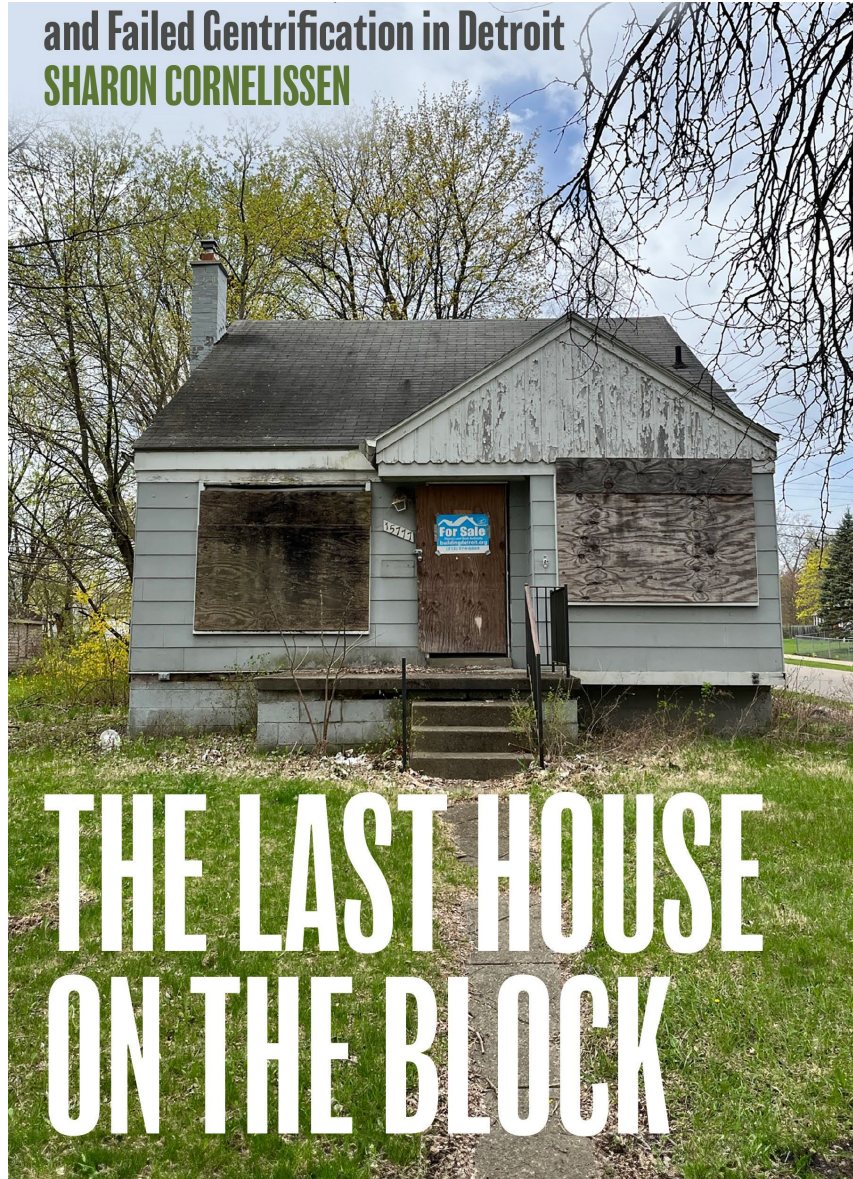


and Failed Gentrification in Detroit
SHARON CORNELISSEN



The Last House on the Block

by Sharon Cornelissen
Harvard Joint Center for
Housing Studies webinar,
November 2025

Detroit: The Most
Exciting City in America?

Last Stop on the L Train: Detroit

***While Asking for Help,
Detroit Sells a Comeback***

***Billions in Debt, Detroit
Tumbles Into Insolvency***

***In Detroit, a Survey of Stray Dogs Tries
to Put a Number to a Safety Problem***

***Detroit Is Now a Charity
Case for Carmakers***

Murder
Capital or
Place to
Be?



Moving into Detroit: Brightmoor



BRIGHTMOOR

Highland
Park

Hamtramck

DET

Grosse
Pointe
Woods

Grosse
Pointe
Farms

Grosse
Pointe
Park

Detroit

Dearborn
Heights

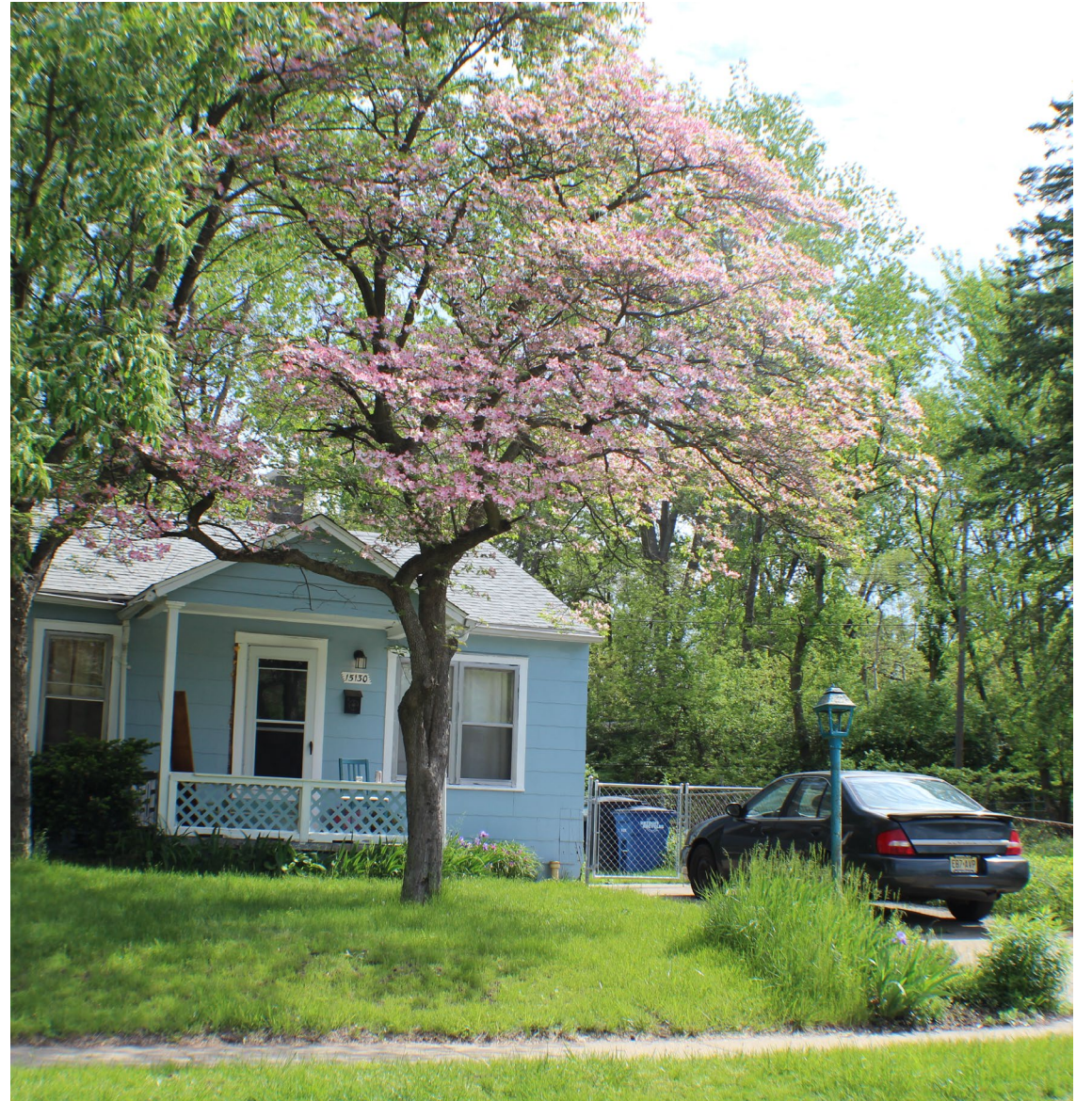
Dearborn

Windsor

Tecumseh

River





A Neighborhood After 50+ Years of Decline

	1970	2000	2017
Total population	26,000	18,000	9,400
% White	99%	22%	13%
% Black	1%	73%	83%
% Poverty	7%	32%	39%
% Vacant housing	3%	12%	33%

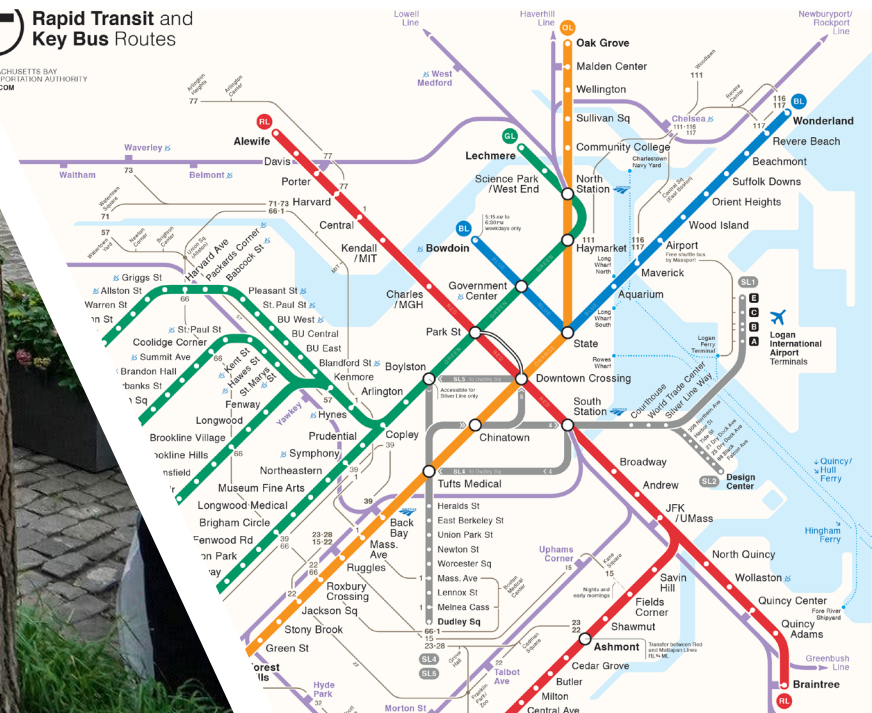
Source. Census 1970-2000, American Community Survey 2006-2010 & 2013-2017

Argument of the book



T Rapid Transit and Key Bus Routes

MASSACHUSETTS BAY TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY
TBA.COM







Two Key Questions

What is everyday life like in an extremely depopulated urban neighborhood?

What does gentrification look like in such a place?

What is gentrification?

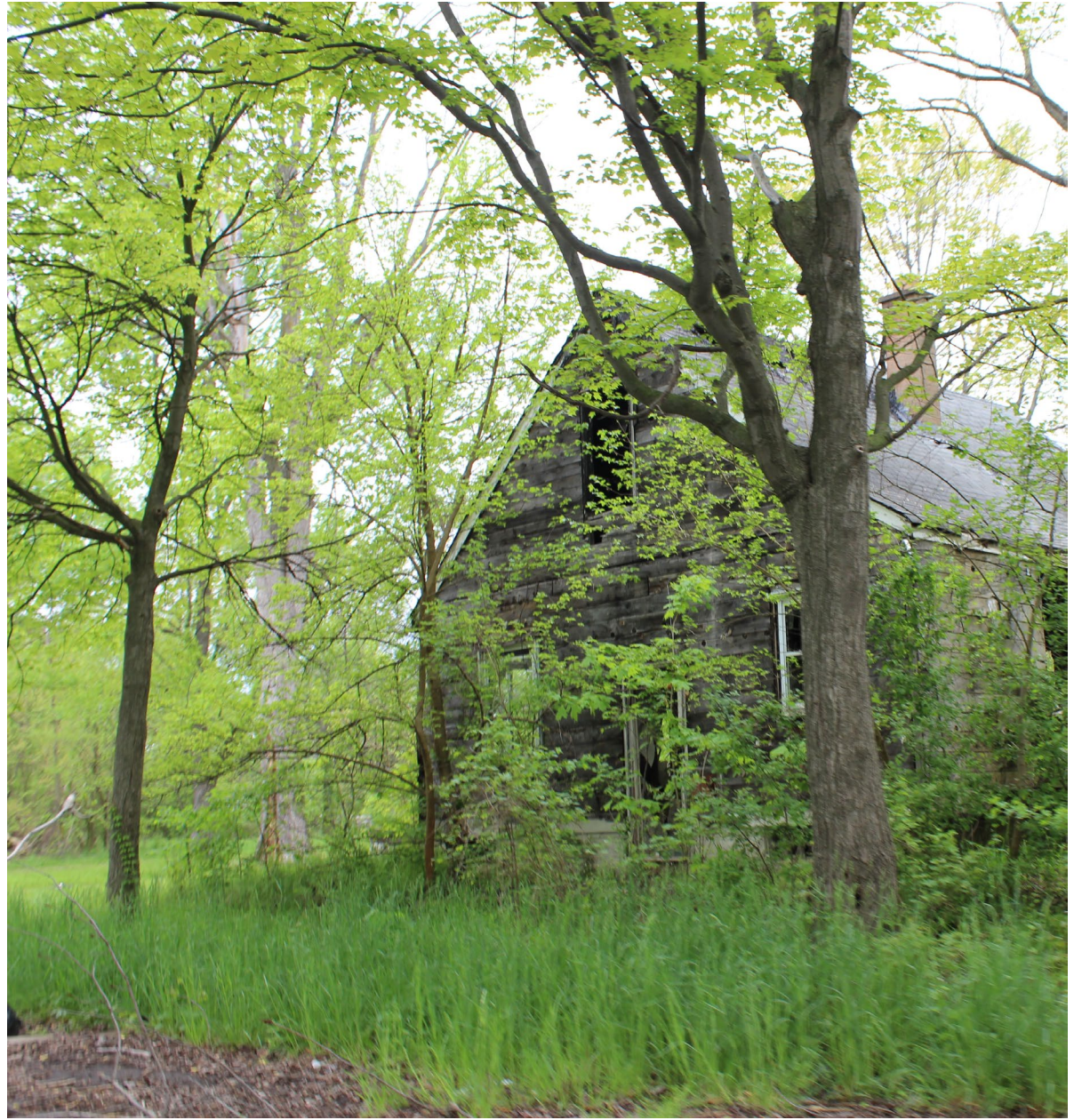
- A process of neighborhood upscaling that starts when higher-income residents move into previously lower-income area.
- Famous examples: Wicker Park, Chicago and SoHo, New York City
- Closely tied to urban decline
- Happens in waves
- Top-down investments drive up home prices and rents, lead to displacement
- Racial displacement possible BUT not necessarily

Lessons from Brightmoor on Gentrification

- Newcomers moved in for Brightmoor's "potential"
- Buying before it is too late
- Decline-induced displacement
- Desolation as surprising neighborhood amenity

- Later waves and top-down capital by city or industry never followed
- Gentrification can **fail** – early gentrification did not overcome extreme depopulation

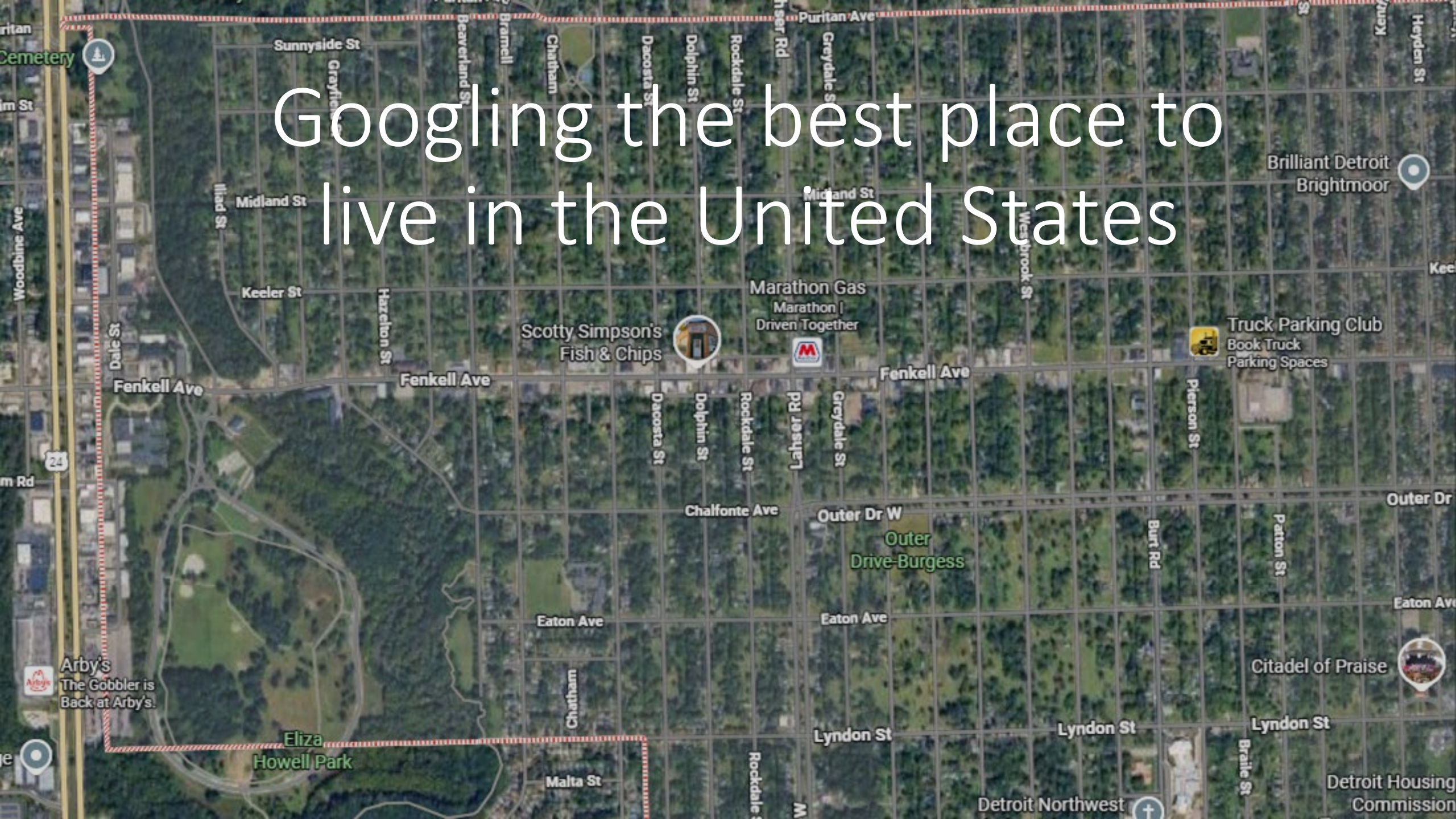
Ethnographic Stories



WHITE NEWCOMERS: Seeing the bucolic in blight



Googling the best place to live in the United States





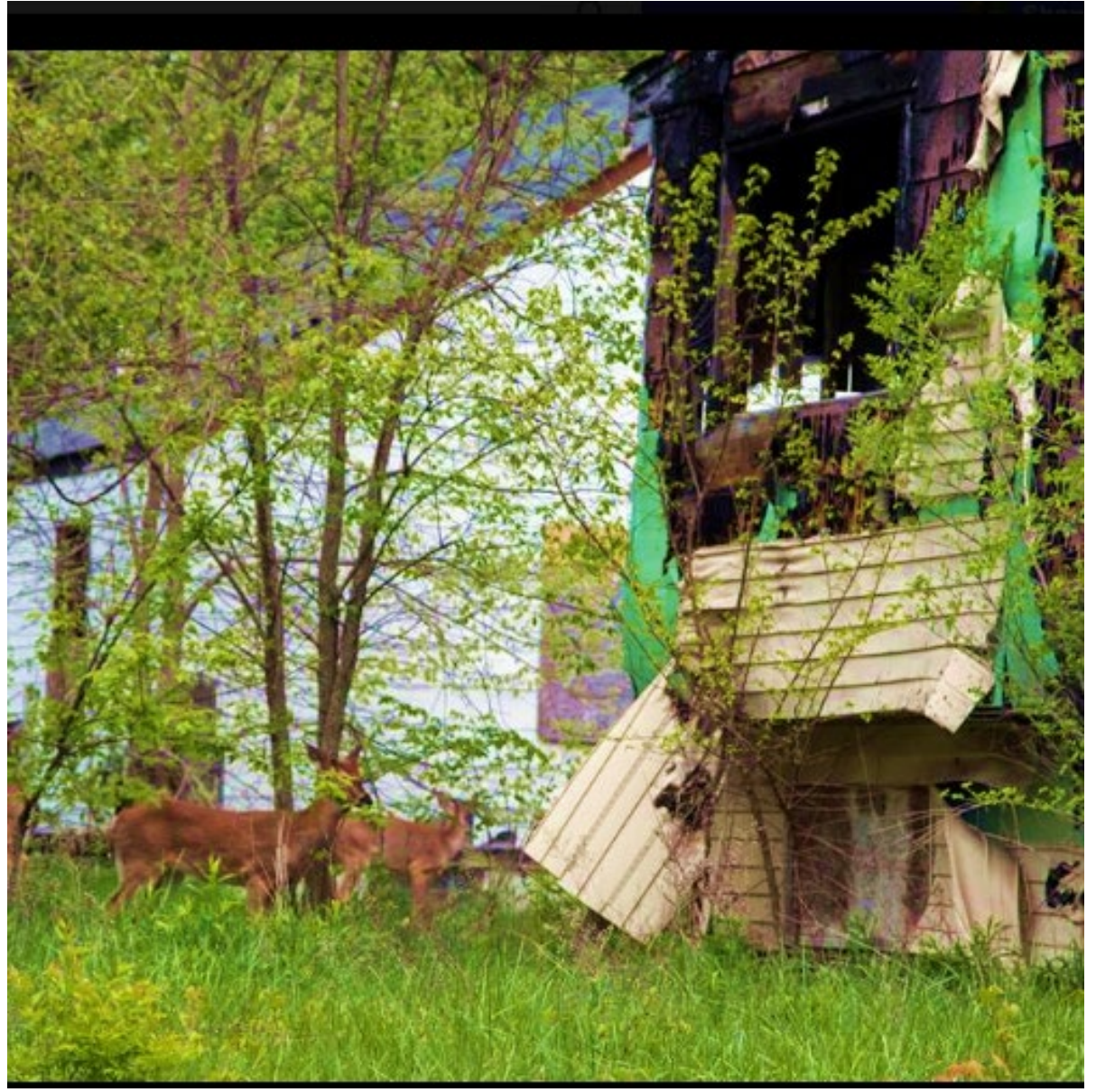




LONGTIME DETROITERS: Urban losses











Conclusions

- Go beyond “Murder capital” or “Place to be” – complicated neighborhood stories and change
- Depopulated cities widespread: Shaping racial inequality & unequal opportunity
- Failed gentrification: expanding the concept & ideas for equitable revitalization





Thank you!

