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The Heart of a City: Detroit's Discourse

By Achanté Allen

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This paper should serve as a stethoscope, better yet a microscope, as you venture through the body of Detroit, Michigan, and the vessels [the discourse communities] that keeps its heart going. According to the English Linguist professor, John Swales, a discourse community can be broadly described as, "... a community that has a set of common goals, and uses a common form of communication to accomplish its goals" (Swales 220-221). Although I do agree with Swales' definition of discourse communities, I believe that your hometown and surrounding environment(s) can have quite a strong influence on which discourse communities you take part in.

Now, the city of Detroit is one of the few places that I call home. It is the city that I was born and raised in. It is the place where my hobbies and talents were encouraged, and a place where I have experienced the most growth. It is a city that has its own way of doing things, I would say that it has a discourse of its own. About a month or so ago, I wrote this autobiographical poem which I titled, "Home":

A precious city
Where dreams are planted to grow
Yet there no one goes;
My city I love
Detroit City my city
Is forever home. (Allen 1)

This poem, though it is not long and detailed, it carries a lot of meaning behind it. Growing up in the city of Detroit as an African – American female, living in a single-parent, middle-class household, being athletic, and coming from a Baptist background, you have a plethora of expectations that you "have to" fulfill.

Additionally, I was taught from a young age that the only way to survive was to find a "hustle" that works for you. If you ever have the opportunity to visit the lovely city of Detroit, you should be able to find our trademark, "Detroit Hustles Harder," posted on the sides of buildings as you walk through the city streets, and on printed clothing apparel displaying the city's sense of pride. The way that Detroit natives carry themselves is what separates us from other cities. Detroit and its citizens have gone through, "Hell and highwater," as my grandmother would say, referring to the riots, the scandals, the Emergency Managers, and recently emerging from a three- to four-year bankruptcy. American Novelist, Elmore Leonard gives a simplified definition of what it means to "hustle":

There are cities that get by on their good looks, offer climate and scenery, views of mountains or oceans, rockbound or with palm trees. And then there are cities like Detroit that have to work for a living (Leonard).

The word "hustle" in the African – American and middle – class discourse communities, usually refers to doing whatever it takes to make money, usually to support yourself, your

family, or whatever group or community that you belong to. Nonetheless, you must work, and work hard to earn your living.

As a proud alumna of Renaissance High School [RHS], I remember many of my fellow Phoenix working many jobs, playing sports, doing homework, and selling snacks in the halls of RHS, hustling, trying to earn their diplomas and scholarships. Despite the selling of snacks being prohibited on the high school campus, the students made a way around the rules by using what I like to refer to as “silent communication”; which involved communication via social media platforms, sign language, the passing of notes, and the distraction of teachers and administration to insure our friend(s) were not caught. Also, with my experience as a student-athlete, I had to “hustle” each and every day that my soccer team held practice in order to secure my name on the starting 11 team sheet. On top of attending practices during the week, I would practice during my down time to improve upon my game; while also trying to find the perfect balance between my love for sports, working a part-time job, and completing school work. With the help of my fellow community members, I was put in a better position to “hustle”, thus enabling me to graduate high school on time with honors.

Furthering this examination on the heart of this city, Detroit, we have been able to see a small portion of the greater whole that is Detroit. As a citizen of the Detroit community, I can say that our individual “hustles”, are the arteries and veins that keep the town’s heart beating. Our goal as a community is to ensure that the body of this city does not die.

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