problems, not only the violent aspects of the Great Rebellion but, I think maybe it was also a moment where people tried to build something new. Do you think there is something like a heritage of that ?

M.B. : Well, there were attempts by some sectors, they developed a New Detroit platform²⁶.

Melba's friend : Right, right, New Detroit.

M.B. : That came out of it and that was an attempt by the liberal establishment to bring the community together and address some of these issues and problems. But see, the main problem, because nothing's a bigger problem than being afraid of the police, right ? And the police got worse instead of better, which is the reason '67 happened and then of course there are other mitigating circumstances that fed into that, so you have looting and so forth. But the shooting and the fighting was not between black and white people, except for the fact that the police were all white, and black people were fighting them, but it wasn't, they weren't fighting white people. In fact, there were white people that came and joined in the looting. And that's something that is also very unique to the Detroit rebellion. And the snipers shooting at the police, state troopers, and it actually was, shall we say, a quasi-

²⁵ Dan Georgakas & Marvin Surkin, *Detroit : I Do Mind Dying. A Study in Urban Revolution*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 1998. Traduction française *Detroit : Pas d'accord pour crever. Une révolution urbaine*, édition Agone, Marseille, 2015.

²⁶ New Detroit est une organisation fondée en 1967, qui œuvre pour à la suppression des discriminations raciales dans les domaines de l'économie et la justice. <http://www.newdetroit.org>

military encounter. There was really no army, but, and the image of course is a little exaggerated.

The rebellion was at a very particular location, 12th and Clairmount, which is over to the northwest, little sparks here and there, hotspots, but it wasn't, like I said, Detroit is 139 square miles and it really upsets me when you hear people who don't read on the news saying 'the city's in flames'. No ! The city's not in flames, calm down, you know, really ?

Melba's friend : Watching too much TV !

M.B. : You know, and too many journalists who never do any research, which is another big problem in this country. People talk as if they if they know something and they don't, they don't read, they don't study, and they don't talk to people who read and study because they say 'where did you read this ?', so, they don't ask us, so...

Le populisme de Trump et la haine des Noirs

S.G. : Yeah, those are the people that, most of the people that hate education are the ones that hate people of colour. And there are a lot of people in this country that hate education. They hate intellectuals...

M.B. : Well, the whole Trump campaign, a lot of that was, you know, the elitists, Obama was an elitist, because he was educated. It's stupid. At a time it used to be that an education was something that Americans valued and they were really building up, especially after WWII there was a real strong movement towards building up public education in the United States. The GI Bill²⁷, you know, 'cos people who couldn't afford to go to college before, if you were in the armed services, especially if you were in WWII, you could go to college for free, the government would pay for it, it was a whole movement to make schools better in the South, and now we're on the other side of that. We're the elitists that are out of touch with the people...

Melba's friend : Like we're not people...

M.B. : Right. So it's sad because consequently you see the capacity of the society to do all manner of thing and then they just call it an opinion, or they call it alternative facts, whatever the hell that's supposed to be. A fact is a fact, and a lie is a lie. And so this game, you know, it's like *Alice in Wonderland*.

Melville, Benito Cereno, Moby-Dick. Trump et l'American Dream

M.B. : But get back to Melville... I love Melville ! Melville was an abolitionist, Melville also hung out obviously with a lot of sailors on the seaport and they were by culture a very interesting people because they were always travelling and Melville was influenced by that.

²⁷ Créé en juin 1944, le Servicemen's Readjustment Act (couramment appelé G.I. Bill) est adopté par le Congrès américain, sous la présidence de Roosevelt. Son but est de permettre aux soldats américains démobilisés à la fin de la Deuxième guerre mondiale de financer leur retour à la vie civile, par l'octroi d'une assurance chômage, d'une bourse d'études, de formation professionnelle, ou par des prêts pour la création d'entreprise ou l'acquisition d'un logement.

And one of my favourite Melville's is "Benito Cereno"²⁸ about the slave rebellion, which is based on the actual rebellion that took place, right, but I think that what's so important about that pursuit of the whale, this obsession is both revenge but it's also the obsession with pursuing something and being blind to the consequences, to everyone else's wellbeing and that is a very American characteristic. As long as you win, it doesn't really matter how you got there. So one can rationalise for example, 45, that's what I call President Trump, Tump, Trump, because you can rationalise, despite his history, his dishonesty, his taking advantage of working people, all of the horrible things that he's done, they can rationalise and say 'well, he's a billionaire', so there's this whole fascination with wealth and the American dream means different things to different people and for a lot of people the American dream is getting rich. And it doesn't matter how you get there and so if you ask some about the whole issue around taxes, which is in the paper today, and not being able to see his taxes, you know, and his not wanting to share his taxes, is really interesting because I had a conversation with this one guy who was down in Atlanta a couple of months ago and he was like 'well, you know, he does that, it's ok, it's all legal, blah blah blah blah' and I was like 'look, shit, you know, they take my taxes before I get my paycheck and he's no better than I am, and I know, I pay a lot of taxes, I'm in the 28 percentile and that's just the Feds, so you think about a third and then you add the State, you add the city²⁹, I mean almost 40% of my income goes to taxes and I'm a working person, right ? He's a billionaire ! He's the one who should be paying 40% of his damn income, not me ! But the people will just like 'yeah, but you know, well,' and I say he is able to do that because the laws are set up in such a way to favour the wealthy, and then they make working people pay for everything including his expensive arse, as he goes all these places, and we get to pay for all that security, and it's just outrageous kinds of things, 'oh well...'. And I say no it's not ok. It's not ok, and it's not fair. And I know I work harder than he does. 'Cos he plays golf all the time.

S.G. : That's right, and eating chocolate cake³⁰.

M.B. : And eating chocolate cake. Oh my god. Buying places and he don't even remember he bought 'em. Did you see that ? She had to tell him ! He didn't even catch himself ! Oh yeah, that's right. And the poor children ... you don't give a shit about those kids. When they were trying to come here as refugees you wouldn't let 'em in. You know, people fall for that bullshit. Come on y'all. Think ! Really ? And it's like ... It ain't good. This is like the worst...

S.G. : And it's just going on four months now...

M.B. : It's unbelievable, it's absolutely ... it's not, yeah ... three months...

²⁸ *Benito Cereno*, nouvelle de Melville publiée pour la première fois en épisodes dans *Putnam's Magazine* en 1855 (traduction française par Jean-Pierre Naugrette, éditions Flammarion, Paris, 1991). Elle relate la révolte d'esclaves noirs à bord d'un navire de traite. Comme pour *Moby-Dick*, Melville semble s'être inspiré de récits et de faits réels : *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels* du capitaine Amasa Delano (paru en 1817), et la révolte de *La Amistad*, en 1839.

²⁹ Le système fiscal américain comporte plusieurs « étages » correspondant à la collecte de taxes sur les revenus, les biens, les ventes etc... : le gouvernement fédéral américain (les « Feds ») ; l'état (ici le Michigan) et le gouvernement local (la ville de Detroit).

³⁰ Allusion au récit fait par Trump sur la chaîne Fox Business, le 12 avril 2017, des circonstances dans lesquelles il a annoncé au président chinois le lancement de 59 missiles sur la Syrie : « Nous en étions au dessert, devant la plus belle part de gâteau au chocolat... ». <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eSz8GM5hvM>

Le déclin du système éducatif

M.B. : You got a person with like low intelligence in charge of education. Everybody who's in a position is the opposite of what they're supposed to be in charge of. Betsy DeVos³¹, she can't even spell, not even with spellcheck on the computer. What ? Really ? She's from Michigan, she has these charter schools. They're terrible ! They're terrible these charter schools and now she's in charge of education ?

S.G. : Yeah. We call the charter school system, it's like 'charter school-to-prison pipeline', 'cos they're not really teaching (...). Yeah... I taught in one of the (...) schools (...). Here before used to be a really nice school, it's still nice. So now they have this wrought iron fence up all the way round. And it's not pointed but the things curve out at the top...

M.B. : So that people won't...

S.G. : So it's hard to get in or out, you know. And so I just lasted there a semester. I said, you know, you guys, I said, if you look at this fence you're training these guys to be used to prison with this fence.

M.B. : It's sad. And it's really tragic because I come from, my mom was a school teacher and my sister was a mathematics high school teacher for thirty years and it's just sad because we're talking about Detroit used to have the model public school system in the country, in the country, you know. And that was a consequence of having a fluid economy at the time, a significant tax base, all the things that you need. A Federal government that was putting money into education, all of the elements were there. Did you go to Cass Tech ?

S.G. : No, I went to Northeastern³².

M.B. : Northeastern, like Cass Tech, was one of the top schools in the country. My daughter went to Cass Tech and majored in art. She went to Cass Tech and then went to art school in Philadelphia, the College for Art and Design for Women in Philadelphia, and it really advanced her abilities as an artist, and when she got to college, she knew things that the incoming freshman class were just learning. My son went to Martin Luther King High School in Maths and Applied Technology, he's an engineer now, and that was the programme that my sister was teaching in, just top, top graduate students coming out of there. He was recruited by MIT but he went to Michigan, 'cos we're a Michigan family so...

S.G. : Well, you know a lot of the education when I was coming through public school, there was a lot of advantages, before it started breaking up with all this charter stuff. Because, you know, you were taught a certain way, because with music you were taught... this friend of mine, you know Shirley Whistle...

³¹ Betsy DeVos (née en 1958 dans le Michigan) est une femme d'affaires, philanthrope et personnalité politique (Républicaine), nommée en 2017 Secrétaire à l'éducation dans l'administration Trump. Elle a mené campagne dans le Michigan en faveur des écoles privées, et milite contre l'enseignement public qui, selon elle, a pris la place des églises dans la communauté.

³² La Northeastern High School était l'une des écoles publiques de Detroit. Elle a fermé ses portes au début des années 1980. Elle se trouvait au nord de downtown, entre East Warren et East Forest Avenue, à hauteur de Grandy Street. Une vaste prairie occupe aujourd'hui son emplacement.

M.B. : Absolutely...

S.G. : Well, she said that, you know, a lot of the public system was run on a platoon system, you know, marching down hallways, everybody two by two, and they don't do this today, but you know how to go into an auditorium, sit down and shut up while somebody was performing. But these days it's impossible because now everybody's like this and even in concerts, I hate going to concerts now because everybody's filming everything, you know, and it's horrible but, you know, DPS³³ they taught you how to come in sit down...

M.B. : They called it Auditorium...

Transmettre la culture afro-américaine

M.B. : Yeah. In auditorium you'd learn to watch classic films and the Glee Club³⁴. I was in the Glee Club. I can't sing now. I was trained, I could carry a tune. And the band. I was in the band. And you'd have these concerts and performances and honour programmes for good grades, and so on and so forth. And that was standard play so you were being actually trained to participate in culture, you know, go to a library, got a museum, and we were taught. In Auditorium they would teach you about classical American art. Unfortunately, they fell short of teaching any instances of black art but that was OK.

S.G. : Right, right.

M.B. : You had to get that in the church, in the community, but you could transition from there. But at my elementary school I have to say we had some fairly progressive people like our music teacher we learned both classic European and American songs, but we also learned spirituals and that was a part of our development. So, it depended on where you were if you had someone who could actually take responsibility and infuse that into the curriculum. But it's not until much later that you actually began to get that. But also when it gets later you get more and more conscious teachers, like in high school I was reading *Native Son*, Richard Wright³⁵, I don't know if you know who Richard Wright is, he's a famous Parisian ex-patriot...

S.G. : And James Baldwin...³⁶

³³ DPS, pour Detroit Public Schools.

³⁴ Au sein de l'Université du Michigan, le Women's Glee Club est un groupe de chant choral, fondé en 1893, sur le modèle du Men's Glee Club, exclusivement composé d'étudiants. Son répertoire s'étend de la Renaissance aux *Spirituals* afro-américains. <https://www.umwgc.org>

³⁵ *Native Son*, roman de Richard Nathaniel Wright (1908-1960) paru en 1940.

³⁶ James Baldwin, écrivain, poète, dramaturge et essayiste américain (Harlem, 1924, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, 1987). Son œuvre est traversée par les questions et tensions liées aux discriminations, non seulement raciales mais également envers les homosexuels. Il est notamment l'auteur de *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), et d'un grand nombre d'essais réunis dans des recueils comme *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Plusieurs ont été traduits en français dans des recueils : *Retour dans l'œil du cyclone* (Christian Bourgeois éditeur, Paris 2015) ; *Chassés de la lumière 1967-1971* (éditions Ypsilon, Paris 2015).

M.B. : James Baldwin... They were bringing them into the classroom in the '60s because it was the '60s and the teachers were like 'we're reading Langston Hughes³⁷, you know, even if they weren't really textbooks they were bringing the literature into the classrooms, so all that's happening at a very critical time. But when my daughter went to high school in the 90s (...), her ninth grade textbook was African American literature. And I was like 'woah'. So she came home with the textbook and she said 'mama no one believes me that I know Dudley Randall³⁸ because Dudley Randall was the poet laureate of the city and he was in the textbook. And 'you've got to come to class' to tell them. And I was like 'ok, Maya, I will come to class and tell them you do indeed know Dudley Randall but, you know, that makes a huge difference in a student's consciousness, not just in terms of black students but all students, to know that there's all this other culture here and that black people just didn't pick cotton and work in the factory. Even though people write about working in the factory, not to say that's not important, but more importantly to appreciate that black people have been major contributors to American culture, not just in terms of music, which they can't get away from, but also in terms of literature, in terms of the arts, and when that's all that's happening, it's a really good time, and then they pull the plug.

S.G. : Well, you know, I think one of the parts even through the educational system being so scrapped now, so hodge podge, that's how hip hop and rap came about, so you know, it went to the streets and started mixing.

Melba's friend : And the church was breaking down too...

S.G. : Yeah. And so you know young people are not involved in the church in the way... and that's how rap and hip hop came about. That was like late 70s. So that might be a watermark of the breakdown of the public school system because you know, my wife and I we got our kids through school by, ok first private school, public school, charter school, back to private school and back to public school, because you know private school we had, I wanted them to get everything I thought they weren't getting in public or charter school, which was the writing, the English and the Math. So now, Tureka is a double major in music and linguistics.

M.B. : That's right, that's right...

S.G. : And so that too is a matter of both parents getting involved, not the single parents, nothing against that, but all you hear about is the single parent, I'm quite sure there are a lot of two-parent families out there...

M.B. : Well, it's just a lot harder when you're by yourself, 'cos I was divorced and pretty much raised my kids by myself, but always had a backup, which so long as you have backup it's ok. And I raised them in a bad area, trying to raise them, that's like having a negative effect. What the other thing about that whole dynamic, especially in terms of the music, the

³⁷ Langston Hughes (1902-1967), écrivain, dramaturge et poète afro-américain, très impliqué dans le Harlem Renaissance movement des années 1920. Il est notamment l'auteur de *The Weary Blues*, recueil de poèmes paru en 1926.

³⁸ Dudley Randall (1914-2000), poète afro-américain originaire de Detroit, et fondateur de la maison d'édition Broadside Press en 1965. Très impliqué dans le Black Arts Movement promu par les Black Panthers durant années 1960-1970, il a notamment publié *Cities Burning* en 1968, en écho aux violences qui avaient secoué la ville l'année précédente.

cultural sort of breakdown. What I wanted to mention is that the churches have shifted. There are still some classic black American churches but there are a lot of these, I call them supersize churches and they just take the people's money but they lack the political consciousness. The black church came out of a political tradition, that's what Dr Martin Luther King came out of. They don't have that any more, they just take the people's money. And also, a lack of creativity. Not all of 'em but it used to be that was the case across the board. And it used to be the music, the cultural training that you got from the church. Aretha Franklin went to public schools and she got formal training but she also learned in the training from the rich tradition of the black church. Pfuff ! It's gone. So when you break down the community all of those different elements are disseminated and it has an effect unfortunately because sometimes I'm teaching and... I have this one poem called 'Why I Observe the Sabbath at Home'³⁹ and it's basically a criticism of these people being exploited by these churches but also everything else that's going on and I read this poem once and I mean this lady got like really upset and I said 'well, I'm sorry, obviously that must be what your church is like'. You know, if you're upset, 'cos if your church is cool you wouldn't be upset by this poem. 'Cos I didn't describe the other churches, I described your whack church and what you're doing up in the church is nothing, just making this fool rich, and he's ignorant of the bible and everything else, you know I can't stand that, anyway, I'm going to stop. But it's a major problem because the church used to be an important place for organising community but also for politics and so those are some of the aspects that are kind of unfortunate. Even though most of those churches big churches they kind of like moved out. But like Donald Trump, he came to that church, North West...⁴⁰

S.G. : North West... Over by Grand River and Oakman...Yeah, but then he hung out with Ben, down in the south west, Ben Carson's people, he went and hung out with them for a little while.

M.B. : No, he went to Ben's house on Deacon. I grew up on Deacon, and then yeah, that was really messed up because Ben Carson⁴¹, you know Ben Carson, he ran for President, he's a black guy who ran for President...

S.G. : Yeah, he was a surgeon...

Histoire de l'Evelyne Crockett High School of Science and Medicine

M.B. : He was a neurosurgeon. We were talking about him yesterday. I was with my cousin who's a retired physician, Julian Stones, yeah, he's a big art supporter, so I was out visiting him yesterday and he got to talking about Ben Carson and how the school was named after Evelyne Crockett, Dr Evelyne Crockett who was one of the first black women who did Ob-

³⁹ Melba Joyce Boyd, « Why I Observe the Sabbath at Home in the D », *Konch* online journal, hiver 2011. <https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/konch-archives/Why-I-Observe-the-Sabbath>

⁴⁰ En septembre 2016, Donald Trump, alors candidat à l'élection présidentielle, a pris part à une messe dans l'église de Great Faith Ministries sur Grand River Avenue à Detroit, entraînant un mouvement de protestation de la part des riverains afro-américains. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/03/donald-trump-protest-black-detroit-church>

⁴¹ Benjamin Solomon Carson, né en 1951 à Detroit, est un neuro-chirurgien qui a rejoint l'équipe de campagne de Trump, après avoir lui-même été candidat lors des primaires républicaines de 2016. Il fait partie de l'administration Trump en tant que Secrétaire au logement et au développement urbain.

Gyn⁴², women's doctor and she was married to George, Judge George Crockett, who was also a congressman, really really progressive people. Crockett, he was in communist. He was ! You know, all those guys. And so they changed the name of that school to Ben Carson.

Audience : No...

M.B. : Yes ! Yes ! And they did it on the sly. I didn't even know how it happened. Someone told me they changed, yeah. (...) Ben Carson grew up on Deacon⁴³, same street I grew up on, two blocks, and he told everybody on the planet that he grew up in the inner city. Deacon, that neighbourhood is not in the inner city. It's almost out the city. We're like two streets over from the suburbs. River Rouge, Ecorse⁴⁴, yeah right. It was one of those neighbourhoods that was built up in the 1950s in the second great migration, black people coming from the south and my parents came up after my dad graduated from Tuskegee University, they came to Detroit because my grandparents were already here during the war and so those, that was one of those designated areas where the government would give a G.I. a V.A. mortgage⁴⁵ to buy a house, if you would build in a black neighbourhood. So that was like a designated black neighbourhood but he just lied. Those were almost like all new houses, it was an up and coming middle class neighbourhood, you know, and he was talking about 'I grew up in the 'hood'... we had no gangs ! What are you lying to these people ? Trying to act like I had it so tough and look at me I'm a neurosurgeon. So what ? I know two three doctors of Deacon, and judges, you know, that's what I'm saying, you're not that unique. (...) We don't want to talk about that. But it's a horrible misrepresentation and how stereotypes get perpetuated, and the interesting thing about when they went to his house, nice little brick bungalow, he was just like this was our dream house, well you could tell, they didn't bother to scan the whole block 'cos it's still a really intact neighbourhood and they also didn't show that the woman living in his dream house where he was growing up had a Hillary Clinton sign in her front yard. People are complicated, that's all I can say. What a drip. So anyway, he's going to be excommunicated from the black race, so. Being brought up on charges.
(...)

La ville en ruine : « Mettez leur ça sur le dos ! »

Antoine Barrot : I had a question, but we're going too far...

M.B. : Oh no, we can back up, what was it ?

A.B. : We already met Dora Apel...

S.G. : Oh, Dora Apel.

⁴² Evelyne Crockett était docteure en obstétrique et gynécologie.

⁴³ South Deacon Street, une rue d'un secteur résidentiel, à une douzaine de kilomètres au sud-ouest de downtown Detroit.

⁴⁴ River Rouge et Ecorse sont deux communes du comté de Wayne, dans la banlieue de Detroit. River Rouge abrite une importante zone industrielle, avec le complexe métallurgique de Zug Island, dont la production alimente les usines Ford situées non loin de là à Dearborn. Ecorse, qui est presque la jumelle de River Rouge, est située un peu plus au sud.

⁴⁵ V.A. mortgage : prêt accordé aux anciens G.I. par le Department of Veterans Affairs.

Sarah Ritter : She's an art historian at Wayne State.

M.B. : Oh yes, yes.

A.B. : So her last book, *Beautiful terrible Ruins*⁴⁶ is mostly about how the images of Detroit. (...) Mostly it's a reflection about Detroit images, the impression to the rest of the world, how it affects people from Detroit... When you talked about all this industry, how do you say that ? When industry left, so the city not really collapsed, but this is what the media etc. showed to the rest of the world, to the US, the other states, etc. and I was thinking about if I can link the two stories maybe Detroit is a weapon of propaganda to show how African American can't rule a city.

M.B. : Absolutely, absolutely. It, you know, blame it on them, just blame it on them ! No question, and absolutely no consideration for the consequences of abandoning a place and what happens when you have a city of 2 million, 139 square miles and there was within the matter of a decade, you pull the plug on it. But it's also a very important point, so much focus on Detroit as opposed to any of these other places. Because, and it's race, it's class and it's also politics because Detroit is a Democratic city, all right. It's a labour city so in order to put things back into that particular hierarchy you want to destroy the unions, they did a damn good job of that, made it a right-to-work state, which was just absolutely, I thought that would never happen, take the guts out of the power of unions, so if you work in a public, a job like a teacher, you cannot strike and the only power you have is to strike. We had a faculty strike at Wayne State. Wayne State's probably the only university where professors strike and so there was a strike and this was early 90s⁴⁷ before they changed a lot of these rules and we still had a Democratic governor and so the new president of the university who happened to be black, Irvin Reid, had just come, he came here from New Jersey, so he wasn't being genuine when he'd sit down to negotiations to tackle with the faculty union, and so the faculty struck. He didn't understand what that meant in Detroit, and in the meantime they had broken ground to build a new law school and a new pharmacy school and that was his big 'I'm so proud what happened in my school'. What happened was the contractors and the workers wouldn't cross the picket line so production totally stopped and he got to that negotiating table with a quickness, as we say, because that was something he really cared about, that was because at that time unions were strong, again, it didn't matter that we were faculty, it mattered that we were in the union, so even though they were contractors that didn't matter, it was solidarity. And so that was something that was very unique to Detroit because you had professional people also acquiring better pay. Schoolteachers used to, in the city of Detroit, were some of the best-paid teachers in the country because they were unionised. So the quality of life and all of that was at a much higher standard of living. So what do you do ? You attack the union ; you end up with a situation where the tax bases are growing and then you end up unfortunately with a knuckle-head mayor, who was corrupt — but believe me all the people he was dealing with

⁴⁶ Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins. Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (NJ) & Londres, 2015.

⁴⁷ Le mouvement de grève en question a en fait eu lieu en septembre 1999.

<https://wayne.edu/newsroom/release/1999/09/15/wsu-president-to-comment-on-strike-action-by-university-faculty-1346>

in his corruption, they weren't black people⁴⁸. The black people didn't have any money. So he becomes the front of corruption and then therefore that's the reason, you know, and so, in fact I was in Paris and a taxi driver told me that he understood that Detroit went down because of this mayor. Like no, dude ! Detroit was already down when he was elected. I mean, he didn't help !

S.G. : No, he didn't help.

M.B. : He didn't help but it was, he, as I say, he was an easy mark.

S.G. : He was a gangster before he was mayor.

M.B. : Yeah, he was a good, he tricked us though, he was a gangster with a lot of greed.

S.G. : Yeah.

M.B. : He tricked me. I voted for him the first time. I never voted for him the second time. I was just like, no. Go sit down and that was really bad though because his election the second time he went on TV and cried, 'I'm sorry, I cheated on my wife, I'm sorry', you know, 'I didn't mean to do it', so people were like give him another chance and I was like 'this ain't no mayoral remedial programme, he can't be the mayor no more, you know, he need to be locked up'. But no, they re-elected him and I knew it was going to happen. They re-elected him and then when the shit hit the fan, he's gonna be in office, it was just a matter of time, he's gonna be in office and we're gonna have to take a major hit. They voted him back in. Even though I think there was some manipulation and corruption in the government before that. I believe that was like a Trump thing too. I believe they were changing votes and all of that. Unfortunately, things that people have said, why they don't vote because they don't believe that there is a process that's honest. I think it used to be honest but I think it's all corrupted now and it's sad because it's going to be even harder to get people to come out in the future unless of course they're scared to death, they may come out if they're scared to death. I'm gonna move to Canada.

La « baleine blanche » comme rêve américain :

« nous sommes fondamentalement dans une position de résistance »

S.R. : When we met Dora Apel we asked her, I don't remember exactly, but she said that for her between Moby Dick and now, the white whale is the American Dream. Thinking of what could be the white whale now in Detroit, what kind of whale are we pursuing here ? Maybe you can have an idea, an intuition, for you, the people of Detroit, what kind of white whale they can meet or seek ? You understand ?

M.B. : I think that regular people, we're just trying to straighten shit out.

S.G. : It's real basic.

⁴⁸ Référence au scandale de corruption qui a entaché le mandat de Kwame Kilpatrick, maire de Detroit (démocrate et afro-américain) de 2002 à 2008.

M.B. : Yeah, it's real basic. We're trying to save the soul of the city and we're trying to a large extent, which is really gonna be even harder now with that fool in the White House, because (...) we cannot deal with him because the Federal government will affect what will happen in all these major places like Detroit, and that's why every time there's a Republican President, Detroit suffers. Every time it suffers because Detroit is a Democratic city and we don't represent their ideals. I do think in terms of the « white whale » that for people like Dan Gilbert and folks with those kinds of aspirations, I think that taking the city back over, controlling the real estate, controlling the market, I think what they're trying to do is reinvent the city and to make it into the image of what they see. And we're basically in a position of resistance where we're just trying to keep the brakes on as best we can because it's sad really because, you know, I can just feel Coleman Young turning over in his grave and swearing, of course, he always, almost swore as much as I do, but I think that there's still some progressive elements. I don't think they understand how strong the people are in the city because there are also progressive things going on in the city, like I've been working with the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Salvador⁴⁹, and he is really dedicated to making sure that the museum better serves, is more inclusive and really he feels that it should have the best African American art collection because we are in Detroit. There are really good people at the Historical Museum, people who are actually reaching out a lot and meeting people. And I think it's more important to not forget that because there are some really good people still doing progressive things, and that's not a whole hell of a lot that you can do about these billionaires because they come in and they are getting control of downtown, but even that's not going to be a complete flip. My sister lives downtown, in 1300⁵⁰. I know a lot of people who live downtown, and those people been living there for decades and they're not leaving. And I think they underestimated the power of the black middle class, that people can afford to live in those spaces and I really think that's going to make a big difference, and no matter what they do it's not going to be like Chicago. It's never going to be like that because we're just not going anywhere. If I'm going anywhere, I'm going to move to Canada. I'll be out. Just out. I'll come visit y'all !
(...)

Melba Boyd, « Burial of a Building »

M.B. : Oh I know which one I'll read... There are some, there used to be a very important department store downtown Detroit called J.L. Hudson's⁵¹. (...) And this building was probably one of the most impressive department store structures, it was one of the largest steel frame buildings and covered like two city blocks...

A friend of mine who lived downtown at the time in one of these high-rise apartment buildings had a blow up the building party and we all came down there to see, 'cos you could see the building in the distance and I went and so it was a really momentous occasion. So I wrote this poem and it's called 'Burial of a Building', and there are a lot of, certain historical references like when they first started to hire black people to work the elevators or to work

⁴⁹ Salvador Salort-Pons, Director, President & CEO du Detroit Institute of Arts depuis 2015.
<https://www.dia.org/about>

⁵⁰ *The 1300 Lafayette East Cooperative* est un imposant immeuble d'appartements de standing construit entre 1961 et 1964, le long d'East Lafayette Street, à proximité immédiate de downtown.

⁵¹ La J.L. Hudson Company était le nom d'une chaîne de magasins. La principale adresse de l'enseigne était le magasin de downtown Detroit sur Woodward avenue. En 1961, il était le plus haut magasin du monde. L'immeuble a été détruit en 1998. L'espace est toujours vacant aujourd'hui.

behind the counters because up until the 1940s we could only work in stock, you know bringing things in or as maintenance or custodians, right, and that was a big deal, and then they hired women, they wanted, they hired them of fair complexion because they felt they would be less offensive to white customers, you know, they didn't say that out loud, but we knew that's what it was, right. Now remember, my aunt went down with her first cousin and she was going to apply for a job and her cousin was brown-skinned and she was very fair and they tried to offer her the job to work, so I know this is really true, and she said 'no, no, no, I'm going back to college, I'm not looking for a job', so anyway, there's a reference to that in here as well.

Anyway, it's called 'Burial of a Building, Upon the implosion of the J.L. Hudson's Department Store'.

*When they bring a building down, when they make history absent,
when they implode a cistern of memories into a basement grave,
where do the ghosts go?*

*Are they given an eviction notice ?
Do they read the headlines of runaway newspapers
tumbling down the street?
Or do they pass on a posting caught on a jagged nail,
or transfixed to crumbling concrete?
Did the ghost of the white-skin coloured girl who ran elevator number five
call a meeting between floors to discuss the demise?
Or did the last of the charmed pearls of mannequins
hiding in the bridal suite of dressing rooms send out a fatal alarm.*

*Perhaps one of the underemployed, excavating the remains for
bronze fixtures and copper veins,
left an echo so disturbing it alerted returning spirits,
disrupted their eternal shopping for imported after dinner mints,
for that exquisite dress with the perfect fit,
for that pin-striped suit for the anniversary occasion,
or for another matching set of muffs and scarves of Christmas past celebrations.*

*Did the ghost follow our footprints to sit atop our houses ?
Or did they hover next to high-rise towers and likewise point translucent fingers
and clink champagne glasses filled with misty laughter ?
Or did the blast cause their skeletons to attention ?
Disrupt such earth-bound musings and with the scattered wind,
dust, ashes and disoriented pigeons, another landmark gone,
another space left behind, another hole in the story,
another burial to collect bones, another place from where ghosts are gone.*

Melba Boyd, « This Museum Was Once a Dream »

M.B. : A poem for Detroit. Were you at the (Charles Wright) Museum⁵², 'cos I wanna know if you saw my poem at the museum, to the right of the museum ? Did you see the poem ? (...) On the dedication wall when you come into the museum, it's like a bronze, it's like on the side, on the left. They asked me to write the poem, right in the middle. I'll read that for you as you didn't get a chance to see it but that's sort of like my most proud moment to be published in bronze. I'll be long dead after people don't even read books and be like 'what is that ?

« This museum was once a dream. »

This museum was once a dream.

Dedication poem for the Charles H Wright Museum of African American History

And there are a couple of references here to the underground railroad, also references to areas in the south with native American geography and so forth.

This museum was once a dream

inscribed inside the walls of slave quarters.

The gates were guarded by ghosts in coloured bottles of glass

swinging from string between bleeding trees.

They held secrets of millions severed from their stories.

Brick by brick memories rebuilt, the amber flare of ancient amber cities in splendour.

The ancestors insisted like the swelling of the mighty Mississippi,

like escaping fugitives tracing moss from limb to limb.

From Alabama through Tennessee, from Africa through [?].

Swollen fingers moulded like water along the angles of pyramids,

Following lost rivers and vanishing borders, recollecting cotton blossoms.

Strong beside a narrow stream of blue light splitting the distance,

the entrance to this museum was hidden within memories rediscovered.

The dream restored on the frozen path of freedom

was the imprint of God's great reach and the immortal human story.

⁵² Le Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History a été fondé en 1965, mais le bâtiment actuel, œuvre de Sims-Varner Associates, a été construit en 1997, à proximité du Detroit Institute of Arts. Il abrite d'importantes collections relatives à l'histoire des afro-américains, notamment la collection Blanche Coggin, consacrée à l'histoire de l'Underground Railroad (cf note 10). Il accueille en outre des expositions temporaires. <http://thewright.org>