The Blight of Indecency: Antiporn Politics and the Urban Crisis in Early 1970s Detroit

BEN STRASSFELD
University of Michigan

Late in the summer of 1972, the Adult World Bookstore opened its doors in the neighborhood of Redford, a residential community located in northwest Detroit. The bookstore—and the pornographic material it housed—quickly caught the attention of Pastor James O. Banks of the Redford Presbyterian Church, who on September 17 used his weekly sermon to discuss the Adult World. In his remarks the pastor condemned the bookstore, bemoaning what its opening symbolized both for the Redford neighborhood and more broadly for Christian values. He sought to draw distinctions between normative sexuality (practiced within the bounds of heterosexual marriage) and commercial sex as represented by the goods on offer at the Adult World: "It is cheap. It is raw sex. It is crude. It is degrading. It is sex separated from sexuality. It is sex pictures and symbols being sold. It is wrong. It represents a way of life in total contradiction to the Christian."[1] The pastor used his sermon to reiterate the importance of Christian norms on sex, norms that had been central to antiporn politics for decades. Banks ended his speech by calling on his congregation to reject apathy and take action against the bookstore.

And take action they did. Letters protesting the Adult World soon began arriving in the mailboxes of major city officials. What started as a slow stream of letters soon became a flood, with not only church members but also many neighborhood residents and organizations writing to express their consternation. Their letters, however, quite often emphasized concerns

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[1] Pastor Banks sent the complete text of his sermon to Detroit's mayor. See James O. Banks to Roman S. Gribbs, October 12, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Roman Gribbs Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

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very different from the ones highlighted by Pastor Banks: fears that the bookstore would lead to an "invasion" of unwanted outsiders; the perceived need to protect children from the excesses of commercial sex; the right of homeowners to decide the character of their neighborhoods; and the belief that the Adult World would cause the economic decline of Redford and Detroit. Together these letters helped form a potent new antiporn discourse, one that eschewed the overt moralizing of previous antiporn efforts in favor of economic and rights-based arguments rooted in concerns about urban decay.

This shift away from moral rhetoric reflected broader changes in society that had put the antiporn movement on the defensive in recent years. Throughout the previous decade, the US Supreme Court repeatedly narrowed the scope of obscenity law and provided greater free speech protections for film and media in cases like *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), *Freedman v. Maryland* (1965), *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* (1966), *Redrup v. New York* (1967), and *Stanley v. Georgia* (1969).[2] This forced many local film censorship boards to shutter during the mid- to late 1960s, including state censorship boards in New York, Virginia, and Kansas and city boards in both Chicago and Detroit.[3] Meanwhile, the Production Code—the document that had regulated what Hollywood could and could not depict in its films for over three decades—met its inglorious end in the 1960s, replaced by the more permissive ratings system.[4] This decline in the prevalence of film and media censorship was the result not just of legal decisions but of changes in public opinion as well, which had increasingly turned against censorship efforts. The sexual revolution led to what conservative critics derisively labeled "the permissive society" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and within this context antiporn efforts and media censorship based on Christian norms of propriety and decency looked increasingly out of step with the times. As Whitney Strub writes of this era: "Government commissions, courts, social scientists, and the general public alike reached a consensus that, if pornography might not

[2] For more on this legal history, see Richard F. Hixson, *Pornography and the Justices: The Supreme Court and the Intractable Obscenity Problem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 20–79; Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 230–66; and Whitney Strub, *Obscenity Rules: Roth v. United States and the Long Struggle over Sexual Expression* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 183–208.

[3] Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915–1981* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 253–54; Jeremy Geltzer, *Film Censorship in America: A State-by-State History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 55–56; and Ken Barnard, "Film Raids Go Way of All Flesh," *Detroit News*, September 20, 1970, sec. H, 11.

[4] See Christie Milliken, "Rate It X? Hollywood Cinema and the End of the Production Code," in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. Eric Schaefer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 25–52.

be something to celebrate, it nonetheless posed no threat to the perpetuation of the republic."[5]

Due to the confluence of these factors, in the early 1970s pornography achieved levels of mainstream visibility and respectability that it never had before (and arguably has not had since). This was the era of "porno chic," a time when feature-length adult films racked up box-office numbers rivaling those of the era's biggest Hollywood blockbusters. Contrary to the old stereotype of the audience for adult movies being dirty old men in raincoats, the hipness of adult films like *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) attracted audiences made up of young people, well-to-do couples, and even major celebrities. Pornography was paid serious attention by critics and journalists of the era, with outlets like the *New York Times* and *Esquire* reviewing major adult film releases and publishing think pieces on the new cultural phenomenon. All this meant that seemingly overnight pornography became a ubiquitous part of the urban landscape, rapidly moving from being sold clandestinely under the counter to being advertised in major newspapers and offered in the hundreds of adult businesses now located in the downtowns and neighborhoods of cities across the country.[6]

In light of all this, antiporn activists were forced to develop new forms of arguments against pornography, ones that could create distance from the now-unpopular overt moralizing of antiporn campaigns of old while maintaining the goal of curbing the spread of adult media. The new form of antiporn politics that emerged in the early 1970s in grassroots campaigns like the one in Redford was shaped by concerns about broader social trends. As Gayle Rubin writes, "Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity."[7] With this in mind, I argue that the antiporn politics and activism of this era, exemplified in Redford's letter-writing campaign, needs to be understood within the context of white racial politics and debates over the urban crisis. I draw on an argument put forward by Robert Self, who writes, "Rather than seeing race on one hand and gender, sex, and family on the other as distinct crucibles of political contest, we might find it more profitable to conceive of them as intertwined."[8] This insight helps

[5] Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 146.

[6] Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-pornography Movement, 1976–1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 74–76. For more on the "porno chic" era, see Carolyn Bronstein and Whitney Strub, eds., *Porno Chic and the Sex Wars: American Sexual Representation in the 1970s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016); Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 146–78.

[7] Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 138.

[8] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 7. Some other notable work along these lines

us to better understand why the grassroots antiporn politics of the early 1970s started to avoid the religion-infused moralizing that had long typified antiporn political discourse and instead began to emphasize seemingly more mundane concerns surrounding property values, neighborhood deterioration, and white flight. In the process, antiporn advocates also managed to adopt and adapt the color-blind rhetoric that had become central to white racial politics in fights over issues like school-desegregation busing.

This article looks at these issues through a focus on Redford's campaign against the Adult World Bookstore. Beginning with an examination of the history and demographics of Redford using digital mapping, I argue that the neighborhood was an area perched uneasily between poor black inner city and rich white suburb. I then move to an overview of the letters sent by Redford's protesting residents, paying close attention to the gender of the letter writers and using maps of the return addresses to speculate about the racial makeup of Redford's antiporn activists. Turning to a detailed examination of the letters themselves, I investigate recurring themes, particularly the perceived threat of pornography to children, the rampant fears that the Adult World would attract "undesirable" individuals, and the concerns over property values and white flight. Finally, I conclude by looking at the legacy of Redford's fight against the Adult World. Beyond just providing an example of grassroots antiporn activism during this era, Redford's campaign helped drive the city of Detroit to pass an innovative new antiporn ordinance in October 1972 that was based on zoning rather than obscenity law. After being affirmed as constitutional by the United States Supreme Court, Detroit's zoning-based approach to regulating pornography would later be emulated by countless cities across the country. In this way, a letter-writing campaign against one adult bookstore in northwest Detroit inadvertently helped shape antiporn politics for decades to come.

The Politics and Demographics of Redford

By the early 1970s Detroit was a city in a visible and rapidly accelerating state of economic decline. The postwar era had seen middle-class whites flee Detroit in droves for racially segregated suburbs. Meanwhile, the process of deindustrialization, whereby automobile and other industry jobs moved elsewhere, only further hollowed out the city's tax coffers. These forces had already done major damage to the economy of the city by the time the riots or, alternately named, rebellion shook Detroit in the summer

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includes Clayton Howard, "Building a 'Family-Friendly' Metropolis Sexuality, the State, and Postwar Housing Policy," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 5 (2013): 933–55; Tim Retzloff, "City, Suburb, and the Changing Bounds of Lesbian and Gay Life and Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 1945–1985" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2014); and Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of 1967, causing destruction to the city itself while simultaneously making the city a national symbol of racial turmoil. This violence only accelerated the white flight from the city, with African Americans quickly moving toward becoming the majority population in Detroit by the early 1970s.[9] One decided exception to this, though, lay in the neighborhood of Redford, which, even in the face of white flight and the growth of the black population of Detroit, remained one of the last bastions of whiteness in the city at that time.

Not to be confused with Redford Township, the suburb located just outside Detroit's borders, the neighborhood of Redford (sometimes called Old Redford) was annexed by Detroit in 1926, making it one of the last major additions to the city.[10] The neighborhood lies in the northwest corner of Detroit, near the border between the city and the surrounding suburbs of Livonia, Farmington Hills, and Southfield. This location meant that in many ways the Redford of the early 1970s more closely resembled the neighboring suburbs than it did the rest of Detroit. Because of the massive size of the city—the combined areas of Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco can fit snugly within the boundaries of Detroit—neighborhood residents could claim to be closer to and share more in common with the white suburbs than with the rest of the increasingly black city. This was particularly the case given that Redford, like most of northwest Detroit, was almost uniformly white, with whites representing upward of 90 percent of the population (see fig. 1).[11]

Still, even as Redford's racial composition resembled that of the suburbs, its economic status was more mixed, with many families in the area making less than $8,000 a year, roughly the median national family income in 1970 (see fig. 2). While the area was certainly more well off than much of the rest of Detroit, the spending power of its residents nevertheless paled in comparison to the wealth of the surrounding suburbs. This meant that Redford acted as something of a frontier between the poor black inner city and wealthy white suburbs, with its racial makeup more like the latter even as its economic status fell somewhere between the two.

This in-between status explains why Redford and much of northwest Detroit had long been a hub of white resistance to racial integration. As Joe T. Darden and colleagues have argued, in the 1950s "the most hardcore resistance to the 'Negro tide' centered in the far northwest section

[9] For a comprehensive history of postwar Detroit, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[10] Frank B. Woodford and Arthur M. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays: A Brief History of Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 277.

[11] All census data come from the National Historical Geographic Information System. Steven Manson, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, and Steven Ruggles, *IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 12.0* (database), University of Minnesota, 2017, http://doi.org/10.18128/D050.V12.0.

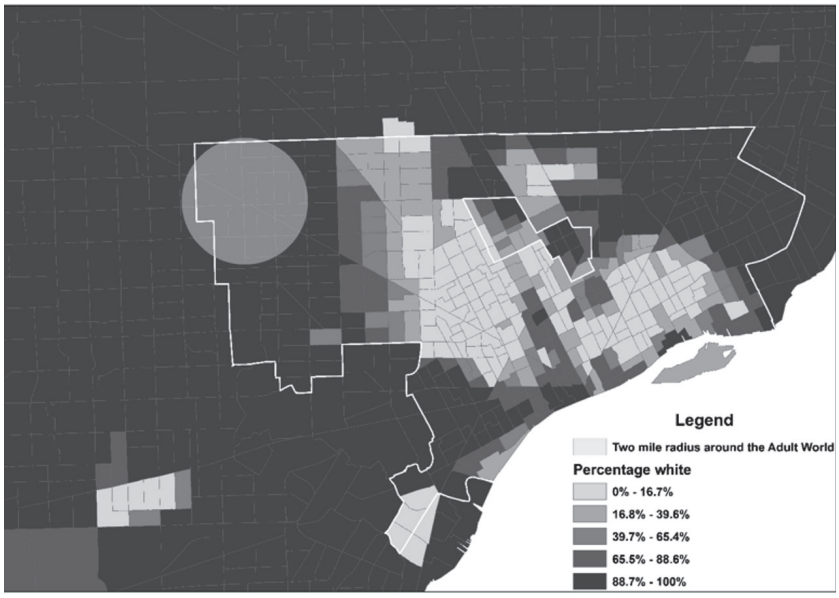

Figure 1. Percentage of white residents in the Detroit metropolitan area, 1970 US Census.

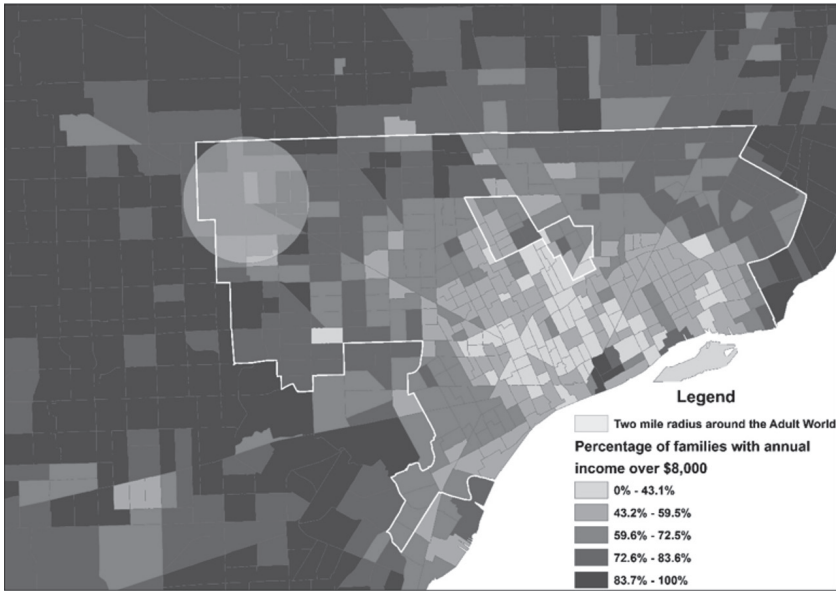

Figure 2. Percentage of households with yearly income over $8,000, 1970 US Census.

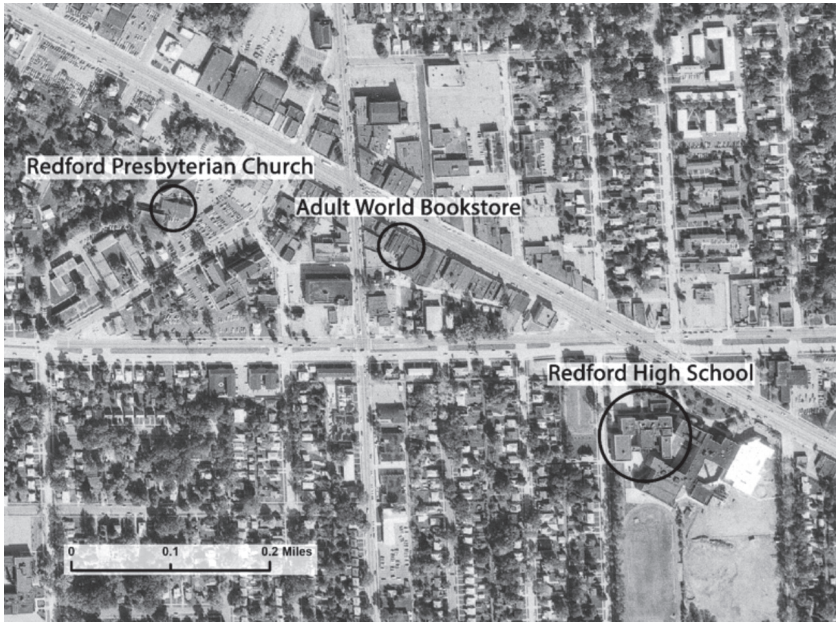

Figure 3. Key locales in Redford mapped onto 1973 aerial photograph of Detroit. Aerial image courtesy of the US Geological Survey.

of the city." This meant that area residents of the era organized to keep their neighborhoods racially segregated by attempting to block the sale of houses to African Americans and by protesting proposed public housing projects.[12] In 1960 an effort to bus students from overcrowded inner-city schools to more prosperous nearby neighborhoods was met with fierce resistance from the white residents of Redford and northwest Detroit.[13] By the 1970s area residents were keenly aware of their growing isolation in a changing Detroit, which only gave their repeated fights with the rest of the city over racial issues an added urgency.[14] Critically too, while whites in suburbs like Grosse Pointe and Bloomfield Hills were engaging in their own battles over racial issues, they had less to lose economically, being firmly entrenched within the middle and upper classes. Many of these same suburbs also used zoning laws to keep "incompatible" populations from moving into their communities, which often amounted to

[12] Joe T. Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 127.

[13] Ibid., 221–22.

[14] John Hartigan Jr., *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 69.

little more than thinly veiled racial segregation by zoning.[15] By contrast, as evidenced by their staunch opposition to racial desegregation efforts throughout the postwar era, whites in Redford felt themselves to be more vulnerable to the impact of urban decay, believing that the spread of the impoverished inner city was a threat to their increasingly tenuous hold on middle-class status.

In the summer of 1972, amidst this turmoil, the Adult World Bookstore quietly opened its doors in the heart of Redford. The bookstore was tucked in between the Redford Presbyterian Church and Redford High School, which were located just a few hundred yards to either side (see fig. 3). Linking the church, bookstore, and school was the major thoroughfare of Grand River Avenue, one of Detroit's five main spokes, which acted as something of a commercial strip in Redford with its numerous small businesses and retail outlets. Given its proximity to the suburbs, as well as the class and racial makeup of the surrounding neighborhood, it is no surprise that this section of Grand River in northwest Detroit was a popular destination for suburbanites doing their shopping in the city. The proprietors of the Adult World no doubt were attracted to this prime commercial location on a major thoroughfare, but this visibility also fueled the ire of many residents in Redford who saw the new business as a threat to the community.

An Overview of the Letters of Protest

As we have seen, the campaign against the Adult World Bookstore was kickstarted when Pastor James O. Banks of the Redford Presbyterian Church used his weekly sermon to call on his parishioners to not go into the recently opened bookstore and to instead fight back against this intrusion of a "smut store" into Redford.[16] By the end of October, hundreds of letters had arrived at city hall not only from members of the Redford Presbyterian Church but also from neighborhood residents, parent-teacher groups, and homeowners' associations. Most of these letters included a return address, making it possible to map where letter writers resided, thereby giving us a sense of their demographics (see fig. 4). Not surprisingly, the vast majority of letters were sent from nearby households, with 80 percent coming from those living within two miles of the Adult World. Letters sent from other parts of the city, with a few exceptions, tended to come from areas in Detroit that were, like Redford, predominantly white. Meanwhile, roughly one in six of the letters originated from almost uniformly white suburban locales. Many of these suburbanite letter writers were former residents of the Redford area, while others did their shopping or went to church there.

[15] David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 33.

[16] Banks to Gribbs, October 12, 1972.

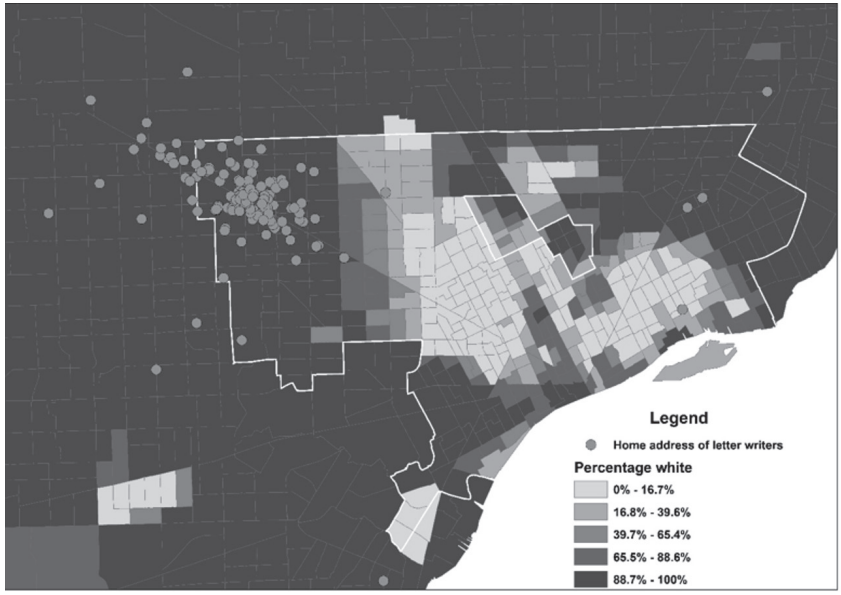

Figure 4. Origins of letters protesting the Adult World Bookstore with percentage of white residents in the Detroit metropolitan area, 1970 US Census.

Taken together, then, it seems exceedingly likely that most, if not all, of those writing protest letters were white.

In total, these letters bore the signatures of roughly 280 individuals.[17] Of these, based on given names and gendered English honorifics, an estimated 194 letter writers were women and 67 men, with the gender of the remaining 19 indeterminate. This gender imbalance is even starker when we omit those letters sent by a husband and wife together, which leaves 153 letters from women and 26 from men, or nearly six women for every man. This perhaps even understates the gender disparity, given that, of those men who did send letters, many were acting in an official role as the head of a neighborhood organization or local business, meaning that just a handful were sent from individual male residents taking it upon themselves to write letters of protest. Though it might be tempting to see the marked prominence of women in Redford's protest campaign as a precursor to the feminist antiporn movement, there is no indication that these women identified as feminists, and as we will see, their letters did not draw on anything resembling feminist rhetoric. Moreover, as Strub has argued, mainstream feminist positions on pornography during the early 1970s were very much

[17] Those who sent multiple letters to either Ravitz or Gribbs or who sent letters to both Gribbs and Ravitz were only counted once.

in flux, with no consensus on the issue, while the feminist antiporn movement would not fully coalesce until the latter half of the decade.[18]

Viewed in conjunction with the presumed whiteness of most of the letter writers, the preponderance of female letter writers provides some indication of the outsized role that white women played in local antiporn activism of the early 1970s, which can be understood as an extension of their major involvement in grassroots conservative politics and neighborhood resistance to racial integration.[19] As Thomas Sugrue writes of the battles over neighborhood integration in Detroit, "Concerns about family, domesticity, and community all undergirded white women's role in neighborhood resistance in the postwar city. . . . [Women] had even more at stake than men in the preservation of a neighborhood. They viewed neighborhood transition as a profound threat to the sense of community they had constructed. And they feared the introduction of outsiders—in the case of Detroit, blacks—as a threat to the domestic unit."[20] Though the perceived outsiders had changed, the prominence of white women remained the constant in neighborhood resistance to both racial integration and the opening of adult businesses. It should therefore come as no surprise that much of the rhetoric employed by those protesting the Adult World was steeped in and adapted from language used in fights over the racial integration of white neighborhoods.

Though the letters sent to the mayor and city council protesting the Adult World Bookstore vary greatly in style and content, three main threads ran through most of them: the need to protect children, fears surrounding the invasion of unwanted outsiders, and a belief that the Adult World would hurt the local economy and lower property values. As Marilyn Adler Papayanis has argued with reference to neighborhood fights about adult businesses in 1990s New York City, "Citizens feared that the presence of such establishments would expose their children to obscene material (either as a result of graphic signage or lax policing), flood their streets with so-called undesirable elements from other areas, and, perhaps most importantly, lower property values."[21] Rhetorical strategies that were fully calcified by the 1990s were, however, still in their infancy in the early 1970s, and the authors of Redford's protest letters were innovators who actively devised new rhetorical strategies that would later become widespread. Moreover,

[18] Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 213–16. For more on the history of the feminist antiporn movement, see Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*.

[19] See Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xx–xxii; and Matthew F. Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 142–67.

[20] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 251.

[21] Marilyn Adler Papayanis, "Sex and the Revanchist City: Zoning Out Pornography in New York," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18, no. 3 (2000): 343.

as can be seen through an examination of Redford's antiporn campaign, these discursive strategies were highly mutable and able to adapt to specific local contexts.

THE THREAT TO CHILDREN

One of the most potent rhetorical devices used by antiporn advocates has long been the invocation of the figure of the idealized and innocent child imperiled by the proliferation of pornography. The deployment of this discursive strategy was particularly prevalent in antiporn politics in the United States, where, as Walter Kendrick writes, this notion "exercised a power unknown in Europe."[22] Anthony Comstock, America's most famous and notorious antiobscenity crusader, largely built his career on the perceived endangerment of children in the face of indecent media, and he intended his 1883 book, *Traps for the Young,* as "a plea for the moral purity of children."[23] Fredric Wertham framed much of his post–World War II crusade against comic books in similar terms, arguing that juvenile delinquency of the era was attributable to the corrupting influence of comics.[24]

Given the popularity of these campaigns and the aforementioned proximity of the Adult World Bookstore to Redford High School, it is not surprising that many letter writers invoked the need to protect children from pornography. The first example of this strategy was a flyer, "How to Protest Against the Adult World," distributed by the Redford Presbyterian Church in early October 1972. The flyer implored residents to write to key city officials—including the president of the city council, the mayor, and the police commissioner—and to call on them to take action against the spread of pornography in the city. It also included a sample letter that distilled the church's preferred rhetoric for the fight against the Adult World. Taking center stage was the argument that the bookstore would represent a threat to neighborhood children: "[Pornography] corrupts our youth and works against what we are trying to do in our families in teaching good sex and the disciplined mind and body. It stands over against what we are wanting to see taught in our schools yet our High School youth must pass this shop on the way to and from the Redford High School each day."[25] In drawing

[22] Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 141. For more on the perceived need to protect children from sexual media, see Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 133–92.

[23] Anthony Comstock, *Traps for the Young* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 1.

[24] See Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 104–66.

[25] Mrs. Naomi Morgan and John R. Morgan to Mel Ravitz, October 17, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Mel Ravitz Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit.

on the perceived vulnerability of Redford's youth, the letter immediately set out the stakes of the issue for area residents.

This connection between pornography and child endangerment echoed contemporaneous battles over school-desegregation busing. Debates over busing raged in Detroit and across the country during the early 1970s, and one of the most frequently used arguments by white opponents of busing was that busing posed a threat to children. Whites thus attempted to evade accusations of racism in the busing debate while simultaneously arguing for the racially segregated status quo to remain in place. As Gillian Frank has argued, activists opposed to both the Equal Rights Amendment and gay rights also drew on the "image of the imperiled child" that had been deployed by antibusing advocates.[26] Similar attempts to fuse the politics of race with the politics of gender and sexuality were deployed in Redford Presbyterian's sample protest letter, which warned that pornography "corrupts our youth."

While some residents ignored the flyer's instructions to "state your own convictions in your own words" and simply signed their name to the sample letter, most drafted their own original letters. But even these letter writers tended to place the protection of children at the heart of their argument. For example, Mr. A. Schanenberger, writing on behalf of the Burt Area Citizens Committee, worried that children might venture into the store despite laws restricting their admission.[27] In a typo-filled letter he argued that "while the present controls limit admittance to 18 years or older this adult bookstore is within 900 feet of Redrord [*sic*] High School and a posted age limit does not guarantee constraint by the owner when that level of curoisity [*sic*] and and [*sic*] money is readily available." Schanenberger also expressed the fear that entrance into the store itself might not even be necessary for the corruption of children: "Unconcern is again reflected in the present choice of building advertising. The flashing lights are contemporary enough but to blatently [*sic*] flash: 'Pleasure is what we sell.'"[28] It was not just the products sold within the store that troubled him but the very presence and visibility of the store itself. In other words, Redford's youth might not even need to enter the bookstore to be corrupted by its influence; a peek at the storefront signage might be enough on its own.

Similarly, a letter from Evelyn Ginn expressed particular concern over the exposure of children to pornography. "Naturally," she wrote, "we do not care to have curious youngsters reading this pornographic material. It

[26] Gillian Frank, "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013): 127–30.

[27] I have tried to use names as given by the letter writers themselves, meaning the name they signed at the end of their letters, regardless of whether their full name was given elsewhere, such as on a letterhead or as part of a return address on the envelope.

[28] Mr. A. Schanenberger to Roman S. Gribbs, October 26, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

nurtures an unhealthy attitude toward sex, most especially when a child's knowledge has not been fully developed." But Ginn went beyond just rehearsing the well-worn trope of the innocent youth in danger from the perils of pornography, positing that the adults going into the store were developmentally stunted and had not truly achieved adulthood. She argued that "these are not really 'adult' bookstores. A mature adult with a normal sex life and a healthy attitude toward sexual love, does not seek this type of entertainment. Only a warped or undeveloped personality needs the kind of stimulus that comes from reading and seeing this type of material."[29] The letter provides a striking example of what Kendrick identifies as the era's dominant conception of the adult consumer of pornography, that "sinister figure of a mentally defective adult—probably male, probably also of lower-class origin—who wallowed in infantile idiocy and wished to make others do the same."[30] This questioning of whether adults who consumed pornographic material really qualified as adults was thus concomitant with the presumed innocence of children, since it hinted that pornography was either the symptom of a developmental deficit or its cause.

ATTRACTING "UNDESIRABLE ELEMENTS"

The belief that only mentally stunted adults could become consumers of pornography also fueled the argument that adult businesses attracted "undesirable" individuals who posed a danger to residents. While this line of argument did not appear in the sample letter, it nevertheless was a recurring theme in many of the letters protesting the Adult World. Some letter writers raised the specter of unwanted homosexual outsiders who were interested in children. As Ginn wrote, "Last summer my teenage son was approached by a man who used filthy sexual language and spoke of 'smoker' movies. I wonder if he had just been to see one. Or perhaps he had just read some pornographic material that stimulated him to the point that he had to go out and pick up a young boy."[31] By equating child molestation and homosexuality—and by more generally linking sexual "perversion" and the consumption of pornography—letters like this worked to emphasize the danger that the Adult World Bookstore posed to the neighborhood's children.

More often, though, Redford's protesting residents wrote of unwanted outsiders in ways that drew on contemporaneous debates surrounding race; white suburbanites frequently complained of a "racial invasion" of their neighborhoods by black city dwellers.[32] As David Freund writes,

[29] Evelyn Ginn to Roman S. Gribbs, October 18, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.
[30] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 208.
[31] Ginn to Gribbs, October 18, 1972.
[32] See Darden et al., *Detroit*, 130–31; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 66; and Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 231, 249.

white homeowners in the postwar Detroit suburb of Dearborn "insisted that blacks had destroyed residential neighborhoods in Detroit and now posed an immediate threat to suburban residents, who needed to prevent a 'Negro invasion.'"[33] Letters objecting to the Adult World similarly often used derivatives of the term "invasion" to describe how the bookstore was drawing unwanted types into the area. "The Northwest Redford-Detroit area has been invaded by 'The Adult World,'" Ann M. Sullivan's letter complains, and Mrs. Wm. D. Murphy implored, "Please help Northwest Detroit clean out this dirty mess that has invaded us."[34]

But even as the Redford protesters drew on the racialized rhetoric of invasion, the fact that they lived within Detroit's borders and not in the suburbs meant that the presumed "invaders" they feared—the undesirable individuals supposedly threatening to tarnish the community—were not the poor black city-dwellers feared by white suburbanites but rather white suburbanites themselves. Myron Gelt, owner of Gigi Floral Fashions, located next door to the Adult World, explicitly made this point in his letter of protest: "Most of the patrons of 'porno' shops are usually the white middleclass suburbanites who live in their suburban utopia."[35] Mrs. Overly similarly complained to the mayor: "If our neighborhood does not patronize this establishment, it still does not prevent people out of the neighborhood from coming in, who would not have it in their own neighborhood."[36] Given the relative dearth of adult businesses in the suburbs in comparison to the nearly fifty spread throughout Detroit at this time, the suburban origins of the individuals to whom she is referring are all too clear.

The fact that the letter writers focused on outsiders also points to the fact that all involved seemed to assume that no residents of the Redford area could possibly be among the customers of the Adult World. Of course, these assumptions are unlikely to have matched reality. Still, given the proximity of Redford to the suburbs, as well as the fact that Grand River Avenue in this area was something of a shopping destination, it does stand to reason that the Adult World had a substantial number of suburbanites among its clientele. The fact that many of these suburban dwellers resided in places that were, at least in the estimation of Redford's protesting letter writers, both economically prosperous and porn-free only exacerbated frustrations over the perceived invasion of unwanted suburban outsiders into Redford.

[33] Freund, *Colored Property*, 334.

[34] Ann M. Sullivan to Mel Ravitz, October 17, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers; Mrs. Wm. D. Murphy to Roman S. Gribbs, September 26, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

[35] Myron Gelt to John Nichols, Mel Ravitz, and Roman S. Gribbs, October 11, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

[36] Mrs. Harold Overly to Roman S. Gribbs, October 10, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

Property Values and White Flight

The final common theme of these letters was concern over falling property values and the economic vitality of Redford and Detroit. This issue, much like the fears that the Adult World would attract undesirable individuals, did not appear in the sample letter but was nevertheless frequently invoked by letter writers. These economic concerns were almost always couched within expressions of civic pride and were tied to a sense of loss and a fear for the city's economic and social health. As Mrs. F. H. Wilcox wrote, "I was born in Detroit, so were my parents, and so were my children. I've been proud of being a 'Detroiter' *but* the new business which recently moved into my neighborhood is spoiling my pride in my city" (emphasis in the original).[37] Similarly, Evelyn Ginn wrote: "Please do anything you can to put all the 'adult' bookstores and movies out of business. We don't need them in our city. They are dangerous to the mental health of some, and an insult to all the people in Detroit who care about our city and the people in it. I care."[38] Ginn was referring to the "I Care About Detroit" campaign, which had been initiated by downtown business interests following the violence and turmoil that hit the city in the summer of 1967. As part of the campaign, flyers and buttons with the "I Care About Detroit" slogan were distributed at special events held downtown, while Motown star Smokey Robinson recorded a song of the same name in support of the cause.[39] The expression was meant to evoke pride in the city and a sense of ownership over Detroit's future, and its deployment in the fight over the Adult World is evidence that the protesters viewed the spread of adult businesses as part of the broader threats to the future prospects of the city.

These expressions of civic pride were often linked with allusions to the growing tendency of white Detroiters to flee the city for the suburbs. Mr. and Mrs. Houslander expressed this perspective when they asked, "Is this another way to drive people from Detroit? We have lived here all our lives, however, if this is the beginning of things to come, perhaps there will be more of an exodus."[40] Such threats to join the white flight to the suburbs were often described in terms of political retribution for inaction on the part of city officials. As Mrs. James Gilligan put it, "As a taxpayer on two residences in Detroit, and a city income tax payer, I will withdraw from this city unless some action is taken on these places, and also cast my vote likewise!!!"[41] No doubt the threat of leaving the city, along with a

[37] Mrs. F. H. Wilcox to Mel Ravitz, October 8, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.

[38] Ginn to Gribbs, October 18, 1972.

[39] Diane J. Edgecomb, "News Bulletin," July 1, 1968, folder 7, box 426, Jerome P. Cavanagh Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Julie Morris, "5,000 Show They Care About City," *Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 1969, 3.

[40] Mr. and Mrs. Houslander to David Eberhard, September 25, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

[41] Mrs. James Gilligan to Mel Ravitz, September 28, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.

promised response come election time, were strategies designed to induce political action.

Linked to concerns about white flight were fears that adult entertainment in Detroit would cause "legitimate" businesses to flee to the suburbs. Letter writers displayed their awareness of the city's already-visible economic decline by expressing the fear that the presence of adult theaters and bookstores in the city would only hasten the trend of businesses leaving for the suburbs or closing. Myron Gelt, the aforementioned proprietor of Gigi Floral Fashions, succinctly expressed this view in writing: "When a porno shop moves in, five regular businesses leave the city as does your tax base." As a small-business owner himself, Gelt further claimed that he "would hate to be classified as one of those businesses fleeing to the suburbs; but with neighbors such as 'porno' shops, it leaves very little choice." [42] Gelt was by no means alone in expressing the view that the economic health of the city depended on closing adult businesses. Echoing this sentiment, Marie Mitchell wrote: "If the Common Council is sincerely trying to get Detroit 'back on its feet,' this type of smut store should be closed."[43] Though in reality, the fall of Detroit's economy had been set in motion decades earlier by the twin forces of structural racism and economic inequality,[44] undoubtedly the belief that adult businesses were a major cause of the economic decline of Detroit was widely held.

Fears regarding the economic effect of such establishments were particularly acute when it came to their perceived impact on residential neighborhoods. As Burt Area Citizens Committee president A. Schanenberger said of the Adult World: "This use on Grand River within a shopping area may at first seem to be appropriate on a major thoroughfare, but its performance and outward effect on our residential community is what concerns us and makes it objectionable."[45] The emphasis here is on the effect that adult businesses might have on residential neighborhoods, and there is an implied acceptance of adult entertainment if sequestered within business districts like the downtown of the city. Another letter writer, Karen Fink, phrased this argument very directly: "I wish to protest, mainly, the location of this store."[46]

These concerns led many citizens to call for laws preventing such establishments from opening in their neighborhoods. Irene Stein, for example, argued that "some laws should be passed forbidding these adult book + peep stores from operating in primarily residential areas."[47] James Gilligan

[42] Gelt to Nichols, Ravitz, and Gribbs, October 11, 1972.
[43] Marie Mitchell to Mel Ravitz, October 13, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.
[44] See Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 5.
[45] Schanenberger to Gribbs, October 26, 1972.
[46] Karen L. Fink to Mel Ravitz, October 18, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.
[47] Irene Stein to Mel Ravitz, October 15, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.

combined his complaint with the threat that he was planning on "moving to a community where the local governmental authorities has [*sic*] sufficient ingenuity to pass legislation whereby these stores will only operate with the approval of the local neighborhood."[48] Notably, this view that residents should have the right to decide whether or not to allow adult businesses echoed the strategies that had become central to white racial politics of the era, which had increasingly come to rely upon a color-blind rhetoric that sought to distance its purveyors from charges of racism while still arguing against efforts to combat racial segregation and inequality. As Matthew Lassiter has argued, "Color-blind ideology shaped a collective politics of white, middle-class identity that defined 'freedom of choice' and 'neighborhood schools' as the core privileges of homeowner rights and consumer liberties."[49] Though the particulars may have changed, the rights-based rhetoric of white suburbanites was mirrored in the letters of antiporn activists. As one letter protesting the Adult World succinctly put it, "We, as residents, have rights too!"[50]

Writing on behalf of the North Rosedale Park Civic Association in Detroit, an organization that represented some fourteen hundred households, Charles Allegrina summarized many of the key issues: "We believe the use of freedom of the press as a rationale [for permitting adult businesses] amounts to a total disregard for the affect [*sic*] this type of amusement has on the surrounding neighborhoods. Various people have described it as the first signs of blight."[51] Allegrina's use of the term "blight" holds particular significance due to its association with the racial conflicts that were central to Detroit's urban crisis. Blight had long been the word used to describe condemned and economically impoverished neighborhoods, which meant that it had come to be linked to predominantly black urban areas. As Freund writes of Detroit's suburbs, "By the 1950s, whites were preoccupied with distinguishing their suburban havens from what they viewed as its urban antithesis, as well as the minority population associated with it. Suburban whites talked constantly about the necessity of preventing 'urban blight' and keeping their communities clean."[52] Neighborhoods linked with blight were, in turn, potential targets of urban renewal, which often meant the total destruction of the community and the displacement of its residents. In Detroit the postwar urban renewal program aimed to rehabilitate "blighted areas" of the city, which in practice meant the leveling

[48] James Gilligan to Mel Ravitz, September 15, 1972, folder 7, box 41, Ravitz Papers.

[49] Matthew D. Lassiter, "The Suburban Origins of 'Color-Blind' Conservatism: Middle-Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis," *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 4 (2004): 550.

[50] Mr. and Mrs. Michael Mayer to Mel Ravitz, October 11, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.

[51] Charles D. Allegrina to Mel Ravitz, October 21, 1972, folder 1, box 42, Ravitz Papers.

[52] Freund, *Colored Property*, 358.

of many of the city's most densely populated black neighborhoods.[53] Thus, the threat of Redford becoming associated with blight carried with it the very real threat of economic consequences for residents. Allegrina's word choice here was no mere coincidence, then, as it tied the fight over the Adult World to a longer history of white backlash against an expanding black urban center.

It is also significant that Allegrina explicitly rejects defenses of adult businesses based on the ideal of the "freedom of the press" and the First Amendment and counters them with an argument about the economic vitality of residential neighborhoods. In drawing on economic arguments to make their case, those protesting the Adult World Bookstore were able to sidestep debates over morality and censorship; indeed, many explicitly denied the relevance of those issues altogether. "This protest is not made in the interest of establishing moral standards for the people of this city," Ralph Williams insisted. "Each adult has the duty and right to set his own standards within the framework of the US Constitution. All open minded people will accept the fact that our own values are not necessarily best for everyone."[54] This insistence that moral concerns were not the motivation for their protest allowed letter writers to avoid debates over censorship; they sometimes even explicitly denied that questions about the morality of pornography were at all germane to the issue at hand.

This rhetorical move drew much of its inspiration from color-blind ideology, which, as Freund argues, had "enabled whites to defend segregation and even to dismiss civil rights protest while claiming to be nonracist."[55] Similarly, then, grassroots antiporn activists of the early 1970s crafted rhetorical strategies that could advocate for media censorship and the shuttering of adult businesses while simultaneously distancing themselves from the stereotype of the religion-driven, blue-nosed, and prudish antiporn crusader of old. This meant that Redford's letter writers emphasized economic concerns over moral ones, even denying the relevance of free speech issues altogether. Of course, just as racism remained at the heart of color-blind ideology, morality still undergirded many of the assumptions behind this new antiporn discourse, and the goals of Redford's protesting residents remained largely the same as those of previous generations of antiporn activists. Nevertheless, this morality-neutral antiporn rhetoric marked a profound shift for antiporn politics by making it better attuned to the social and political landscape of the post–sexual revolution era. And though Redford's protesting residents were by no means synonymous with the antiporn movement as a whole, their campaign was indicative of broader antiporn trends occurring at the grassroots level across the United States in the early 1970s.

[53] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 48–49.

[54] Ralph E. Williams to Roman S. Gribbs, September 23, 1972, folder 6, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

[55] Freund, *Colored Property*, 17.

In time, this new form of antiporn rhetoric would decline in its centrality to the broader antiporn movement. By the end of the decade, feminist critiques of pornography had moved to the forefront of antiporn politics due to the work of groups like Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media and Women Against Pornography. Still, this is not to say that the antiporn discourse pioneered in grassroots battles like Redford's disappeared once the feminist antiporn movement took hold. As Pamela Butler has argued, "race" and the "politics of urban space" were in fact central to the feminist sex wars in ways scholars have only begun to explore.[56] This can be seen in the forms of "neighborhood feminism" that Georgina Hickey looked at in her examination of Minneapolis antiporn activism of the late 1970s and 1980s, which combined concern over the economic impact of adult businesses on residential areas with a feminist antiporn discourse.[57] Meanwhile, key early feminist antiporn leaders like Detroit-native Laura Lederer, whose father had been instrumental in antiporn activity in Detroit during the early 1970s as the head of the city's Department of Buildings and Safety Engineering, also drew heavily on the tactics and rhetoric pioneered in grassroots antiporn fights of the era.[58]

The feminist antiporn movement and the fiery debates surrounding it as part of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s have continued to have a profound impact on how pornography has been studied by scholars today.[59] This has, however, obscured the fact that the feminist antiporn movement met with little success when it came to actually affecting the regulation of pornography. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's famed Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which was first proposed in 1983 in Minneapolis, sought to turn feminist antiporn discourse into legislation by treating pornography as a violation of women's civil rights and allowing women who had been harmed by pornography to seek damages against the adult film industry in civil court. However, the ordinance was only ever enacted in the cities of Indianapolis and Bellingham, Washington, and in both those cases, the law was quickly overturned as unconstitutional in

[56] Pamela Butler, "Sex and the Cities: Reevaluating 1980s Feminist Politics in Minneapolis and St. Paul," in *Queer Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 207.

[57] Georgina Hickey, "The Geography of Pornography: Neighborhood Feminism and the Battle against 'Dirty Bookstores' in Minneapolis," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 1 (2011): 126.

[58] Josh Sides, "Excavating the Postwar Sex District in San Francisco," *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 3 (2006): 369–71.

[59] As Peter Alilunas argues, one legacy of the feminist antiporn movement has been that the study of pornography has continued to be "taken up under a feminist heading and debated on political or ideological terrain mostly centered on content," with the result of this being "radically destructive in terms of basic historical knowledge." Peter Kenneth Alilunas, "Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video, 1976–1986" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013), 38.

federal court.[60] In contrast, as I explore in the concluding section ahead, Redford's antiporn crusade helped shape Detroit's new legislative approach to regulating pornography, one that would be widely imitated, becoming the preferred legal means for halting the spread of adult entertainment in cities across the country.

Conclusion: The Birth of the Detroit Model

Redford's campaign against the Adult World achieved its most immediate goal when in November 1972 the bookstore quietly closed its doors, a victim of community pressure and feared legal action.[61] More significantly, Redford's efforts helped shape the bold new antiporn legislation being debated in Detroit at that time. On October 20, in the midst of the deluge of letters sent by Redford residents to city officials, the Detroit City Council held a public meeting with city residents to get their thoughts on a proposed new antiporn ordinance. This meeting attracted around 180 people, nearly all of whom supported the proposal. Redford residents guaranteed healthy attendance by chartering a bus for forty-eight people from the Sixteenth Precinct Police Station, which was located just a few blocks from the Adult World Bookstore and across the street from Redford High School. A *Detroit Free Press* reporter rode with them to the meeting, and her article explicitly downplayed any implication that these antiporn activists were driven by religion or morality; she wrote that there was more "small talk than sermonizing" on the bus ride and that the riders were "far from a bluestocking brigade."[62] Local businessman Myron Gelt spoke at the meeting, drawing cheers from the audience when he told the city council: "If you're not gonna do something about it, stop calling meetings, because we've got more important things to do—like looking for homes in the suburbs." Meanwhile, the lone voice of dissent at the meeting was an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union who argued that "an adult bookstore is not the same as a bar, a pawnshop or the like. It is protected by the sanctity of the First Amendment to the Constitution."[63]

This free speech argument evidently fell on deaf ears, as four days later the city passed the new ordinance regulating adult businesses. The mayor signed it into law just a few days after that, and present at the bill signing were Mrs. Betty Hedeen, president of the Redford Community Council, and Mrs. Virginia Fuller, representing the Redford Parents Club, both of whom had received invitations from Mayor Roman Gribbs. Each

[60] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 323–31.

[61] Mrs. Stanley Taylor to Mel Ravitz, November 13, 1972, folder 7, box 41, Ravitz Papers.

[62] Maryanne Conheim, "Council Hears Foes of Pornography," *Detroit Free Press*, October 21, 1972, 3.

[63] Ibid.

subsequently received a letter from the mayor, complete with an autographed photo from the bill signing; Gribbs expressed his gratitude for their help in "gaining passage of these vitally needed laws," going on to say: "I look forward to having your support as we continue our efforts to eliminate the blight of indecency from Detroit."[64] While Gribbs's invocation of "indecency" is an indication that the morality-based arguments of old never fully disappeared, his mention of "blight" points to the fact that this rhetoric had become inextricably linked with a new antiporn discourse emphasizing issues of urban decay.

The bill that Gribbs signed into law was a novel new method of regulating pornography, one that grew out of the rhetoric used by Redford's letter writers. The ordinance steered clear of the traditional antiporn lever of obscenity law, which was an exception to the First Amendment and therefore tended to be framed in terms of morality and the curtailment of free speech. Instead, the city used zoning law, which seemed unconnected to censorship or to arguments about decency. Detroit's zoning ordinance required that adult businesses be at least one thousand feet away from each other, thereby dispersing them and avoiding any one neighborhood being overrun by pornographic outlets.[65] From the outset, the bill was based on the premise that adult businesses have a negative economic effect on residential neighborhoods. As city council president Mel Ravitz said at the time of the bill's passing, "I think this time the ordinances will pass [a court test] because we're taking the view that these establishments have a blighting effect on neighborhoods by downgrading and depreciating property values."[66]

Adult theater owners in the city quickly challenged the ordinance, eventually taking their fight all the way up to the United States Supreme Court in the 1976 case of *Young v. American Mini Theatres*. A five-to-four decision ratified the constitutionality of Detroit's zoning law. Justice John Paul Stevens wrote for the majority, using the rationale that the "location of several such [adult] businesses in the same neighborhood tends to attract an undesirable quantity and quality of transients, adversely affects property values, causes an increase in crime, especially prostitution, and encourages residents and businesses to move elsewhere."[67] In the wake of the court's

[64] Roman S. Gribbs to Mrs. Virginia Fuller, November 1, 1972, and Roman S. Gribbs to Mrs. Betty Hedeen, November 1, 1972, both in folder 7, box 333, Gribbs Papers.

[65] Detroit's approach stood in contrast to the Boston Combat Zone, which sought to quarantine adult businesses in one area of the city. See Eric Schaefer and Eithne Johnson, "Quarantined! A Case Study of Boston's Combat Zone," in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[66] Gloria Snead, "Council OK's Smut Store Rules," *Detroit News*, October 25, 1972, sec. B, 1.

[67] Young v. American Mini Theatres, No. 75-312 (United States Supreme Court, June 24, 1976).

decision, Detroit's method of dispersing adult businesses through zoning law, an approach that came to be known simply as the Detroit Model, quickly spread across the country. It was copied by dozens of cities both small and large, from Benton Harbor, Santa Barbara, and Louisville to Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.[68] The arguments against the spread of pornography put forward by residents of Redford had trickled upward, eventually gaining the official imprimatur of the highest court in the land before spreading throughout the country. Through this process, the discourse developed in grassroots neighborhood antiporn activism came to fundamentally reshape the dominant legal strategies for regulating pornography.

About the Author

Ben Strassfeld completed his PhD at the University of Michigan in the Department of Screen Arts and Cultures in 2018. His dissertation, "Indecent Detroit: Regulating Race, Sex, and Adult Entertainment, 1950–1975," looks at the history of media censorship and antiporn politics in postwar Detroit. His published work has also appeared in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* and the *Velvet Light Trap*.

[68] Bruce Taylor, "Ask a CDL Attorney: Is 'Zoning' the Solution?," *National Decency Reporter* 15, no. 2 (1978): 3; "Adult Entertainment Restrictions OKd," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1978, sec. 2, 11; Sides, *Erotic City*, 149–53.