

## "The place is not still. We shape it and make it our own": A Special Study in Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67*

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**Date received: 4/3/2025**

**Acceptance date: 23/3/2025**

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines how *Detroit '67* by Dominique Morisseau depicts the complicated relationships between people and places during one of the most chaotic periods in Detroit's history. The play, which is set during the 1967 riot, shows how the place is more than just a setting. It is a dynamic force that both shapes and is shaped by its inhabitants. This paper uses the spatial theories of human geographers Yi-Fu Tuan and Doreen Massey to investigate how Detroit shapes the identities and ambitions of its Afro- American citizens while being reshaped by their actions. Tuan's ideas about how individuals are impacted by their setting and the distinction between space and place are significant. These ideas show how Chelle and Lank's basement serves as a haven of security, memory, and resistance of the forces that seek to remove them. As well as how Detroit shapes the personality of the characters. In this study, Detroit is shown as a contested place, shaped by migration, systemic racism, and economic change, based on Massey's theory of place as dynamic. In *Detroit '67*, the experiences of the Afro-Americans are highlighted, challenging common misconceptions of place as being static and exposing it as a dynamic concept created by human activities.

**Keywords:** Afro-Americans, Detroit, identity, place-making, racism, spacial power

"المكان ليس شيئاً مجرداً. نحن نشكله ونجعله ملكنا":

دراسة مكانية في ديترويت ٦٧ لدومينيك موريسو

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تاريخ استلام البحث : ٢٠٢٥/٣/٤

تاريخ قبول البحث : ٢٠٢٥/٣/٢٣

الملخص:

تدرس هذه الورقة كيف تصور ديترويت ٦٧ لدومينيك موريسو العلاقات المعقدة بين الناس والأماكن خلال واحدة من أكثر الفترات فوضوية في تاريخ ديترويت. تُظهر المسرحية، التي تدور أحداثها خلال أعمال الشغب عام ١٩٦٧، كيف أن المكان أكثر من مجرد إطار. إنه قوة نشطة تُشكّل من قبل سكانها و تُشكّلهم في آن واحد. تستخدم هذه الورقة النظريات المكانية للجغرافيين البشريين بي فو تان ودورين ماسي للتحقيق في كيفية تشكيل ديترويت لهويات وطموحات مواطنيها الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي بينما يتم إعادة تشكيلها من خلال أفعالهم. تُعدّ أفكار تان حول كيفية تأثر الأفراد ببيئتهم والتمييز بين الفضاء والمكان بالغة الأهمية. تُظهر هذه الأفكار كيف يعمل قبو شيل ولانك كملاذ للحماية والذاكرة والمقاومة للقوى التي تسعى إلى إزالتهم. بالإضافة إلى كيفية تشكيل ديترويت لطبيعة الشخصيات. تظهر ديترويت، في هذه الدراسة، كمكان متنازع عليه، تشكل الهجرة والعنصرية المنهجية والتغيير الاقتصادي، بناءً على نظرية ماسي للمكان باعتباره نشاطاً. تُبرز ديترويت ٦٧ تجارب الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، فتتحدى المفاهيم الخاطئة الشائعة التي تعتبر المكان كياناً ثابتاً، و تظهره كمفهوم نشط يتشكل من خلال الأنشطة البشرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، ديترويت، الهوية، صناعة المكان، العنصرية، القوة المكانية.

## Introduction:

Detroit serves as Morisseau's (1978) particular muse in *The Detroit Project*, a trilogy of plays about her homeland including *Detroit '67* (2013). The play takes place in the summer of 1967 in Detroit, in a period of civil turmoil and racial tension. The play revolves around Chelle, an African American woman in her late 30s, and her brother Lank, who is in his early 30s. They run an unlawful after-hours club in their late parents' basement. Chelle prefers stability, while Lank aspires to greater opportunities, such as buying a bar with his African American friend Sly, who is in his late 30s. When Lank and Sly save Caroline, a mysterious white woman in her late 20s who is hurt and, on the run, their lives drastically change. As racial tensions in the city increase, her presence causes disruptions at home and raises questions about the risks she might bring. Despite the increasingly unstable environment surrounding them, Lank believes in moving forward, while Chelle is afraid of change and risk. The protagonists experience both social and personal hardships as the play progresses, facing issues of loyalty, family, institutional racism, and the influence of place on their survival and aspirations. As the Detroit riot breaks out, the play comes to a climax, and each character is forced to make decisions that will affect his/her life. Through poetic conversations and historical connections, Morisseau tells a story about change, survival, and the price of pursuing one's aspirations in a city that is undergoing radical change. She investigates how individuals attempt to control their own future while still being influenced by their place.

Many people believe that the desire to seek chances in a wider, more open environment is what motivates migration. Other migrations happen in North America, as people move from small towns and rural areas to large cities. Since there are no sufficient opportunities for employment and too many social restrictions on them, people view rural places as being overcrowded in an economic and psychological sense (Tuan, 1977, p. 60). So, unlike the South, Northern cities like Detroit were seen by Afro-Americans as a place where they could find more job opportunities, better education, and, most importantly, freedom. The Afro-Americans started to think that Detroit is their place. A place where they can have a decent life. Their belief aligns with the idea that places are locations of considered importance where biological needs —such as those for peace, food, water and reproduction —are met (Tuan, 1977, p.4).

When it comes to the elements influencing internal migration, security and stability come first (Abed, 2016, p 450). Detroit's prosperity deteriorated over time. The United Auto Workers union changed its emphasis from progressive politics to ensuring that its members would receive higher salaries. In order to avoid strikes, companies were no longer required to give in to make concessions to progressivism. Because of this, automakers had no reason to ensure that African American employees had equal access to positions, promotions, seniority, or even salary. Many of Detroit's industrial companies moved into the suburbs after white Detroiters, so they freed themselves from the need to make symbolic efforts toward social justice. Due to homeowners associations and discriminatory lending practices, Afro-Americans were unable to purchase suburban homes (Bertolini, 2022, p.16). The suburbs became the new location for manufacturing. The city had a sharp decline in manufacturing employment (McDonald, 2013, pp. 9-10). Concentrated poverty, urban deterioration, and limited upward mobility for Afro-Americans in certain urban areas were caused by an increase in residential segregation and white flight (Chen, 2024, p. 169).

Geographical mobility and location are important factors in the conflict between labour and capital during the production process. One of the capital's main advantages over labor is its considerable and expanding geographic mobility. In order to avoid a well-organized workforce, entire industries have regularly moved throughout the history of industry, which has lowered labor costs and restored capital's control over labor (Massey, 1995, pp. 55-56). Because of the white flight and the relocation of industrial factories, Detroit suffered from job losses and poverty.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The French geographer, Vidal de la Blache, in his important work *Principles de Geographie Humaine* (1922), emphasizes that human geography offers an entirely new understanding of how humans and the earth work together. Later, the focus switched on investigating the subject of how the physical environment affected human activities in the writings of Ratzel and Semple (Savita and Hira, 2003, p. 4). When people or groups get to know a space and associate it with their cultural values, social meanings, and individual experiences, it becomes a place (Tuan, 1977, p.6). Tuan (1976) mentions that humanistic geography shows how people are related to the environment, how they behave geographically, and how they feel and think about space and place in order to get an understanding of the human world (266). People's social behavior is influenced by the setting

(Tuan, 1974, p.243). People always shape their worldview from the most noticeable aspects of their physical and social settings. Hence, worldview and setting are closely related (Tuan, 1974, p.79).

Tuan's use of the term 'topophilia,' which expresses attachment to and love of place, makes his book, *Topophilia*, one of the most well-known humanistic-geographic works for scholars outside the field. Thus, the field of humanistic geography was formally defined by the Chinese American geographer, Tuan. Tuan defined humanistic geography as a subfield of geography that aims to gain a deeper understanding of how the environment and geography affect human life (Seamon and Lundberg, 2017, pp. 5-6). The experiences and aspirations of people are represented by a place. The study of space, from the humanistic perspective, is the examination of the spatial emotions and ideas of a community in the context of their experiences. Experience is the totality of means by which people can acquire knowledge of the world. The space that individuals perceive and construct, the space that provides signals for their behavior, varies with the individual and cultural group. The distinctive feeling of space that individuals acquire is a result of the combination of visual perception, touch, movement, and thought (Tuan, 1979, pp. 387-388).

Doreen Massey, a humanistic geographer, examines the fact that a place is unique because it is shaped by a combination of social relationships that come together and weave at a specific place (1994, p. 154). Massey is also interested in the economic dimension of the place. In her book, *Spacial Division of Labour* (1995), she states that location and geographical mobility play crucial role in the struggle between capital and labour in the production process. The Capital's significant and growing geographic mobility is one of its key advantages over labour. Throughout the history of industry, entire sectors have frequently relocated in order to avoid a well-organized workforce, and this has reduced labor costs and restored capital's dominance over labor (55-56). Due to interregional conflicts and tensions brought on by a mix of disparate economic fortunes, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and occasional exploding into street violence, the task of establishing a national government has become difficult (57).

## **Discussion**

As a result of the white flight and the relocation of industrial factories, Detroit suffered from job losses and poverty. For the whites, Detroit became a place that is stigmatized with violence, as bandits, thieves, cutthroats, beggars, and vagrants were all products of poverty (Tuan, 1980, p.134).

In other words, poverty leads to violence and crime. This was reflected in the way they treated the Afro-Americans. The Afro-Americans in Detroit are not treated fairly on economic standards. Afro-Americans are forced into the lowest-paying and least desired jobs due to discrimination in the workplace (Ware, 2013, p. 1092). This is clearly stated by Bunny, an African American woman in her mid to late 30s and a friend of Chelle and Lank, during her conversation with Chelle about having a rich man to be her boyfriend. Bunny states, " 'Cept these niggers 'round here ain't bringing back no kinda thousands. Hell, they ain't even bringin' back no hundreds" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 10). This addresses the disparity in wages and economic opportunities that Afro-Americans face in Detroit despite their hard work. Bunny's words highlight structural obstacles that prevented Afro-Americans from acquiring riches in the city.

The racial wage gap is brought to light by the sharp contrast between her dream of economic prosperity and the real economic circumstances faced by Afro-Americans. This frequently required African American women in Detroit to participate in the workforce themselves, usually in lower-paying service jobs. This happens in the play as Chelle and Bunny work. The racial treatment that Afro-Americans receive is obviously shown in one of the conversations between Lank and Chelle. When viewed through the lens of racial injustice, their conversation is very important, especially when it comes to the treatment of African American soldiers after they have served their nation in Vietnam. In returning home, Otis Jones, an African American man, is portrayed as struggling and "talkin' to himself sometimes on the street" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 16).

Despite their devotion and sacrifice for the United States, African American veterans are neglected and mistreated, which is a small detail that speaks to broader systemic problems. Despite experiencing racial discrimination at home, Afro-Americans have long served in the United States military and participated in all major wars. Their service does not, however, ensure that they will be treated equally when they return. Otis Jones stands for a large number of African American soldiers who experience psychological trauma, racial cruelty, and economic hardships after returning to civilian life. They are still treated as second-class citizens and are not provided with the same respect and privileges as white veterans, even though they risked their lives for the nation. It is clear from Otis's behavior that he is experiencing psychological trauma, most likely post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a mental illness that arises from exposure to extremely frightening or horrific situations (Bisson, Sarah, Catrin, and Neil, 2015, p.1).

Racial disparities in health arise because institutional racism makes it impossible for Afro-Americans to have equal access to resources, including wealth, jobs, income, and healthcare (Yearby, 2018, p.1113). Afro-Americans suffer from institutional racism in Detroit. According to MacPherson William (1999), institutional racism is the "collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behavior that amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping that disadvantage minority ethnic people" (49). This can be witnessed in the bad treatment that Afro-Americans receive from the police.

In one of his remarks, Sly refers to the police treatment of Afro-Americans. He says, "they been cracking down on the after hours spots" (Morisseau, 2014, p.19). These places are usually created by Afro-Americans to avoid racist treatment that they receive in White-owned bars. These clubs are regularly raided by police based on the excuse of obeying the law, but these raids were usually used as justifications for mass arrests, harassment, and violence. Under the guise of upholding the law, police raided these clubs, but these raids were only pretexts for mass arrests, harassment, and violence. The attacks Sly mentions point to a rise in this racist enforcement, indicating that tensions between the police and African American Detroiters are about to explode. Bunny says that the police are being serious around Twelfth Street, an African American street. When the police suspect someone of committing a crime, they arrest them without worrying about probable cause demands or other legal procedures (Bertolini, 2022, p. 18).

The treatment of Afro-Americans by Detroit's police force is well-known. Officers often stop, frisk, and beat African American residents without reason, and incidents of police brutality are widespread. The remarks made by Bunny and Sly imply that the police were purposefully expanding up their presence in African American areas, further criminalizing a group that already faces social and economic exclusion. Enforcing the law is only one aspect of this crackdown; another is keeping African American Detroiters under control, keeping them from gathering, and reminding them of their inferior status in the city. Native Americans and Afro-Americans, both free and enslaved, are seen to pose the greatest threat to law and order. They are viewed as strangers. White people mistreat them out of fear, which naturally makes them hostile (Tuan, 1980, p. 166). Sly and Bunny's speech is used by Morisseau to show how everyday experiences, such as the



inability to gather without worrying about police interference, influenced the reality of African American life in Detroit. Even something as simple as socializing might be greeted with violence and institutional oppression for Afro-Americans; she highlights a tragic historical reality.

After bringing the injured Caroline to the basement by Lank and Sly, Chelle suggests taking her to the hospital, but Lank's says: "They gonna have our names. See our faces. They wanna pin somethin' on two colored men, they just got the names and faces" (Morisseau, 2014, p.29). It is an excellent representation of the deep mistrust that Afro-Americans in 1967 Detroit had toward the police and the court system. His words show the criminalization of Afro-Americans, the anxiety associated with being wrongfully accused, and the institutional racism present in organizations such as courts, police departments, and hospitals. Non-white people are attacked for things like insulting white people, which was frequently false (Newton, 2010, p. 71). Lank's concern to get Caroline healthcare stems from the unpleasant fact that, in any circumstance, Afro-Americans are frequently perceived to be at fault even if they do nothing wrong.

The police believe that Afro-Americans are a threat, and this is clearly stated in Sly and Bunny's conversation about the police. Sly says that he is stopped by the police when they see him dressing well and ask him about his plans for the night, as if he needs a pass to walk in the streets. Sly's remarks provide a strong condemnation of Detroit's police harassment of African American communities and racist discrimination. The fact that Afro-Americans are criminalized for merely appearing in public places is reflected in his experience of being stopped by the police on La Salle Avenue. His mockery, which implies that he needs a pass in order to move around the streets, shows a deep dissatisfaction with the way African American autonomy and movement are systemically policed. His remarks reveal how law enforcement viewed Afro-Americans as potential criminals rather than citizens. Detroit's African American community was seen by the police as a group that needs to be watched over and controlled. This is like policing being used more generally in African American communities to frighten and restrict movement rather than to provide protection.

Bunny talks about the police saying that "tried to grab me up last night leavin' my ol' man's. Say women like me up to no good" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 40) depicts a combination of policing, racism, and prejudice against African American women in Detroit in 1967. Her experience demonstrates how law enforcement criminalized, harassed, and viewed African American women



as lacking in morality, all of which served to further systemic oppression. African American women barely endured the pain of segregation, verbal assault, fear of white violence, and discrimination in employment and in education (Abbass, 2016, p.1508). The situation is that any African American standing in a corner, leaving house to get into his car, attending church, entering a shop, leaving a store, entering a nightclub, or leaving a nightclub may face harassment and possibly to be arrested. According to the Detroit Police Department's definition of a criminal, any African American who is not in the place he belongs to can be arrested (Turrini, 1999, pp. 12-13).

In America, skin color is one of the primary issues of the twentieth century. It has an impact on many aspects of Afro-Americans' lives, including their identity and self-concept, which are never fully addressed (Talib, 2020, p.35). Afro-Americans are treated as being strangers and outsiders. Strangers are subjects to stricter enforcement of all restrictions. Those who are privileged are treated with respect when they are arrested or accused of breaking the law. Strangers are not treated with the same respect, thus, they are punished and arrested by force. Without worrying about taking responsibility, a privileged citizen may abuse, mistreat, and even kill a suspicious outsider (Tuan, 1980, pp. 159–160). The racism of the police is clearly shown in the way they are attacking the illegal bars of Afro-Americans. Bunny shows this in her conversation with Chelle. Bunny states, "Folks sayin' them pigs went into the Dukes and started all kinds a hell. Beat on Buddy Johnson so bad his head damn near cracked open. Even had Martha Briggs on the floor...kickin' her in the stomach" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 59). The racial double standard of police and the severe disparity between privileged, the whites, and African American—who are considered as outsiders—are both highlighted in this speech. The Afro-American after-hours bars are viewed by the whites as places for criminal activities.

According to Caroline, the officer, whom she used to have a relationship with, intentionally chooses where to enforce the law. His choice depends on racial and economic interests proving direct cooperation with criminal groups. This officer takes bribes from criminals. As long as they receive their share, many officers have financial agreements with illegal businesses, which allows crime to continue. The general white community does not care as long as crime and police brutality stay in African American areas. Crime is accepted because it keeps African American communities unstable and insecure; it is even encouraged by corruption. This is depicted in the idea that when crime remains within the ghetto, the authorities in the broader society often ignore it (Tuan, 1980,

pp.173-174). As a result of the extreme racist treatment that Afro-Americans receive in Detroit, Detroit, for them, becomes a place that is stigmatized with racism, as they are chained to this place.

A place's uniqueness stems from the fact that it is produced from a particular combination of social relationships that come together and weave together at a certain location (Massey, 1994, p. 154). So, places are shaped by the people and their social relationships. As a result of institutional racism that the Afro-Americans face in public places and from the police and Detroit's economic deterioration because of the relocation of the car industry and the white flight, Afro-Americans are forced to shape and develop places where they can find security, belonging, a sense of control over their lives and a means for economic survival in Detroit. This is depicted in Chelle and Lank's basement, which is used as an illegal bar, and the bar that Lank and Sly want to buy. In a conversation with her brother and friends, Chelle states this, "we just trying to make a lil' money the way we know how" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 16).

Morisseau chooses the basement to be the place where the characters gather almost all the time. This is important as in most languages, the two poles of the vertical axis—high and low are extremely powerful words. Anything that is superior or better is elevated. There is a hierarchy in residential locations (Tuan, 1977, pp. 37-38). This idea can be extended to the basement of Lank and Chelle. Being low means inferiority, concealment, and lack of social status, while being high is traditionally linked to power, supremacy, and prestige. This is represented in residential hierarchies. Richer individuals reside in higher-up parts, while poorer or marginalized populations are positioned in lower or concealed locations, like the basement, where the majority of the play's actions occur. Although low places are often associated with inferiority by dominant social systems, marginalized communities could reshape these places into places of resistance, community, and strength.

A building, in some communities, serves as the main means for keeping traditions and reflecting a real view. In addition to being the center of economic activity, the house can also be a place of ritual and refuge (Tuan, 1977, p. 112). The basement is more than simply a building; it is a place where Detroit reality is mirrored, traditions are preserved, and financial survival is provided. In a city that is stigmatized with racism, the basement serves as a haven where Lank, Chelle, and their community can find shelter. The basement therefore reflects the ways in which African American communities have historically established private or hidden places to protect their

humanity and dignity in the face of institutionalized oppression. Unquestionably, African American music, the blues, is an essential part of the fight to preserve and strengthen African American identity. It is proof of a tradition that dates back roughly four centuries (Falih, 2019, p. 36).

In the basement, there are pictures of Motown artists adorning the walls. Proud posters of Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. Somewhere else, there is a photo of Malcolm X. Retiring to a quieter or more private place does not mean leaving the social life behind. Instead, the place and its objects still reflect the people that live there. The place itself serves as an active conversation through its design and items (Tuan, 2002, p. 72). The basement of Lank and Chelle is more than just a place to stay; it is an important place where African American identity in Detroit's past, present, and future meet. The items in the basement, which include posters of important African American figures, are more than just ornaments. They serve as a living dialogue that conveys the conflicts, pride, and hardships of the people who inhabit the area. The basement is actively engaged with the social life, even when it is retreating from it. Motown was a source of pride because it showed that African American musicians could succeed in the mainstream while maintaining their cultural roots. The basement makes its guests face the social world rather than isolating them from it. This makes the basement a real, breathing setting where history, politics, and culture are actively engaged rather than just a place to hide.

A place is an archive of treasured memories and noteworthy accomplishments that motivate the present (Tuan, 1977, p. 154). In the modern family structure, there is less physical contact. It is possible that not much is needed because the built setting and its furnishings greatly enhance the feeling of unity (Tuan, 1998). The basement serves as a storehouse of individual and collective history in addition to being a physical location. Places retain memories, as evidenced by the persistence of Lank's childhood portrait of Chelle throughout the years. The posters in the basement stand for historical achievements that inspire the present. All the characters of the play can create their own present and future in Detroit, much as those Afro-American figures created a significant part of the Afro-American history.

The home itself is a unified architectural whole, especially when seen from the outside; the inmates are strongly reminded by its visual coherence that they are not isolated individuals but rather members of a community. The entire house establishes a contradiction between us and them, inside and outside. The house is a haven and a symbol (Tuan, 1998). This can be applied to the

basement of Lank and Chelle and the other illegal bars that the Afro-Americans shape in order to find safety. These places serve as harmonious settings that foster resistance, unity, and a feeling of communal identity while drawing a distinct line between an insider group and a hostile outside world.

Bunny says that people start visiting the after-hours bars more since the soldiers come back from the war in Vietnam. Sly says, "folks need a good place to get a drink and have a good time and leave that Vietnam blues back overseas" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 16). So, the basement can serve as a field of care for Afro-Americans. Sly's statement speaks to the necessity for a place where Afro-Americans can let their guard down and briefly leave aside the hardships of life, like the Vietnam blues and the horrible events that they witnessed there. Since the basement's real worth is in the emotional support and unity it offers its occupants, it does not need to impress an outsider. The basement becomes a source for economic survival and a means for emotional support and this can be seen in Lank's comment that "we here to make people feel good. Make some extra money" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 16). This can be aligned with the concept that Afro-Americans frequently withdraw inside their homes, the only place they still have control, because they feel so helpless and powerless (Tuan, 1980, p.173).

Lank and Sly do not want to endure the racist treatment of the police, who attack the illegal bars anymore. They want to feel safe and work legally. That is why they start talking about buying Sheplings bar that is being sold by his white owner. As a result, the determination of Detroit and the increased number of Afro-Americans in it, the white flight starts to increase. This is shown in Lank's remark, "Tryin' to get away from all these niggers movin' in, hunh?" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 17). The white people start to go to the suburbs as is stated by Bunny referring to the white movement, "Moving to the suburbs. Peanut said white folks all over town been trying to sell they property and move on out" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 17). The wealthy always have the choice to live in a house of their own and to be completely surrounded by people of their own kind. They can also live in a setting that they have designed (Tuan, 1977, p. 171). In urban centers like Detroit, Afro-Americans have encountered structural obstacles that restrict their options, whereas white families can choose to go to the suburbs and establish independent, frequently racially segregated communities. This economic and racial difference is hinted at in Bunny's observation. White people

leaving the city highlights a process of segregation where power and wealth enable some groups to avoid the miseries of racial tension and urban deterioration.

Afro-Americans are chained to the crowded and deteriorating Detroit as they have no other choice. This can be seen in the thought that poor people reside in crowded, filthy areas close to their places of employment in commercial and manufacturing cities with weak cultural institutions; rich suburban belts stretch beyond these areas. Lank and Sly want to convince Chelle to buy Sheplings bar by using the money that they inherited from their parents. Chelle refuses this completely. A place is created from a specific set of interactions between individuals that come together and weave together at a particular place (Massey, 1994, p. 154). So, the place is shaped by people and their social relationships. In *Topophilia* (1974), Tuan states that the social behavior of people is influenced by the place (243). In other words, people are shaped by place, just like how the place is shaped by people. Since the place influences people's social behavior, this means that it shapes them by influencing the way in which they behave. Since the characters are humans, the influence their place has on their behavior differs individually. They are not the same in the way they react to their surroundings.

Each character tries to find a way by which they can live in the racist and deteriorating Detroit. Bunny is a character who is shaped by Detroit. She tries to find her own way of survival in a place that is severely divided by racism. People are so adaptive that, under circumstances, they can even profit from residential overcrowding—most notably, as a kind of friendly, indiscriminate human warmth (Tuan, 1977, p.64). Bunny says, "keep my ear to the ground and tell folks where to get things. Go here for the best hairdo in the city. Go there if you need a new auto part. Go up if you want some good blow. Go down if you want some good bump" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 11). Bunny's comment is an excellent example of how individuals can adjust to and even profit from residential overcrowding, turning crowded cities into centers of economic survival and social interaction.

As a resident of Detroit's crowded and chaotic setting, Bunny uses her familiarity with the city to help others to move around its complex networks of entertainment, services, and business in her speech. She moves around a lot, which shows that Detroit's social network is based on knowing the right individuals and places, which is an adaptive ability that is required for survival. Then she says, "And if you ain't lookin' for none of that, then what the hell you doin' in Detroit?" (Morisseau, 2014, p.11). This shows that one needs to deal with the city's way of working rather than fight it in

order to survive there. She redefines Detroit's rough, crowded neighborhoods as centers for opportunity and excitement rather than as limitations to survive. Detroit's overcrowded, hectic, and troubled atmosphere has shaped her into a street-smart survivor.

Lank and Sly want to buy Sheplings bar to be legit so that the policemen will not be able to threat or attack them. This shows how Lank and Sly are affected and shaped by the racist treatment that they receive in their city, Detroit. Lank tells Chelle that, "we been thinkin' 'bout how it'd feel to be legit. Thinkin'... we could get us a piece of Shep's bar and start to build somethin' for ourselves. Found this stuff for a good deal— thought it'd be great for a bar!" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 18). Space is a resource that can provide wealth and power when used correctly. All over the world, it is an indication of social status (Tuan, 1977, p. 58). Lank's ambition for legitimacy is seen in his efforts to get Sheplings' bar. Owning or managing a physical location, such as a bar, is not just an economic investment but also a social indicator of respectability and success in many societies. Lank and Sly are considering transforming their informal or unstable lives into a legitimate one, which means stability and recognized status. This is seen in Lank's remark , "I'm tired of bein' laid off at that plant and runnin' joints outta my basement like I got somethin' to hide. Like the only way I can be somethin' is underground. I'm ready to be above ground just like them white folks" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 19).

The worldwide idea that real estate ownership is similar to social and economic power is reflected in Lank's idea. Regardless financial status, a well-run business such as a bar can serve as a gathering place for Afro-Americans. This strengthens a sense of pride and identity while also proving the plan's financial viability. For Lank and Sly, the bar is more than just a business; it is a means of creating something for themselves that the community views as respectable and successful. Lank and Sly aspire to have a better life as they believe in themselves and their community once they are given a chance and treated equally. Lank says:

Pickin' out niggers ain't gonna do nothin' but lock away a whole lotta  
potential. put us to good use, this city be full of all kinds of production.  
I'm tired of bein' laid off at that plant and runnin' joints outta my  
Like I got somethin' to hide. Like the only way I can be somethin' is

underground. I'm ready to be above ground just like them white folks.  
Ain't no tellin' what Detroit could be if we was all put to good use....  
Detroit could be some kinda Mecca... that's what it could be. Colored  
folks moving this city forward. Get us some business of our own make  
them stop treatin 'us like trash to be swept away. I'm tellin' you, we get  
a chance to get above ground, Detroit'll be a Mecca  
(Morisseau, 2014, pp.19-20).

Lank's wish for Detroit to be just like Mecca is clever. The Kaaba is situated in Mecca. In Islam, the Kaaba is the most respected place of worship. It is both the highest point in the world and its center and navel Every superior place is always elevated (Tuan, 1977, pp. 37, 40). This idea can be elaborated to apprehend Lank's speech. In his words, Lank makes a comparison between the desire to be above ground, which he connects with legality, visibility, and power, and being below, both literally and symbolically. Similar to his experience of operating a bar in their basement, Lank laments the fact that Afro-Americans are forced to work underground due to oppressive conditions, either working out of basements or being hidden away. Being underground is a hint of social exclusion, invisibility, and a lack of acceptance or legality. Being above ground, on the other hand, implies not only a physical elevation but also a superior status—power, visibility, and acknowledgment. Being in a position of authority and influence is symbolized by this height placement. If Afro-Americans are given the opportunity to be fully used and empowered, Lank sees Detroit developing into something similar to Mecca. As Mecca, Detroit is not just any city in this sense; it is a treasured location and a major center for spiritual, cultural, and economic excellence. It represents a shift from an environment of marginalization to supremacy. Lank's ambition to buy a piece of land and build their own business is a direct reaction to being marginalized.

Chelle, unlike Lank and Sly, is not interested in buying the bar. She says, "That ain't the somethin' I want Lank....these parties are temporary. Survivin'. This house and this life is all I need. I don't wanna take on nothin' that could make us lose it" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 21). Chelle's comment highlights a fundamental divide between ambition and security and is full of details and tension. Chelle's concern with the idea of survival refers to a mindset influenced by struggle and uncertainty. Chelle focuses on maintaining their minimal level of security. She prioritizes the ability to keep a secure, familiar place over following unknown aspirations and dreams in a setting where



the risks are high, whether because of racial discrimination, economic instability, or both. Chelle expresses a cautious hesitation to change in this statement, stating her concern that aiming for more could endanger the weak security they already have, according to which the danger of losing what they currently have is greater than any potential advantages of significant change or upward mobility.

While Lank sees himself moving above ground and gaining legitimacy through economic empowerment, Chelle's concentration is on survival and preservation, which contrasts sharply with Lank's more ambitious goal of transformation and elevation. Lank is not convinced with Chelle's point of view. He tells her, "Don't you see I'm tryin' to make things better? Invest this money so it grow into somethin' more" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 21). Lank's perspective is reflected in the idea that Afro-Americans desire to be accepted into the American society, especially in wealth and prosperity (Tuan, 1996, p.123). The desire of many Afro-Americans to be fully acknowledged and included in the country's promise of fame and prosperity is reflected in Lank's statement. Lank's focus on transforming money into something more is not just about accumulating wealth; it is about transforming their current marginal status into one of power and influence.

As the place has an impact on people's social behavior (Tuan, 1974, p. 243), Chelle is so much influenced by her living in Detroit. When Lank and Sly bring the white and hurt Caroline, Chelle is totally shocked. She tells them, "What the hell is this white girl doin' down here? You done went stupid?" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 26). She is afraid of the whole situation as Caroline is badly hurt, and there are "bruises along Caroline's face. Swollen eye. Dried blood by her temple. Green and yellow staining her face" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 27). Chelle tells Lank and Sly that they cannot keep her, but Lank insists on keeping her till the morning, and then they will help her to get on her way. Chelle starts praying that the one who hurts Caroline is not African American because Caroline might get confused and unable to recognize the one who hurts her in a place that is full of Afro-Americans and in Detroit the police will not be interested in searching for the truth so they might be imprisoned. Detroit's social and historical context in the late 1960s is a major factor in Chelle's fear of welcoming Caroline into their home.

A lifetime of experiencing racial tensions, systematic oppression, and the unspoken rules of survival in a place where Afro-Americans are continuously questioned, arrested, and excluded from full participation in society has influenced Chelle's behavior. Chelle's fear is not merely personal,

but it also represents the larger experience of African American Detroiters in that era. Experience covers all the ways that humans can learn about their own world (Tuan, 1979, p. 288). Therefore, Chelle's fear is not out of nowhere. It is out of experience. Because of her surroundings and historical trauma, Chelle has a survival instinct that makes her fearful. Though Chelle sympathizes with Caroline, she thinks that in a city like Detroit, she is not supposed to behave according to her conscience or nature. She believes that the most important thing is to protect herself and her family from this mysterious white woman who might bring them troubles.

Chelle is aware of the presence of racial injustice and institutional brutality, and instead of confronting it directly, she chooses to carefully handle it to survive. Lank is a challenger and dreamer. Lank's remark shows his more assertive and rebellious nature. His comment is especially important because it captures the growing dissatisfaction and disapproval in the late 1960s African American society. According to his viewpoint, there comes a time at which endurance and patience give way to action. He believes in change, whether it be through business activities, like buying the bar, or questioning social standards, which is reflected in his larger character journey in the play. Feelings between Lank and Caroline start to grow, and this is something that terrifies Chelle. She believes that such a relationship is not going to bring anything good for her dear brother.

The process of forming a national government has grown challenging due to interregional conflicts and tensions caused by a variety of different economic fortunes, cultural backgrounds, and occasional bursts into street violence (Massey, 1995, pp. 56-59). Detroit suffers from difficulties in creating unity and stability in a sharply ruptured society. These divides, in economic fortunes and cultural backgrounds, are found within a single city rather than throughout a number of regions of a nation. These divisions appear to be racial and economic disparities; the unstable climate is exacerbated by white flight, housing discrimination, and police abuse of African American citizens. Unrest is caused by the government's failure on issues of economic inequality and racial injustice. Detroit becomes a contested location due to its divisions, which arise from racial and economic disparity, much as areas that face intergroup conflict nationally. Governance becomes difficult. Therefore, any form of rebellion is a response to the way local and state authorities have failed to address long-standing injustices rather than merely a burst of street violence.

Mayor Louis Miriani followed a strategy to fight crime created by Detroit Police commissioner Herbert Hart in 1960. Police presence in high-crime areas, many of which are in

African American communities, was significantly expanded as part of the five-part plan. Nearly every person is arrested has been Afro-American. Despite some Detroiters' support for the crime crackdown, the African American community stated that they experienced random harassment. The proposal for a new, independent police review board was rejected by Miriani. Miriani is greatly hated by the African American community in Detroit (Turrini, 1999, p. 12). Group solidarity is further strengthened, and the sense of individual separateness is decreasing when there is an awareness of the Other, a hostile or unsympathetic reality outside (Tuan, 1998). Afro-Americans are aware that they are seen by the whites as the Other, the strangers, and the enemy. Therefore, they start to take action. This is shown in Sly's words to Lank that "unrest happening everywhere. Even down at the plants, Peanut say colored men startin' to organize and let folks know they ain't takin' the short end of the stick no more" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 45). Sly highlights the African American community's fight against economic and racial oppression. A sense of collective struggle is strengthened by this awareness of outside enmity. The riot of 1967 started on Twelfth Street.

It is poverty that creates bandits, thieves, beggars, and vagrants (Tuan, 1980, p. 134). In other words, poverty produces crime and violence. Frustration over the financial difficulties, including institutional indifference and brutality by police, contributed to the riots. Violent behavior sometimes becomes a survival tactic (Muayad and Taher, 2024, p.43). In the mostly African American Twelfth Street area of Detroit, the Detroit Police Department raided an illegal bar in 1967. When officers arrived, they found an African American celebrating the safe return of friends who had fought in the United States war effort in Vietnam. They broke up the celebration and evacuated a great number of people. People began to gather, and the gathering became agitated. Then, someone threw an empty bottle through the rear glass of a police car. The riot started (Bertolini, 2022, p. 15). Bunny tells Chelle, "the folks is so mad about these pigs...they think they fightin' back... Twelfth Street lookin' like some kinda smoke bomb been set off" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 59). If the poor and the struggling people express their complaints, they are mostly ignored unless they are accompanied by acts of extreme desperation (Tuan, 1980, p. 169). Bunny refers to the resentment of the police, which stems from years of harassment, racial profiling, and police violence. Before the riots brought the issue into the public eye, Afro-Americans had been organizing for equal housing, economic opportunity, and police reform, but their efforts had been mainly ignored.

Lank and Sly's bar is in the area of unrest, and they want to protect it. Lank tells Chelle he has "to protect our business" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 56). This can be clearly seen in the idea that people view a place as a source of meaning that they will protect against intruders (Tuan, 1976, p. 269). When Sly and Lank go to the bar to protect it, they they get arrested by the police. A friend of theirs, Peanut, goes to bail them out. Sly is released, but the police officers refuse to release Lank unless they pay more money, and Peanut does not have enough. Sly goes to tell Chelle. He tells her what happened. He states, "Big Four came up on us at Sheplings.... And accused us of tryin' to loot.... So Lank, he got a lil' too angry. He started shinin' his flashlight right back " (Morisseau, 2014, p. 62). Thus, just because Lank and Sly are there in the bar, they are arrested, though they do nothing wrong. They are seen by the police as being possible criminals. Sly and Chelle go get Lank out of the prison. When Lank returns home, there are "visible bruises on his face. Greens. Blues. Yellows. Dried blood by his temples" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 65).

Chelle is angry because of Lank's aspirations of buying a bar and thus he gets arrested for protecting it. Another reason for her anger is Lank's love for Caroline. Chelle says, "You get around her and you get further and further away from reality. Forgettin' who you are and what this world can do to you.... You think you somebody you ain't" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 68). Chell thinks Lank is searching for a different version of himself that does not conform to the racial hierarchy of the city. A place is a representation of a people's experiences and aspirations (Tuan, 1979, p. 387). Despite the state of chaos around them, Lank and Sly battle to hold onto the bar, which shows their powerful economic and emotional attachment to the place. The bar is more than simply a business to Lank and Sly; it is a symbol of their freedom, aspiration, and sense of hope for the future.

Even if it is hidden deep within, the urge to see the other as inferior and hostile never goes away. Strangers then turn into the enemy (Tuan, 1980, p. 213). Since Afro-Americans are seen as strangers, in the riots, they turn to be the Whites' enemy. The event is first described as being similar to the Vietnam War. Detroit's streets were changed from what appeared to be a peaceful, respectable city to one that was the scene of a guerilla battle, complete with heavily armed Guardsmen and military tanks hovering behind burned-out buildings. Participants were also given labels such as snipers, looters, or rioters, all of which meant active participation (Ulbrich, 2011, p. 90). This is clearly shown in the tanks that are moving outside the basement. Chelle describes the situation, "I stepped out on the porch this morning to a cloud of smoke. Look like we in some kinda

war picture. Mean-lookin' guards come down this street, hunting us like we're the enemy" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 74). Afro-Americans are seen by the authorities as threats to be subjected rather than as citizens in need of protection.

Chelle also remarks that Afro-Americans are burning some buildings. This is reflected in the idea that living in a terrible setting may excuse bad behavior because the quality of one's material settings and moral life are linked in certain ways (Tuan, 2002, p. 179). Authorities criticize acts of violence and destruction, but they can also be seen as a reaction to the repressive circumstances that many African American Detroiters face. Systemic racism affects housing for Afro-Americans. They are subjected to police brutality. Economic inequities affect Afro-Americans. Many people believe that revolution is the only way to demand change because of the frustration, hopelessness, and resentment these circumstances create. In one last attempt to be heard, some individuals have turned to riots after formal means for justice failed. Treating people like criminals or second-class citizens can cause them to behave in ways that mirror the unjust system they encounter daily.

Chelle is terrified as she knows that the police are searching for Caroline as she has witnessed their corruption. People always shape their worldview from the most noticeable aspects of their physical and social settings. Hence, worldview and setting are closely related (Tuan, 1974, p. 79). Caroline, in Chelle's opinion, intentionally or unintentionally leads Lank to believe in a world that does not exist for him. Chelle tells Caroline that "make him believe you an' him is in the same. But you ain't the same" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 83). Chelle's words reveal a fundamental racial tension and refer to the racial equality that does not exist in Detroit. Chelle tells Caroline that she can start her life again, but Lank can not do this. He is chained by the city just like the other Afro-Americans. Chelle's remark shows how physical and social settings influence people's perspectives, especially in a society where racism affects every aspect of daily life. This is directly related to the idea that the primary parts of the beliefs are shaped by the setting.

Chelle and Bunny are sitting in the basement when Lank opens the door, wildly disoriented. He looks at them in horror and hardly manages to tell them that Sly is dead. Chelle collapses and wails. Lank, after some time, starts to tell Chelle what happens. He says that he and Sly were in the bar when some policemen appeared, trying to burn their bar. They chased the policemen, and there were tanks rolling around the corner. Sly did not see the tanks, so Lank asked him to stop. He states, "them soldiers that come to back up the police for the riots. Saw niggers chasin' after cops

and decided the niggers were the ones to shoot" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 90). So, without trying to know why an African American man is running after a white officer, the soldiers decide to shoot the African American man since he is perceived as an enemy and as a threat to law and order.

Space is abstract, but when individuals start to give it meaning, it transforms to be a place (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). The bar is considered by the police as merely another building, an empty space that falls under their authority. It is neither a dream, a home, nor a sign of individual identity for the police. It is simply a part of the riot zone that needs to be controlled. For Lank and Sly, the bar is a place that is full of meaning, aspirations, dreams, and values. It is the future they are working to create. So, in an attempt to fight and protect this valuable place, Sly sacrifices his own life. After Sly's death, something is changed inside Chelle. Now, she accepts to have the bar. Sly loves Chelle, and she loves him too, so his death influences her so much. She tells Lank that "it'd be nice for us to have some music. Some way for people to dance and feel good" (Morisseau, 2014, p. 91). Her statement reveals a desire to establish a place of strength and joy in an atmosphere of chaos, as well as a sudden acceptance of change.

Sound greatly enriches the human sense of space, along with sight and the capacity to move and control objects (Tuan, 1977, p. 14). Morisseau uses music a lot in the play. Motown is used by Morisseau to not only establish the emotional tone but also to show how Afro-Americans deal with the city and contribute to creating its character. Afro-Americans use Motown music, which has its roots in Detroit, as an effective way of expressing their pride and feeling of belonging in the city. The sense of Afro-Americans community of Detroit is greatly influenced by its music, which is deeply woven into the city's social and cultural fabric. Through Motown's sounds, they are able to leave their cultural imprint on the city and reject being only defined by the hardships or violent events that surround them. Furthermore, as Afro-Americans living in Detroit in 1967, the characters are attempting to create the city's personality by adding to its cultural heritage as well as by engaging with its social structures and economics. Afro-American creativity and voice are strong in Motown, claiming their part in shaping the history and identity of the city.

Memories of sounds and scents, shared activities, and homely delights gathered over time can all contribute to a deep attachment to a place (Tuan, 1977, p.159). In the 1960s, Detroit's cultural scene is characterized by music. The concept of music, dancing, and joy is central to the bar they intend to create, supporting the idea that music fosters a feeling of belonging and a sense of

community. Music is one of the means by which Afro-Americans try to shape their place, Detroit. Each sound has the power to produce a unique spatial atmosphere (Tuan, 2009, p. 108). Despite Detroit's instability, this musical atmosphere distinguishes it as a center of artistic and social power. A vital component of almost every human community is music (Tuan, 1995, p. 85).

Another important thing about music is that one's awareness of directional time and space can be negated by music (Tuan, 1977, p. 128). This is stated in how Afro-Americans in Detroit use music as a source of relief and endurance. It is a way to escape, even if it is for only a short time, the harsh realities of life, whether they are political, social, or economic. Through the symbolic means of art, an area can be transformed into a location and its core of passionate loyalty (Tuan, 1976, p. 269). Motown's influence in Detroit is an excellent example of how symbolic artistic expression can turn an area into a location that is filled with meaning and strong emotional ties. Detroit was once merely an industrial city, but Motown music transformed it into a cultural icon and a place of great pride and loyalty for Afro-Americans. Motown becomes the sound of Detroit and shapes the city's cultural character, making it more than just a record company. African American artistic talent, economic empowerment, and collective pride are all represented by the music.

Love, struggle, hope, and resilience are all reflected in the songs of the African American bands. These songs become deeply rooted in the memories of people and communities, turning Detroit into more than just a city; it became an iconic setting where historical and personal stories meet. The blues can be viewed as a social, cultural, and historical record of African American musicians who capture their cultural identity through its many forms. This type of music also connects Afro-Americans to Africa and its earlier culture and traditions, embodying the traditional values that define them. It is part of their folklore. In the face of institutionalized racism that identifies them as barbarians, these cultural components serve to provide them with a respectable, unique, and independent cultural heritage (Falih, 2019, p.47).

## **Conclusion**

The reciprocal relationship between people and place is revealed by analyzing Detroit '67 using Tuan and Massey's spatial theories. The play shows how the characters' identities, ambitions, and struggles are shaped by Detroit, which is characterized by economic inequality and segregation.



At the same time, the characters actively shape their setting by envisioning new opportunities and contributing to the unique personality of their city. Through this dynamic, Detroit '67 presents the city as a site of memory, power, and resistance that is always changing, challenging static ideas of place.

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