Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: Charles LeDuff
Title: “Detroit: An American Autopsy”
Publisher: Penguin Press, 2013
Reviewed by Chloe Spitalny

Detroit’s Autopsy and a Glimpse into an American Future

The city of Detroit conjures up two distinct images: the first is that of a thriving and innovative city that led the United States and the world in the development and production of automobiles throughout the industrial revolution. The second image is of modern day Detroit, a dilapidated city riddled with crime, corruption, racial warfare, and poverty. In his book, “Detroit: An American Autopsy” Charlie LeDuff exposes the modern day city of Detroit without apology. His graphic depictions of crumbling city blocks, gang-violence, police corruption, and political scheming force the reader to address the most dire realities facing this nation.

Leduff is a reporter at heart, and his talent for investigation and storytelling are evident on every page of “Detroit: An American Autopsy.” The book delves into the meat of the city's problems with vigilance and purpose. This is mainly due to the Pulitzer-Prize winning author's ability to convey his personal interrogations of, and interactions with, the heroes, victims, and villains of Detroit with a sense of dark humor, humanity, candor, and most importantly personal investment. Leduff is able to tell Detroit's story with the dual perspective of a professional detached reporter and as a native son of the city, allowing the reader to believe the author's stake in the story.
The pages of “Detroit: An American Autopsy” read like a collection of "Law and Order" greatest hits. Subsequently, Detroit is portrayed as a city defined by its failures. Events conventionally perceived as "abnormal" like arson, robbery, political screaming matches, and high-level sex scandals, are described as the norm. Leduff's primary purpose in exposing the severity and unfathomable scale of Detroit's problems is to expose a larger American story. His investigative piece forces the reader to examine how a once prosperous city became a place of such severe crime and corruption. What factors created a community in which citizens loot a fire station for food, while firefighters are busy risking their lives to extinguish flames caused by the arson of vacant and broken down homes? What financial and political systems were in place to promote the election of one of the most corrupt mayors in the history of the United States? How does crime get so out of hand that ambulance, police, and fire services simply cease to respond to calls? These are the tough questions presented to Leduff’s reader.

At first glance the plights of Detroit and its inhabitants seem so distant from the experience of the average American. Others criticize Leduff's work as being a form of "ruin porn," or a book simply meant to sensationalize the tragedy of a city and its people. But “Detroit: An American Autopsy” does more than that. Much like a medical autopsy provides knowledge regarding the death of a person, this book is meant to expose the widespread issues that led to the decline of American economic, educational, political, and social systems. In a particular moment of poignancy, Leduff challenges the reader with this idea: "Go ahead and laugh at Detroit. Because you are laughing at yourself." By exposing the problem, Leduff calls upon the American people to fix the issues of the
present in order to push through a difficult moment in the American story caused by the failures of our past.

An aspect of “Detroit: An American Autopsy” and its author's personal story that was both interesting and relevant to the Connecticut College American Studies program was the evidentiary support for the idea that race is a socially constructed idea. Throughout the book, Leduff is consistently referenced as a white male. In the author's conversations with a variety of the books subjects, he is referred to as "whitey," "Mister Charlie" (a term used to address white slave owners in antebellum America), and "white boy." Much later in the book, Leduff discovers that his paternal grandfather was in fact classified as "mulatto." This is an interesting fact, considering that in the past, "blackness" has been determined by a "one drop" rule. Under those criteria, Leduff could be regarded as a black man. These inconsistencies regarding the acknowledgement of race and shifting perception of "blackness" overtime represent that there is no inherent reality of race.

Although this book was emotionally difficult at times, it was a riveting read. Through his descriptive writing style, illustrative use of dialogue, and graphically gritty tone, Leduff was able to capture the essence a city in shambles and the fortitude of its inhabitants. The text in the book is blunt to a point of painful honesty. His text is visceral, at times crude, and heart wrenchingly sad. His authorial voice is particularly sorrowful when he discusses his personal and familial trials with the city of Detroit. Leduff lost his sister and a niece to the hard-edged city. Their experiences as high-school dropouts led to drugs, prostitution, and ultimately death. In passages discussing these two women, the
author's pain is palpable; as a result he establishes himself as a critic with a personal stake in the city and the consequences of its fall from greatness.

I highly recommend this book for its no-nonsense honest approach to some of America's greatest domestic issues. The writing style makes for a quick and engaging read, and I commend the author's in depth and immersive analysis of one of America's most interesting cities and the problems plaguing it. This is not a book in which the author stands back. It is not an effort to compile research in order to present a topic neatly and eloquently. It is, however, a book that delves head first into the trials, missteps, and failures of a truly American city. The author gives direct insight into the personalities that both shape and are defined by that iconic and tragic city. The account is personal, messy, raw, and still beautifully written.