

12-21-2022

## Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Memory in Twentieth Century Detroit

Emma C. Grant

University of Windsor, grant124@uwindsor.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Grant, Emma C. (2022) "Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Memory in Twentieth Century Detroit," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*. Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 6. Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate History Collections at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History by an authorized editor of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

12-21-2022

## Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Memory in Twentieth Century Detroit

Emma C. Grant

University of Windsor, [grant124@uwindsor.ca](mailto:grant124@uwindsor.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Grant, Emma C. (2022) "Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: The Intersection of Race, Class, and Memory in Twentieth Century Detroit," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*. Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 6. Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate History Collections at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History by an authorized editor of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

## Abstract

The Black Bottom community of Detroit, Michigan became an ethnic hub for African American's due to the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. This was a vibrant community composed of a heterogeneous population from various backgrounds and social classes, though faced with ongoing issues regarding sanitary and housing conditions due to entrenched racial segregation within the city. By 1936, the neighbourhood was split by middle class entrepreneurs who wished to raise the cultural prominence of the community's entertainment district. This research analyzes the intra-class relations that caused the fracturing of two communities: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. Moreover, this work refutes historical debates, which wish to concretely bind these entities as separate. Through an overview of Detroit's history, the memory of the community is assessed effectively creating an intersectional analysis encompassing African American intra-class relations, culture, the fluidity of space, and collective memory.

Due to the booming industrial enterprises in Detroit, Michigan during World War I, the city became a major destination for individuals who took part in the Great Migration. In 1910, Detroit contained a population of 5,741 Black individuals. By 1920, the African American population skyrocketed to 40,838 residents.<sup>1</sup> Upon arrival to the city in the early 1900s, migrants were limited to settling within the parameters of a pre-determined Black corridor known as the St. Antoine Street District.<sup>2</sup> This region grew east, south, and north as the area's western border was barred by the white populace from sprawling into the downtown business sector. This predominately Black section of Detroit had interchangeable names including St. Antoine District, the East Side Colored District, and the Gratiot Area.<sup>3</sup>

Two opposing community boundaries came out of this single, physical space: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. The Black Bottom was an overcrowded community largely composed of Detroit's Black working class and was infamous for its poor housing and sanitary conditions.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Paradise Valley rose to cultural prominence during the 1930s and was declared Detroit's "Harlem."<sup>5</sup> Acting as the central conduit for the African American community, this section of the city was famous for its jazz scene, night life, as well as its patronage to poets and artists.<sup>6</sup> The exact locations of these communities are contested and unanimously remain unclear according to historians. Although these two spheres inhabited the same ethnic, cultural, and physical space, they are designated in the historiography of Detroit as separate.

This essay argues that Paradise Valley grew out of the Black Bottom community, which inextricably links the two separate entities into one. The ambiguity of each community's location, the concrete understanding of their regional overlap, and the inability of historical research to untangle the two spheres is evidence that the division, which created separate communities, is a social construct based upon intra-class relations within Detroit's African American community. Moreover, this essay attempts to capitalize on the fluidity within the field of social memory by entwining historical dialogue with the narrative of lived experiences. Alon Confino asserts that there is, "(N)o one way to do memory," yet cautions the historian on the methodology used within the relatively new form of analysis.<sup>7</sup> This work advocates that social memory must be analyzed through an intersectional approach and thus works to forge the bonds between race, intra-class relations, urban space, and memory.

This research follows the evolution of class relations between the Black elite, middle, and working classes within Detroit from the 1870s to 1936. By analyzing transformations of power

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Anne Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1925* (The University of Michigan: Michigan Historical Collections/The Bentley Historical Library, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, "Detroit," 25.

<sup>3</sup> Darlene C. Conely, "Driven and Pursued: Black Migrant Detroit an Analysis of the Neighborhoods Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, 1916-1968," Master's Thesis, Morgan State University, 2016, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community In Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Dave Kenney, "Paradise Found: Detroit's Paradise Valley," *Michigan History Magazine*, vol. 103, no. 3 (May-June 2019): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Peters, "Cultural and Social Mecca: Entrepreneurial Action and Venue Agglomeration in Detroit's Paradise Valley and Black Bottom Neighborhoods," *Artivate* 9, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review* 102, (December 1997), 1386-1388.

and the inherited morals that accompanied these transfers, this essay will demonstrate how class relations within the African American community created distinctions within a designated urban space. Ultimately, this research refutes historical debates, which attempt to concretely bind these communities. Additionally, this study will reflect upon the targeted demise of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley due to the Urban Renewal Acts of the 1950s. By addressing the destruction of this community, this work can assess the intersectionality of social memory within Detroit's urban space and thus marry academic discourse to the subjectivity of lived experience in an attempt to lend agency and voice to those who lived within Detroit's African American community and those who carry on its memory today.

### The Historiographical Space Debate

Jeremy Williams claims that the Black Bottom community lay between Gratiot Avenue, Brush Street, Vernor Highway, and the Grand Trunk Railroad.<sup>8</sup> Williams further ascertains that Black Bottom's commercial strips were located on Hastings and St. Antoine Streets, and were known as a distinctly separate district called Paradise Valley. Thus, Black Bottom served as the residential area and Paradise Valley its up-scale commercial center.<sup>9</sup> Opposing this geographic analysis, David M. Katzman asserts that Detroit residents of African descent lived within five city wards bounded by Woodward and Gratiot Avenue. Katz further details that the majority of these Black residents lived in the region called the "Old Near East Side."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Katzman evaluates that during the initial Black population boom of the late nineteenth century, much of the new population was forced to settle within a narrow two-block-wide radius, which extended from the Detroit River to the city's outer limits. According to Katzman, this major artery of the Black region was St. Antoine Street.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was the high concentration of Black residents crammed along St. Antoine Street that made the Black business district in this urban space possible.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Williams's claim that Paradise Valley and Black Bottom are distinct and separate is refuted. These two spaces may have been *made* separate, but they were born from one cultural space.

Elizabeth Anne Martin places the Black Bottom community within the southern boundaries of the East Side Colored District, thus declaring a community within a district.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, Darlene C. Conely places Black Bottom within the bounds of Vernor Highway to the north, Hastings Street to the east, Madison to the south, and John R to the west with Gratiot Road cutting through the middle.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Conely places the boundaries of Paradise Valley as beginning on the north side of Vernor Highway to the east side of Hastings, down to Gratiot Avenue, from Gratiot to Bush Street, and up to Brush and Columbia on the west side.<sup>15</sup> Each of these historical perspectives is placing slightly different boundaries upon a shared space defined

---

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Williams, *Images of America: Detroit the Black Bottom Community* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Images*, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 72-73.

<sup>11</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *Detroit*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Conley, "Driven and Pursued", 48.

<sup>15</sup> Conley, "Driven and Pursued", 61.

by race. The division of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley was not based upon geographic location, political affiliations, or ethno-cultural distinction as both Black Bottom and Paradise Valley shared the same residents. Instead, it seems that the division from one community to two was born from deeply entrenched class boundaries within the African American community of Detroit, which were reflected in physical spaces stratified by caste.

Although this essay academically assesses the cultural separation of urban spaces within Detroit based upon class, it does not change the fact that this space was indeed identified and is remembered as separate in the eyes of the residents who lived in these communities. In an interview recorded by the *Black Bottom Digital Archives*, Mr. Jiam DesJardins, a resident who moved to the community as a child in 1933 and lived on Hastings Street, clearly describes Paradise Valley as a separate, “little town” though specifying that it was primarily a commercial area.<sup>16</sup> According to DesJardins, Paradise Valley was born from a coalition of ten entrepreneurs who created the Paradise Valley Businessmen’s Association in an attempt to promote and grow the small economic hub. Though self-defined as a distinct space, Mr. DesJardins describes Paradise Valley as belonging to Black Bottom using language such as “we had...”. Despite the fact that Paradise Valley was viewed as separate from Black Bottom, it still *served* Black Bottom and its residents believed that they claimed some ownership over the commercial space.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Late Nineteenth Century: Roots of Intra-Class Relations Within Detroit’s African American Community**

According to Richard W. Thomas, during the Reconstruction Era the Black elite of Detroit coveted class consciousness over ideas of race. Upper-class Black individuals distanced themselves from the race-centered freedom celebrations following emancipation within Detroit’s African American community. In the years following 1871, this group actively campaigned against Black cultural holidays, insisting that assimilation into white society would be hastened if the community only celebrated national holidays.<sup>18</sup> The resistance of Detroit’s Black elite to engross themselves within the wider community is also evidenced by their dismissal of public dances held by others within the African American community. Instead, the elite turned to their own clubs for their socializing needs, as well as held private dinners and teas solely for fellow class members. The elite’s closed rank system effectively shut out the lower classes in an attempt to distance themselves from the Black community and thus become ingratiated within white society. Thomas states clearly that Detroit’s African American elite, “(T)rembled at the thought of association with the Black masses.”<sup>19</sup>

Katzman supports this analysis by assessing Detroit’s Black class relations through local church membership. The Black elite were overwhelmingly Episcopalian, the middle class were primarily Methodist, and the working class were mostly Baptist. The highest circle of Black society attended St. Matthew’s Church, which held great prestige within both the Black and white communities, and thus offered a bridge to religious assimilation. The African American

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mr. Jiam DesJardins and Bert Dearing featuring BBA Fellows, Black Bottom Digital Archives, Oral Histories, transcript, <https://digital.blackbottomarchives.com/interviews/>.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mr. Jiam DesJardins, Black Bottom Digital Archives, Oral Histories, transcript.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *Life for Us*, 8-11.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Life for Us*, 11.

elite coveted their prestige within the religious community and barred membership to their church effectively shunning the Black middle and working classes even in charitable endeavors. When the number of African American migrants slowly trickled into Detroit at the end of the nineteenth century, St. Matthew's closed its doors and refused to assist the newcomers and their poverty stricken brethren.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that the African American community of Detroit was marred by divisive class structures beginning in the Reconstruction Era. Elitism and status were defined in Detroit's Black community by how far one could distance themselves from the working and lower classes, and thus align themselves with the white population. However, it was this separatism that brought about the elite's fall from power. The number of Black elites within Detroit society quickly diminished at the beginning of the twentieth century due to their exclusivity. Families who did not produce a male heir had daughters who moved to other urban centers to marry within their class, while others followed their financial pursuits outside of Detroit. The few who remained either severed themselves from Black society or made alliances with the emerging and powerful middle class.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Early Twentieth Century: The Great Migration and the New Middle Class**

With the coming of the Great Migration, the new Black middle class of Detroit (composed mostly of the first Southern arrivals in the late nineteenth century) usurped the power of the upper class. Not only was this due to the upper class's incestuous decline but was also due in part to the influx of migrants to Detroit who aligned themselves with the values of the established middle class.<sup>22</sup> However, this does not mean that the established residents shared their sentiments. The new middle class inherited the patronizing and aloof nature of their societal predecessors. Following World War I when the African American migration to Detroit went from a trickle to a flood, the existing Black community did not receive the migrants warmly and mostly ignored their existence. Established Black residents feared the perceptions of the white community, believing their entire race would be broadly painted with negative stereotypes.<sup>23</sup> This prejudice from the existing Black community to the new migrants translated to the business sector as well. Many of the new Southern residents entered into commercial enterprises of which they had no former knowledge, leading to badly run services that the rest of the Black community believed reflected poorly upon their race. Thus, Black customers did not hold loyalty to fellow African American run businesses during the early migration.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of their inherited elitist nature, the Black middle class changed their exclusionary tune once it was recognized that they required the patronage of the new migrants in their own commercial pursuits.<sup>25</sup> The powerful middle class was successful in changing the construction of the St. Antoine, Beaubien, and Hastings streets into a small but budding business sector.<sup>26</sup> These middle class businesses depended upon the migrant communities that they served. This is

---

<sup>20</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 135-139.

<sup>21</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 164-65

<sup>22</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 164-65

<sup>23</sup> Martin, "Detroit," 5.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, "Detroit," 21-22.

<sup>25</sup> Martin, "Detroit," 21.

<sup>26</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 165-166.

further evidence that the commercial district that became Paradise Valley was born from the same roots as the Black Bottom community.

Even with some commercial success, the Black Bottom community faced a staggering housing crisis. Between 1914 and 1923, migrants settled in the areas of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom out of necessity, as the city was dealing with an incredible lack of housing for Black residents due to entrenched residential segregation practices.<sup>27</sup> In 1917, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that 25,000 individuals of African descent were living within this “restricted area.”<sup>28</sup> Given that this urban sector was used as European immigrant housing throughout the nineteenth century, the worn and ill maintained dwellings in the district were already in poor condition, and according to Conley, were centuries old by the time the Great Migration was underway.<sup>29</sup> Many of the wooden structures began as shacks in alleyways, or as barns and sheds.<sup>30</sup> This area was dilapidated but landlords still charged extremely high rents for the substandard structures, which Black residents clamored to out of desperation. The living conditions within the Black Bottom community were in all respects shocking. In the 1920s, social workers described homes in which rain poured through roofs lacking electricity, plumbing, as well as bathrooms. Often if a tenant demanded a toilet, the landlord would not bother to build a separate room, but instead would place a toilet directly in a living room or kitchen.<sup>31</sup> In 1931, the *New York Times* stated that a Hoover Committee Report reflected these same trends of dilapidated Black housing with poor sanitary conditions and extremely high rents as a national issue not only faced by Detroit residents.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that the middle class had inherited some of the elitist tendencies of the upper class, this group made an effort to assist with the hardships of those below them. The new middle class rejected the old elite’s ideology of assimilation, and instead focused on uplifting other Black individuals through charitable works in churches, social societies, and the Detroit Urban League. However, it must be noted that this charitable work was done in a patronizing manner that often failed to understand or sympathize with the lifestyles of the lower classes.<sup>33</sup>

### 1936: The Split

By 1936, the African American community of Detroit had weathered the storm of the Great Migration and were slowly recovering from the Great Depression, which created far more consequences for this ethnic community as compared to their white counterparts. Despite these hardships Dave Kenney claims that the African American population of Detroit had, “little sense of identity,” and the Black district of the near east side was declared a slum.<sup>34</sup> According to Kenney, this area was an “unofficial geographic district” that was approximately ten blocks wide and thirty blocks long, with the main corridors encompassing Hastings and St. Antoine Streets.

---

<sup>27</sup> Conley, “Driven,” 60-65.

<sup>28</sup> D. J. Healy, “HOUSING FOR NEGROES,” *Detroit Free Press* (1858-1922), Jul 11, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Conley, “Driven,” 61-65

<sup>30</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 73-75

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *Life for Us*, 94-99.

<sup>32</sup> “Sees Negro Housing Wretched in Cities: Hoover Committee Reports,” *New York Times*, 27 Nov 1943, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Katzman, *Before*, 156-160.

<sup>34</sup> Dave Kenney, “Paradise Found: Detroit's Paradise Valley,” *Michigan History Magazine*, vol. 103, no. 3, May-June 2019, 28.



This region went by many names in the early 1930s but was mostly referred to as the Black Bottom.<sup>35</sup>

In order to uplift the cultural prominence of the area, in 1936, community leader, Rollo Vest, set forth a plan to elect a de facto mayor of the African American cultural center in imitation of Harlem, New York and Bronzeville, Chicago. However, in order to achieve this goal, the area known as Black Bottom had to not only be rebranded, but the artistic and economic epicenter had to be segregated. The name Paradise Valley was chosen for the specific Black business and entertainment district that belonged to the northern edge of the Black Bottom community. Elections were held by the Black operated newspaper, the *Michigan Chronicle*, to determine the mayor of Detroit's Black, cultural capital.<sup>36</sup> On October 31, 1936 the *The Chicago Defender* announced that Roy Lightfoot, owner of the prominent B & C Club, was elected to the Paradise Valley post. A ball was held at the famous Greystone club in his honor, cementing the club's esteemed status as an unofficial capitol building of Paradise Valley.<sup>37</sup> Even though Paradise Valley was considered a separate entity, the entertainment district still served all classes of Black Detroiters, just as the commercial district had since its creation in the late nineteenth century. Len Reed of the *The Chicago Defender*, reported on Club Plantation's opening show titled "Rhythm Excursion" in March of 1937. Reed stated that patrons included, "Troupers from the carious niteries, downtown business men and their 'stenogs,' Ford makers, painters and drivers all were there to help make the roaring, wild and riotous party..."<sup>38</sup>

Between 1936 and the late 1950s, Paradise Valley became what Jeremy Peters terms a, "Cultural and Social Mecca." Though, it must be noted that Peters places this terminology on both the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley communities while still defining the neighborhoods as separate entities. The celebrated jazz scene and music venues, which were centered within Paradise Valley, became important spaces of cultural contact. In fact, Peters states that it was the concentrated nature of music venues that attributed to its success. Paradise Valley reached such acclaim that the entertainment district saw an influx of white patronage from not only neighboring districts, but also from the suburban communities surrounding Detroit. Peters makes this specific claim to emphasize the success and influence, which this celebrated Black district held.<sup>39</sup>

Would Paradise Valley have been able to reach such success and acclaim if it had not severed itself from Black Bottom? This essay cannot definitively answer that question. Yet, this essay can state that at its inception the middle class business owners of Black Bottom believed that this area required rebranding in order to fetter the bonds of slum association. Thus, Paradise Valley was born of social class construction, severing the ties between the lower-class slums and the middle-class business district. The distinction of two urban spaces was not born from segregation by way of commercial and residential organization, but rather by the needs of the middle class to

---

<sup>35</sup> Kenney, "Paradise Found," 29-30.

<sup>36</sup> Kenny, "Paradise Found," 28-32.

<sup>37</sup> "PARADISE VALLEY'S MAYOR," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Oct 31, 1936.

<sup>38</sup> Len Reed, "LEONARD REED STEALS 'LITTLE ZIGGY'S' SHOW," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Mar 20, 1937.

<sup>39</sup> Peters, "Cultural and Social Mecca," 20-26.

differentiate their image from that of the working poor in order to reach noble distinction as a Black cultural center.

### **The 1950s: The End**

The systemic issue of substandard African American housing in Detroit was never adequately addressed by either white individuals in power or Black activists as too many barriers of prejudice restricted their efforts. Thomas J. Sugrue asserts that following World War II, Black homeowners from both the working and middle classes occasionally cooperated with white housing organizations to address the systemic housing issues they faced. But alas, this often led the Black community to unconsciously cement the racial divisions already prevalent within Detroit society.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the plight of African American segregation was not only a by-product of racial prejudice within Detroit, but was also due to the combined actions of federal and local governments, real estate agents, individuals interacting with the system of real estate, and various other community organizations.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, the institutions restraining the African American community were too great and too strong to adequately contend with.

The growing rhetoric among Detroit's white populace and local government in the mid-twentieth century was to clear the city of blight in order to usher in an era of "urban renewal." During the Slum Clearance of 1949, the entire Black Bottom community was bulldozed. Detroit saw the destruction of 3,500 buildings, most of which were Black owned. The Occupancy Standards Act of 1950 and the Construction and Equipment of the Home Standards Act in 1951 cemented Mayor Jefferies' ability to destroy the middle class Black communities that bordered Paradise Valley's commercial district. Finally, with the Federal Highway Act of 1956, Mayor Albert Cobo destroyed the cultural and economic heart of Detroit's Black community: Paradise Valley's Hasting Street.<sup>42</sup>

Sugrue's research corroborates an outward expansion of Detroit's African American community from the East Side between the years of 1950 and 1960, resulting in improved housing conditions for the community. Sugrue stated that, "The number of Blacks in substandard buildings (dilapidated buildings or those that lacked running water or indoor toilets) plummeted between 1950 and 1960 from 29.3 percent to only 10.3 percent."<sup>43</sup> This shift is attributed to African Americans who moved out of the dilapidated Black corridor into newer neighborhoods.<sup>44</sup> However, this analysis fails to address the targeted policies of Detroit's government, which purposefully destroyed the communities of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. It is no coincidence that this data reflects a mass exodus of Detroit's Black East Side between 1950 and 1960. These years almost perfectly align with the Urban Renewal Acts, which were enacted between 1949 and 1956, and deliberately displaced African American homeowners and renters from this specific district. These acts may have resulted in improved housing conditions, but it was not by way of pure, autonomous choice that many Black residents

---

<sup>40</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>41</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Vaughn Thomas Horn, "Cobo's Ragweed Acres and 49 Million Alternatives: Examining Land Use Policies in Detroit's Paradise Valley and Surroundings," *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, (2014): 34–37.

<sup>43</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins*, 183.

<sup>44</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins*, 183.

relocated across the city. Moreover, upon relocation, the systemic issues facing racial housing segregation within Detroit were not addressed, resulting in new Black communities facing the same entrenched barriers as before the destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.<sup>45</sup> What was once the central hub for African American habitation, economic venture, and artistic celebration was cleared in less than ten years. An important and vibrant cultural community met its end, instead I-375 now runs through this area.<sup>46</sup> Paved concrete now covers this bygone Black neighborhood, leaving its former residents, as well as the current residents of Detroit, with only their memories of the area.

### Memory: The Conclusion

Though the cultural space may be gone, the social memory is not forgotten. Social memory can be loosely defined as a historical concept used to examine the connection between social identity and historical memory, as well as explore how individuals come together to form common groups.<sup>47</sup> The past several decades have seen a renaissance movement to eulogize this African American community. The narratives written on this remembering reflect the ambiguity of the two districts and its cultural space. Frank Rashid analyses Detroit poet, Robert Hayden's works, and perhaps unknowingly, asserts the obscure perception of the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley communities. Hayden's poetry captures the spirit of 1930s Paradise Valley where he lived in his youth. Interestingly, Hayden describes Paradise Valley as a "slum," though this slum was rich in community and connection amongst its residents. Despite the crime, poverty, and violence prevalent in the area, it was a home wrought by the will and perseverance of its people. Hayden's poetry humanizes the physical destruction of Paradise Valley by fastening its erasure to the metaphor of mortality amongst its residents, thus emphasising Hayden's reverence and remembrance for those who shared his community. However, Rashid's historical narrative through the eyes of Hayden makes no mention of Black Bottom. It would seem that because Hayden is a man of Detroit's celebrated Black cultural society, he amalgamated the slums and the entertainment mecca in order to celebrate his unique, artistic experience within Detroit.<sup>48</sup>

Dr. Andre Lee was a Black Bottom resident during the 1940s and remembers the neighborhood as rough with a prejudice police presence and a patchwork of gangs. However, Dr. Lee also recounted his youthful interactions with Black Bottom's cultural scene by way of his uncle who managed various shows for the clubs of the entertainment district. Dr. Lee described his experiences at the Flame Show Bar, the Paradise Theatre, and the old Greystone.<sup>49</sup> Despite the fact that Dr. Lee's memories center around notable Paradise Valley landmarks, he does not separate Black Bottom from Paradise Valley. Instead, this personal remembering amalgamates the communities into one representing Dr. Lee's personal experience of culturally identifying with the Black Bottom community and associating his points of contact with the entertainment district to this single community realm.

---

<sup>45</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins*, 183-189.

<sup>46</sup> Horn, "Cobo's Ragweed," 34-37.

<sup>47</sup> Scot A. French, "What Is Social Memory?" *Southern Cultures* 2, no.1 (1995), 9.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Rashid, "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies," *John Hopkins University Press* Vol. 24, no. 1 (2001): 200-226.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Dr. Andre Lee, *Black Bottom Digital Archives*, Oral Histories, transcript, <https://digital.blackbottomarchives.com/interviews/>.

This essay has shown that Paradise Valley's cultural, economic, and commercial district was born from the Black Bottom community proving that these two regions are in fact one physical space. Culturally and class consciously crafted, Paradise Valley was separated from the larger district due to intra-class relations amongst Detroit's African American community at the hands of middle class entrepreneurs in 1936. Although division is at the heart of this analysis, amalgamation acts as its driving beat. The destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley in the 1950s blurred the lines of separation, instead binding the communities together in commemoration. By studying this space through the lens of intra-class relations this work acts as an avenue of intersection, which integrates racial class systems into the larger narrative regarding the fluidity of space, culture, and collective memory.

## Bibliography

- Conely, Darlene C. "Driven and Pursued: Black Migrant Detroit an Analysis of the Neighborhoods Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, 1916-1968." Master's Thesis. Morgan State University, 2016.
- Confino, Alon. "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method". *American Historical Review*. 102. (December 1997): 1386–1403.
- French, Scot A. "What Is Social Memory?" *Southern Cultures*. Vol. 2, no.1 (1995): 9-18.
- Healy, D. J. "HOUSING FOR NEGROES." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*. Jul 11, 1917.
- Interview with Dr. Andre Lee. *Black Bottom Digital Archives*. Oral Histories. Transcript. <https://digital.blackbottomarchives.com/interviews/>.
- Interview with Mr. Jiam DesJardins and Bert Dearing featuring BBA Fellows. *Black Bottom Digital Archives*. Oral Histories. Transcript. <https://digital.blackbottomarchives.com/interviews/>.
- Katzman, David M. *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973.
- Kenney, Dave. "Paradise Found: Detroit's Paradise Valley." *Michigan History Magazine*. vol. 103, no. 3. May-June 2019.
- Martin, Elizabeth Anne. *Detroit and the Great Migration 1916-1925*. The University of Michigan: Michigan Historical Collections/The Bentley Historical Library. 1993.
- "PARADISE VALLEY'S MAYOR." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967. Oct 31, 1936.
- Peters, Jeremy. "Cultural and Social Mecca: Entrepreneurial Action and Venue Agglomeration in Detroit's Paradise Valley and Black Bottom Neighborhoods," *Artivate*. Vol. 9, no. 1 (2020): 20-26.
- Rashid, Frank. "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies." *John Hopkins University Press*. Vol. 24, no. 1 (2001): 200-226.
- Reed, Len. "LEONARD REED STEALS 'LITTLE ZIGGY'S' SHOW." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967). Mar 20, 1937.

“Sees Negro Housing Wretched in Cities: Hoover Committee Reports.” *New York Times*. 27 Nov 1943. 22.

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Thomas Horn, Vaughn. “Cobo’s Ragweed Acres and 49 Million Alternatives: Examining Land Use Policies in Detroit’s Paradise Valley and Surroundings.” *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, (2014): 31–37.

Thomas, Richard Walter. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community In Detroit, 1915-1945*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Williams, Jeremy. *Images of America: Detroit the Black Bottom Community*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009.