

Restructuring Detroit, a Ghost Story

By Tom Stephens

Dedicated to the students of the Southwest Detroit Freedom School, for taking personal responsibility!

“...the more you have, the more you can have.” - Arundhati Roy, “*Capitalism, a Ghost Story*”

“... money is the right to have rights.” - Raj Patel, “*The Value of Nothing; How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy*”

“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to do...” - Kris Kristofferson, “*Me and Bobby McGee*”

The World of “There Is No Alternative!”

In a recent article, the brilliant essayist and novelist Arundhati Roy describes current political economic trends in her native India. “*Capitalism, a Ghost Story*”¹ focuses on the role of corporate-funded foundations. It has much to teach us about our world beyond India, as well as the strange humanitarian colonialism of philanthropy. What do concepts like freedom, democracy, and social justice even mean in today’s world? With a full-on global corporate push to grab and hold all the riches and power everywhere, regardless of consequences for “the 99%” or even for the fate of the Earth, what choices, dreams and terrain may still be available for us to survive and fulfill our humanity? Big questions she’s not afraid to address.

“*Capitalism, a Ghost Story*” portrays an incredibly confusing new phase in social evolution: a toxified, bioengineered, robotic precariat, ruled by the privatized neoliberal Corporate State; irredeemably corrupt; immune to grassroots democratic advocacy from below; colonizer of the popular mind; and technological arbiter of reality itself. The ideological, spiritual and psychic consequences are revealed in a passage that echoes throughout our planet’s shrunken spaces for thinking, feeling and acting on any impulse to genuine human freedom:

“Gradually, one particular imagination—a brittle, superficial pretence of tolerance and multiculturalism (that morphs into racism, rabid nationalism, ethnic chauvinism or war-mongering Islamophobia at a moment’s notice) under the roof of a single, overarching, very unplural economic ideology—began to dominate the discourse. It did so to such an extent that it ceased to be perceived as an ideology at all. It became the default position, the natural way to be. It infiltrated normality, colonised ordinariness, and challenging it

began to seem as absurd or as esoteric as challenging reality itself. From here it was a quick easy step to ‘There is No Alternative’.

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Meanwhile here in the heart of the Great Lakes bioregion of North America, leading corporate and government figures bloviate endlessly about “running government like a business” (a sneaky, demonic program for demoting “citizens” and “People” with civil and human rights to mere “consumers”). Consequently, the ordinary working People of Detroit have, once again, been going thru a very tuff time.

In the face of the city’s longstanding disinvestment, racialized poverty and post-industrial blight, Michigan’s new Republican Governor Rick Snyder has a plan. He’s applying a unique version of his “Emergency Manager” statute to Michigan’s largest city. A straight takeover of this historically crucial community would bite off much more political and social backlash than Snyder can chew. So he did the next best thing. While Arundhati Roy was publishing “*Capitalism, a Ghost Story*,” in March and early April he strong-armed local officials into accepting what the Emergency Manager law calls a “Consent Agreement.”

Detroit’s version of this document (which lacks actual “consent,” and is not really an “agreement”) is entitled a “Fiscal Stability Agreement.” The underlying digitally archived file itself, that went thru various revisions and negotiations in March before being signed and approved by Mayor Dave Bing and a narrow 5-4 majority of Detroit City Council, is somewhat more accurately labeled the “Master City Restructuring” document.

Detroit’s “restructuring” will begin with state oversight of its local government, by a powerful Financial Advisory Board, Program Management Director, and Chief Financial Officer, jointly appointed by state and local officials. They have the (far more than merely “advisory”) power to take over city government programs, if “reforms” and “restructuring” are not being pursued to their satisfaction.

“Restructuring” the political, social, and economic life of Detroit, a city which, in spite of its vibrant culture and political life, has long been plagued by ills associated with mass poverty, official corruption, physical blight, and bitter racial conflict, would arguably be a good thing. But by whom and in whose interests? How? With what consequences for Detroit’s People, especially the most vulnerable victims of poverty and racism?

“Restructuring” without accountability to, or respect for human rights of the primary victims of social injustices, in favor of members of the elite corporate community (who view the city’s deep and severe crisis as offering opportunities for profit), is quite another matter. So is doing it thru the backroom mechanisms illegitimately conceived by “Emergency Manager” legislation.

Detroit’s reality is already the neoliberal nightmare; relentless cutbacks in education, health, and other social services. What seems inevitable is that “restructuring Detroit” (unless resistance can prevent it - as I have previously argued elsewhereⁱⁱ), will look an awful lot like the now-notorious “structural adjustment” programs imposed on the developing world by the major multilateral financial institutions - the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank - throughout the neoliberal era. Systematic privatization of common public resources; deregulation of corporate power; savage attacks on social services, working standards and basic quality of life for ordinary People; all as a way to even further enrich and empower elites. The infamous “Shock Doctrine,” in Motown rhythm. This is the noxious, authoritarian political reality of “restructuring.” No wonder they hide the term behind comforting lies like “consent” and “fiscal stability.”

It’s bitterly contentious, highly emotional and utterly perplexing when powerful white elites move aggressively to implement their neocolonial agenda against poor, people of color communities that are virtually defenseless.

Inspired by Arundhati Roy then, presented for your consideration; a tragicomic treatment of 21st century Detroit. It features (with sincere apologies for appropriation, outright theft and license) diverse human spirits and voices, attempting for real to face our issues and challenges:

Dramatis Personae:

Crazy Horse

Karl Marx

Harriet Tubman

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Gandhi

Malcolm X

Emma Goldman

Toni Morrison

Coleman Alexander Young

Arundhati Roy

Grace Lee Boggs

Raychel Gafford

Other characters to be developed by Detroiters and to enter the action as it goes forward...

Settings: Streets, parks, union halls, church basements, civic and neighborhood groups, living rooms, government agencies, cyberspace, anywhere and everywhere Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is "working well together" with his supporters, as he rapidly puts it, on their version of "development."

The action begins with a CHORUS of Detroiters milling about discussing: the new "Consent Agreement;" the latest mass school closings; the suburban takeover of the city's water system; the lack of decent job opportunities; continual reductions in bus transit; rising violent crime rates; burnt-out vacant houses and weed- and garbage-strewn fields salting neighborhoods everywhere in Detroit's enormous 139-square mile footprint; repeated uncorrected odor violations produced by the world's largest trash incinerator in the middle of the city; privatization of the corrupt Detroit Department of Human Services; "austerity" budget cuts to already-inadequate city services (including police, fire and ambulance); the state elections board of canvassers' refusal to place a popular referendum against the "Emergency Manager" law on the ballot (by a straight party-line vote, on the ridiculous pretext that a portion of the petitions' typeface allegedly bears the wrong font size); foolish government officials and unscrupulous corporate special interests conspiring together against the general welfare; and other matters of injustice experienced as stressful daily reality...

CRAZY HORSE:ⁱⁱⁱ We live in the shadow of the real world! In the darkest shadow of this shadow, the white government authorities scheme to take away what's left of our freedoms. They talk endlessly about the "invisible hand of the market," while they lie, cheat and steal in these dark shadows. And they get away with it because we've forgotten the nature of our relationship to power.

My People learned long ago that nothing White Fathers sign their names to on papers is worth anything when they are after our land, resources and community. Then when they take away the land we lived on in common, the White Chiefs divide it up and use it to dominate, oppress, and serve themselves at the expense of all others.

I was stabbed in the back and killed when I agreed to come to their fort and talk with them. My People took my heart away and buried it in secret. I live on as a symbol of spiritual freedom and physical resistance to racist attack.

Somehow the owners of a sexually oriented business in suburban Dearborn put my name on their sign. Malt liquor manufacturers put my name on 40-ounce alcohol beverage containers. At least the rock band they named after me isn't half bad.

When it comes to foreign invaders annihilating and using you for their selfish, destructive purposes, I believe I may have some things to teach the People of Detroit. In life I was never at the strait formed by the river between Lakes Huron, St. Clair and Erie, that the French called "*détroit*." If not for my "red"

tinge, perhaps I would be a suitable candidate for the new “Financial Advisory Board,” which seems to be open only to non-Detroiters!

CHORUS: “No Justice, No Peace!”

HARRIET TUBMAN: Before People can become free, they have to realize that they aren’t free. I freed thousands of slaves, and could have freed thousands more, if they had known they were slaves. I told them, “If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.” That seems like pretty good advice for today as well!

I see an incredible amount of confusion in Detroit about what it could mean to be free. This group wants industrial jobs to come back and support a so-called “middle class” lifestyle. Other groups want a revolution, whatever that would mean to each of them. Yet others want African-American self-determination and -government. Some are working toward building the new world to come, while others are fighting against the injustices of today. Most are numbed by glowing screens portraying the world as an oppressive farce. It reminds me of slavery.

Many social movements and changes followed the times of human slavery and abolition when I lived. There are complicated, interrelated issues: education, violence, work, nature, relationships between women and men, parents and children, different races and classes and nations. None of it's covered by what they call “education” today. It's impossible to imagine all these people in their different groups and tribes, beset by corporate propaganda and electronic thought control as they are, agreeing on everything.

Can you get a taste of what you want most, by refusing to stop in front of glowing screens or boasting, self-important leaders, by continually moving toward goals you identify and define for yourselves? If you understand that you are modern versions of slaves, you can begin to identify and define the things that could set you free!

CHORUS: “Whose Streets? Our Streets!”

GANDHI: Decolonization is about People first remembering what it means to be human beings, and then acting on that knowledge. Whether it's India or the United States, government or education or spirituality or the environment; the basic dynamic is the same. We have to take responsibility for our lives in order to experience what we call “freedom.”

Saying “no” to the “restructuring” program of leaders in Detroit and Michigan, from the deepest conviction, is better than saying “yes” merely to please, or worse, to avoid trouble. This question of saying “yes” or “no” to the Governor’s “Consent Agreement” is the superficial one. The real question is whether or not our human spiritual principles and moral convictions have a place in our

political economic life, and the public affairs of our society. Answering “no” to this question leads to the rule of “Emergency Managers” and the imperial privatization of life. Answering “yes” is the next step on the road to freedom.

That’s why Governor Snyder and his State Treasurer Andy Dillon confused the issue by pushing a so-called “Consent Agreement.” Instead of taking the city over via an “Emergency Manager,” they needed officially designated local leaders to say “yes” to their program for “working together” to “restructure” Detroit. The distinction has no actual substance for People, but they can claim they have “consent” for what they want to do anyway.

The violence of poverty; the injustice of racist, patriarchal and class oppression; the impunity of official elites who lack anything even resembling a realistic program for change and reform; these are the evils today, the rotten heart of colonialist social relations and political domination, slowly killing a great city and its people who suffer the highest concentration of childhood poverty in North America. The single “no” to these evils leads to many, many “yesses” for the city and its People!

CHORUS: “The People United Will Never Be defeated!”

EMMA GOLDMAN:^{iv} They called me an “anarchist,” and it’s a label I wear proudly. But what is this “debate” about politics, really? One is called a communist, another is a conservative, yet another is a liberal or some other superficial label for ideas spoon-fed to powerless children. Think for yourselves!

What matters is the living essence of things. During the very same six months when Michigan’s Governor and his business cronies devised their “restructuring” of this city, a new surge of popular resistance rose up – claiming kinship of “99%” of the People against the rich and powerful “1%” all over the world! This after decades of corporate domination of People’s communities, your livelihoods, your very thoughts! How clear at times like these that the accepted, official version of reality is false, and that all self-proclaimed authority is based on fraud! What an opportunity to really live, and to do so in entirely different ways, if we seize it!

They call it “restructuring:” It is merely paranoia, rooted in the impulse towards centralization—the absurd, unjust idea that one decision-making structure should be legitimized at the cost of all others; that difficult conversations about social structure and conflict should be avoided at virtually any cost; that all decisions need to be approved by a higher power; that ordinary working people cannot be trusted to organize themselves in decentralized networks.

The old fraud of the State demands a concentration of power, exclusion, elitism, and repression. The scientific basis for the idea of centralization has long been undermined, in complexity theory, in economics, computer science,

the understanding of collective intelligence and emergent behaviors, and even in military strategy. After the “Occupy Everywhere” phenomenon of 2011, it should be dead. But the ghost of self-interested Hobbesian myths about “needing” a single, strong leader to keep everything from falling apart persists, as long as that power continues to exist. Thanks to its control over education and media, even those who claim to oppose it have been indoctrinated in its values and lies!

CHORUS: “Smash the State!”

COLEMAN YOUNG: Who let her in here?

Most People remember me as the first African-American big city mayor in Detroit in 1974. But I got my start as a public figure in the Red Scare in the ‘50s, when the goddamn Un-American Committee came to town. I basically told them to kiss my ass. I never would have dreamed Detroit’s Black leaders would let these Republican “Emergency Mother Fuckers” (EMF’s) come back into Detroit and take it over like this!

When I told those motherfucking HUAC rednecks how to pronounce the word “negro,” and made them apologize to me for their disrespect, I was coming out of the industrial unions in the depression. The CIO was the first important interracial organization that fucked up white power. Those motherfuckers never forgave us for that. Detroit was the birthplace of the UAW/CIO and the first motherfucking major US city governed by its African American majority.

Sure I made some mistakes. How the fuck could I have known workers’ wages would stop rising – permanently – just when I won the mayor’s office? I wasn’t fucking Jimmy Boggs! If I’d known what these motherfucking corporations were gonna do to my People – even to the White workers – you bet your ass that as Mayor I wouldn’t have been so quick to kiss up to ‘em! Anyway, without struggle there’s no progress, and you don’t struggle fucking perfectly; you fight and learn from your motherfucking mistakes and fight again until you can’t fight the sons of bitches any more. That’s my education. Aloha, Motherfuckers!

CHORUS: “We are the 99%!”

GRACE LEE BOGGS: I may be 96 years old now, but at least I’m the first character here who’s actually still alive! It’s an incredible, hopeful, terrible time to be alive in Detroit, now that we’ve been brought so far down there’s no choice except to begin to do things differently, to make a different way to live. Detroit has taught me many things. Our time is like thousands of years ago, in the transition from hunter-gatherer society to what would become known as “civilization.”

Now is the time to grow our souls, as an essential part of making the next American revolution. We no longer have the luxury of petitioning government

to reform politics and make things better for us. We have to do things for ourselves. Create re-imagined spaces and institutions, where healthy relationships with other People, with nature, and with our selves can be rebuilt - transformational organizing revitalizing and creating “beloved communities.”

Education - real, interactive, relevant, place-based and transformative learning - is a huge part of the broad renewal of our selves and our world. We have to probe deeply beyond familiar concepts like “racism” and “jobs,” to understand the link between our country’s passion for economic growth and slavery. We talk about enslaving people as if it were only a matter of racism. It was not just racism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, this country’s rapid economic growth depended on having many more people doing the work. That’s why we enslaved Blacks. And it depended on getting more land. That’s why we exterminated so many Native Americans. That fundamental contradiction - of dehumanizing ourselves while degrading others, for the sake of rapid economic growth - was built into the founding of this country.

Confronting issues like that means confronting organized power, as well as the false myths many People live by. But the ruling powers of our nation and our world are themselves powerless to deal with our real problems: our youth without hope of a decent future; our planet’s ecological crisis; our unsustainable, unjust, unequal economic system. The rulers are powerless, because they don’t believe another world is possible. Our power comes from the belief that another world is possible, and the determination to get together and create it!

CHORUS: “This is what democracy looks like!”

KARL MARX: I’m glad sister Grace mentioned confronting the system of organized power, because we often forget that our real issues and problems are not about one person or another, about Obama or Bush or Bing or Snyder or any individual or group of People. The problem is not People’s behavior or attitudes (although Mitt Romney’s bullying behavior as a teenager should perhaps be considered an exception). It’s the system that causes People to behave and believe in violent, unjust, dominating and prejudiced ways. Making another world is about conflicts between classes, not individuals.

In *Capital, Volume 3*, I wrote that “The realm of freedom can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind force of Nature, and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature.” Such rational collective action of “the 99%,” based on ecological health instead of financial or industrial greed, is still ultimately the only answer for places like Detroit, which is the proverbial ‘canary in the coal mine’ for the rest of the world.

Groucho Marx (no relation) defined "Politics" as "the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedies." How did he know about Obama, Snyder and Bing and their silly, selfish systems of "There is no alternative"? When you are threatened with despotic rule by "Emergency Managers," perhaps the infamous idea, "You have nothing to lose but your chains" takes on a more concrete reality!

CHORUS: "Solidarity Beats Austerity!"

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: Every January 15 we are reminded that in 1963 I had a "dream" about racial equality and desegregation. How many remember that by the time I was killed in 1968, I focused on the "triple evils" of materialism, militarism and racism? That I had publicly opposed the imperial US war in Southeast Asia, not because it was too expensive, strategically misguided or lost, but because it was fundamentally wrong and immoral? That I called for "a radical revolution of values" from a "thing-oriented" to a "person-oriented" society?

My evolutionary journey from the dream to radical revolution seems to have begun in a Birmingham, Alabama jail, where I wrote about my People "smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society." Will the "restructuring" of Detroit change, or even acknowledge or address this unjust inequality that so obscenely persists for most of the 80%-plus African-American population of this city fifty years later? What about the silenced Latino and profiled Arab populations? Are they merely seeking "restructured" cages? Or will this century finally see the Promised Land of air, land, water, food, shelter, education and justice for all?

What I wrote in the Birmingham jail applies today to Governor Snyder, State Treasurer Dillon and their bland platitudes: "I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block is not the White Citizens Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to positive peace which is the presence of justice, who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action,' who paternalistically believes that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom..." Michigan EMFs - "Emergency Manager Fascists" (after all, I was a man of the cloth) - seem to be confused about which century they are living in.

When I scribbled those words on scraps of paper that were smuggled out of the jail by my attorney (who thought at the time I might be losing my grip on sanity, by the way), African Americans had already been waiting over 300 years for their basic human rights. It's now 50 years later, and the white power structure of Michigan is systematically expanding various forms of "emergency"

rule over most People of Color in the state! Rebellion and civil disobedience are the only honorable and intelligent options they leave us!

CHORUS: “We Want the World and We Want it Now!”

MALCOLM X:^v What I said in life applies very well to Detroit today: “If you're not careful the newspapers will have you hating the oppressed and loving the people doing the oppressing.” To read the papers or watch their corporate-bastard cousins on TV news, you'd think the only thing Detroiters want is to be like Black suburbanites, and the reason they can't achieve that exalted status is because they're completely incompetent fools.

I lived a life of controversy and reinvention, and was assassinated by my former allies, after I broke free from their dogma and tried to follow my own path. Today I'm remembered as the most articulate spokesman for a new way to think and talk about race in America. The same controversy and conflicts that shaped my life and my death continue to dominate race relations in the Detroit region, between the overwhelmingly Black city, the white-dominated suburbs and state, and the Latino, Native American, Arab and Asian minorities caught in the middle.

What Detroiters need, and what their state overseers refuse to tolerate, is Detroiters' self-determination; the fundamental human rights of all Peoples to decide for ourselves the best political and social arrangements for our communities. Without it, talk of “freedom” is a lie!

This isn't rocket science. Governor Snyder and his latter-day white supremacist buddies “get it.” They demonstrate their lack of trustworthiness because they refuse to accept People outside their circle as true equity partners. Fittingly, Detroit was where I articulated the difference between the “house Negro” and the “field Negro” in my “Message to the Grassroots” speech at King Solomon Church in 1963. Old habits apparently die hard!

CHORUS: “Black Power!”

TONI MORRISON: As a worker known for specializing in both language and ghost stories (and the second character here who's still actually living!), let me offer a few thoughts about the language of the Governor, and the wealthy and powerful animal spirits he represents.

As I said when I accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature, I reject language of money that drinks blood.^{vi} What do I mean by that? Here's an example: “The Program Management Director acting in the place and stead of the Mayor and the City Council with respect to a Reform Initiative in the event that the Financial Advisory Board finds a Reform Default of this Agreement.” That just makes me want to reach for a silver crucifix to ram thru some vampire's heart!

If what they really mean is, “When corporate capital says ‘jump!’ You say ‘How high?’,” then (with due respect to the vernacular, as Soulman Young would’ve put it:) *just fucking say that!* Drop the dead, unyielding language that’s content to admire its own paralysis. Statist language, censored and censoring, ruthless in its policing duties, with no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance, is a lie, and an evil lie that’s calculated to enable oppression, dispossession, injustice and racist domination of weakened human beings.

Detroit’s People get no benefits from this misprision of language. The official language of the state’s “Agreements” is smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege; it’s a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago. Yet there it is: dumb, predatory, sentimental. Exciting reverence in schoolchildren, providing shelter for despots, summoning false memories of stability and harmony among the public. They speak the malign language of law-without-ethics only to those who obey, or in order to force obedience. Their obscene, misused and distorted language falls on utterly deaf ears!

In place of “restructuring” let’s have liberation. Economic fairness in place of “fiscal stability.” Not fraudulently coerced “consent.” Rather freely embraced desire for justice, passion for truth and beauty, wisdom and integrity. “Emergency managers” (which would better be called “dictators”) have drunk enough of the People’s blood! Cut them off!

CHORUS: “Don’t be afraid!”^{vii}”

ARUNDHATI ROY: I too am still alive, and very happy to see ghost stories spreading beyond India in our interconnected world. The whole world is spinning out of control around a concept of “value” created by capitalism. A thing is valuable only if the far-seeing, self-possessed and energetic representatives of “the 1%” – the rich, the capitalists, the leading men and some women of Governor Snyder and Mayor Bing’s “business community” – can find ways to use it to get more wealth and power for themselves.

This is a totally crazy way to “value” ourselves and our world. That seems to occur to us intermittently, but it is the normal way things work, so we submit to it. The fact that it’s getting out of control is the good news!

As cunning, brilliant, wise, far-seeing and energetic as the representatives of the business community like Governor Snyder often are, in spite of their vast, historically demonstrated capacities to innovate, adapt, ally and do business with fascists, socialists, despots, military dictators and freakish scumbags of every description, even with “Emergency managers,” they seem to have trouble grasping a simple fact. Capitalism is destroying the planet.

The current crisis of capitalism, democracy and the living Earth is making a very few very, very rich, while spreading socioeconomic and personal disaster throughout “the 99%” everywhere. If not for these predatory “externalities” of capitalist dealings, the specter of Detroit’s “restructuring agreement” might be funny; like I described India’s relations with global capital: “an unequal partnership in which [Detroit] is being held in a bear hug and waltzed around the floor by a partner who will incinerate her the moment she refuses to dance.”

CHORUS: “No Incineration! No Dancing Bears!”

RAYCHEL GAFFORD: I’m alive too. [PROUDLY!] I led the walkout of hundreds of students from Detroit’s Western International High School on April 25, 2012, and we started the Southwest Detroit Freedom School in Clark Park across the street. Our voices are the most important of all!

When we not only walked out of school, but started our own Freedom School, Detroit’s school/jail administrators talked about us as if we were merely “truant,” as if what we did was somehow wrong, by some warped version of social values. They prohibited us from holding our freedom school sessions too close to the school building, as if such a foolish restriction would stop us! How can one who’s unable to admit a distinction between conscientious civil disobedience and anti-social misconduct be entrusted with responsibilities for education?

More questions: What are we supposed to look for in terms of an “education” in this community, in this time, under these circumstances? What kinds of values create a system that closes dozens of school every year and leaves young people with no vision or hope for a decent future? By what authority do selfish and greedy political climbers claim moral and intellectual high ground from which to lecture us?

Some answers: We will learn what we need to know thru our actions, our self-determined confrontations with the actual conditions of crisis in our communities, our creativity and spiritual quests, and our respect for those who demonstrate that they deserve our respect!

The authority we recognize will come from service to others; from honesty; from solidarity with those we love and trust because they love and trust us.

Our values are clearly stated in our Freedom School, in our demands to the school system, and in the tradition of collective, transformational action that we proudly inherit.

CHORUS: “WE DEMAND RESPECT!!!!^{viii}”

“Challenging Reality Itself” is the Only Alternative

“They’re selling postcards of the hanging/They’re painting the passports brown...” - Bob Dylan, “*Desolation Row*”

Those particular lyrics - the first two lines of a mind-blowing and unique rock song - didn’t really hit me for many years. The universally compelling themes they evoke with such astonishing brevity: coercive laws of competition in commerce (“*selling*”); terrifying images of mob violence consequences for victims of the dominant reality (“*postcards of the hanging*”); an imaginative life of consciousness, art and the mind (“*painting*”); distorted beyond recognition in a funhouse mirror version of reality hurtling toward fascism (“*brown passports*”).

Until living thru the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist crimes against humanity, the visionary depth and wealth in just the first two lines of Dylan’s great song (a composition that had already turned my brain inside-out once when I was a teenager), never occurred to me. Now I see the terrifying prejudice, fear and hatred of the mob, combining in real time with the State’s violent, indifferent opportunism, to destroy lives, freedoms and justice. Robotic drone massacres at the push of a button, based on a single all-powerful leader’s merest whims, and my People shrug as if it were just another titillating mock-story about celebrities’ sexual misconduct measured by hypocritical, self-righteous personal moralism. History happened, and continues. In blood tones.

“*Desolation Row*” is sort of an heir to Billie Holiday’s 1939 recording “*Strange Fruit*” - perhaps the most important single recording of the 20th century, taking inspiration from horrors of lynching victims under Jim Crow terrorism. (“*They’re selling postcards of the hanging...*”) Both are melodic and poetic vocal performances that challenged not only brutality but reality itself. I am struck again and again by the immense power of music, and all art, to change and reframe daily life. What can the rest of us take and use from such geniuses’ creative confrontations with the oppressive realities of our common world?

Imagine the great Lady Day, a woman raised in poverty and taken into whorehouses, become an African-American musical genius, in the bloody fascist heart of the 20th century, confronting a microphone and the deadly evil of Jim Crow with heart-stopping lyrics as well as unsurpassed vocal artistry, transforming the legacies of folk and jazz music with a single soul-shattering performance:

*Blood on the leaf and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck*

*For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter fruit!*

What a strange, terrible and wondrous thing. What an awful price she paid. Consider the unbreakable cultural chains that connect such courage, suffering and brilliance to the magic of Motown and the Afro-centric cultural consciousness of Detroit. The political indecency of the likes of Rick Snyder and Andy Dillon the “turnaround expert,” presuming to talk down to People who learned in the school of hard knocks what life is really about. “Restructuring,” indeed!

In the words of the great, martyred Native American leader Crazy Horse, we live in the shadow of the real world. Stepping out of that shadow - into a history of our own making, by any means necessary, creating whatever meaning we can wrest away from the flimflam turnaround men - would be a fine way to take personal responsibility for this reality.

The world corporate capital constructed and maintains for us - the world of “There is no alternative” and “Fiscal Stability” - is not the real world. The real world is a place where we are taken seriously as People and as agents of our own reality, our own history and our own future.

Freedom is impossible for those who can’t even conceive of inhabiting this real world. Freedom means actively and energetically challenging claims to “reality” itself, the technological, corporatist reality of the “too big to fail,” the “homeland” and the “war on” drugs, terror and us. It means reshaping not only our conceptual categories, but our political economy along more democratic, equitable and egalitarian lines, derived from the ancient beneficial human institution of the commons.

That’s what “restructuring” Detroit will require. I wonder every day, all day long, if in Detroit today we have it in us to reject the hypocrisies and exploitation of Snyderism, and embrace real alternatives?

The Commons

Approaching the end of this long ghost story, it’s clear to me that part of our answer, if we have one, must be rediscovering the ancient institution of the commons, and putting it in place of the depraved, soulless market- and corporate-based socioeconomic principles and institutions to which there is supposedly “no alternative.”

The world of the 21st century is not that of the so-called enlightenment in the 18th, the early industrial revolution of the 19th, or the fascist, genocidal horrors of the 20th centuries. Our world has been reduced in size by modernity, and expanded in scope. We see the things we need to live - not only food, shelter

and other material things, but also education, health and just coexistence with our natural environment and other species. They're right there in the shadows, behind the misleading symbols and caricatures of reality on glowing screens everywhere.

We need - and can transform! - an economic system based on equitable sharing of all these things, in place of the spiritual wasteland of high-tech industry governed by capital. Toni Morrison's "Beloved Jazz Paradise" made flesh - and water and soil and spirit.

As Arundhati Roy recently put it: we "live side by side with spirits of the nether world, the poltergeists of dead rivers, dry wells, bald mountains and denuded forests; the ghosts of 250,000 debt-ridden [Indian] farmers who have killed themselves, and of the 800 million who have been impoverished and dispossessed to make way for us." This is our global reality. It's time we start challenging it, and keep doing so, until all that's left of our common wealth, our rights and values and our world of humanity and nature are restored to us. Or die trying and haunt the EMFS forever.

"Any idiot can face a crisis -- it's this day-to-day living that wears you out." - Anton Chekhov

"Freedom is the one purport, wisely aimed at, or unwisely, of all man's struggles, toilings and sufferings, in this Earth." - Thomas Carlyle, "*The French Revolution*"

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose..." - "*Me and Bobby McGee*"

Mothers' Day May 13, 2012

END NOTES:

ⁱ <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?280234> (March 26, 2012)

ⁱⁱ "*There is no Plan! The Structural Adjustment of Detroit*" <http://www.countercurrents.org/stephens240910.htm>, and <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/09/24/the-structural-readjustment-of-detroit/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Channeled in part by John Trudell

^{iv} Channeled in part by Kenneth Rexroth, and Peter Gelderloos

^v Channeled in part by Manning Marable

^{vi} http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

^{vii} The first 3 words of Toni Morrison's novel, "A Mercy"

^{viii} The 29th Demand of Southwest Detroit Freedom School:
<http://detroitrevolution.com/2012/04/southwest-detroit-freedom-school/>

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