

Heather Thompson
**“Detroit Politics in the Sixties and Seventies:
Tumultuous Past, Contested Legacy”**
February 13, 2003

My name is Tom Klug and I am with the History Department here at Marygrove College. I welcome you to another in a series of public presentations that we call “Defining Detroit”

Before we get started, I would like to point out that this event has been made possible due to financial support from:

- a. the Skillman Foundation
- b. the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- c. the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs
- d. Marygrove College

I would also like to request that each of you fill out the survey and drop it in the basket as you leave this evening; it will help us better plan future “Defining Detroit” events.

And if you are not yet on our “Defining Detroit” mailing list, please fill out a card and leave it at the table near the entrance.

I have the distinct pleasure of introducing this evening’s speaker: Heather Thompson, a native Detroiter, a graduate of Cass Tech (and later the University of Michigan and Princeton University), since 1997 an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and author of Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor and Race in a Modern American City (published by Cornell University Press in 2001), copies of which are available for purchase,

(back to Heather in just a minute...)

I am also the director of Marygrove’s Institute for Detroit Studies.

You can read the back of your program to get more information about the IDS...

The idea behind the IDS is quite simple: we believe that Detroit deserves serious attention by scholars; and, indeed, that scholars and the wider community are enriched when they study Detroit critically.

I am not the only one who believes that serious-minded scholars should study Detroit.

Allow me to read from a review of Suzanne Smith’s book, Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit (by the way, Suzanne Smith was our 2nd “Defining Detroit” speaker back in October, 2000):

According to the reviewer:

“Several years ago I was invited to Sao Paulo to give a talk on Detroit’s labor and urban past at a conference on globalization and the auto industry. One day, while on a tour of some picturesque villages nestled in the mountains outside of the city, a Brazilian in our group asked me pointedly, ‘Why do you study Detroit of all places? Does anyone really care about that city or even think about it very much?’ As he finished speaking I looked up in surprise and said, ‘Listen!’” And from the windows of an ancient structure next to us came the sounds of Marvin Gaye’s *Heart it Through the Grapevine* from the speakers of an old transistor radio inside. ‘See,’ I smiled, ‘Detroit is everywhere! Doesn’t that make it worth examining?’”

“Detroit is everywhere”.....

Oh, the review appeared in the journal Labor History and it was written by...HEATHER THOMPSON.

This evening, Professor Thompson will examine for us the politics of Detroit during the 1960s and 1970s.

What she writes about in her book, Whose Detroit?, is a complicated story involving multiple participants: African-Americans and whites; the middle class and the working class; labor and management; rank and file workers and union bureaucrats; conservatives, liberals, and all sorts of radicals...

She also informs us that Detroit’s political “war at home” extended back to the 1930s and 1940s when African-Americans, workers, and labor and civil rights organizations first successfully challenged the city’s white & capitalist power structure.

To say the least, white racial conservatives and corporate managers did not concede power gracefully—whether on the shop floor or in the city at large (within city government, the Detroit Police Dept., public schools, etc.)

In certain respects, the Rebellion (or “riot”) of 1967 was a political act, the culmination of 30 years of effort by the oppressed to win freedom and an economic livelihood.

But here is where Professor Thompson makes the greatest contribution: as bad as things were in Detroit up to and including 1967 (e.g., the great loss of factories and tens of thousands of industrial jobs since the early 1950s; or the great disillusionment with one “development” or urban anti-poverty program after the next (freeways, urban renewal, the Johnson Administration’s “War on Poverty” while it aggressively engaged in another kind of war abroad)---Detroit’s fate was not sealed.

Concerning the rights of workers and African-Americans, she shows that Detroit was still very much “contested terrain” after 1967, and this fact helps explain why we see in the

late 1960s and early 1970s some the intense political conflict (including some very dramatic courtroom battles) in the city.

QUESTIONS:

Who “won” and who “lost” Detroit’s war at home? What were the results of this for Detroit? In what ways are the effects of this still visible today?

Keep these questions (and other ones you may form) in mind as we now welcome this evening’s distinguished speaker, Heather Thompson.

--Thomas A. Klug