Urban Disaster, Population Displacement, and Detroit: Imagining Urban Ethnomusicology for the Musics of a “Dead City”

Co-Chairs:
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Open Forum
Thursday, November 11
3:45-5:15 pm
Fernwood Room

For over three decades, Detroit has epitomized American urban disaster, through national media depictions of crime, blight, unemployment, and physical/infrastructure decay. It is being embraced as an urban studies laboratory for witnessing the death of the city as it concludes its life cycle. With depopulation and displacement of its peoples to the surrounding suburbs and other cities, Detroit is becoming more of an idea than a populated place, and this phenomenon is being commodified in complex ways. As the world stood by in a drawn-out national gawkers’ delay, the city was left to fend for itself to struggle in the last stages of capitalism.

Simultaneously, however, it has been eagerly claimed by national media as a rich source for “ruins porn” photographs and essays. “Detroit disaster” topics have been amply covered over the last half decade by non-Detroit national media (some of whose photojournalists spent less than 8 hours in the city to cover it). This forum (hosted by Detroiter) is intended to open discussion about the demographic displacement of Detroiter and Detroit musics, the politics of national urban identities, race, and the ownership of “Detroit” as a marketable idea. What does “Detroit” mean now? Who gets to define it? How do theories of urban ethnomusicology help us interpret Detroit urban musical contexts and the “Detroit musics” (electronic music and beyond) produced both in and outside Detroit? Could Detroit musics (regardless of where produced) be functioning symbolically as a “musical ruins porn” for the US and beyond?