

# Freshwater











# Table of Contents

Film Summary	5
Using this Guide	6
Director's Statement from Dream Hampton	7
Mapping Freshwater in Detroit	8
Participants	10
Key Issues	11
Background Information	13
Discussion Prompts	17
Opening / Closing Activity	22
Resources	23
Credits & Acknowledgements	24





# Film Summary



Detroiters experienced an enhanced form of water destruction from massive flooding that destroyed homes and belongings and lives last summer. The water rose in streets and alleys and yards and, most important, in people's homes, where it submerged possessions and memories, and surfaced emotions that many were not prepared to confront.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use FRESHWATER to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

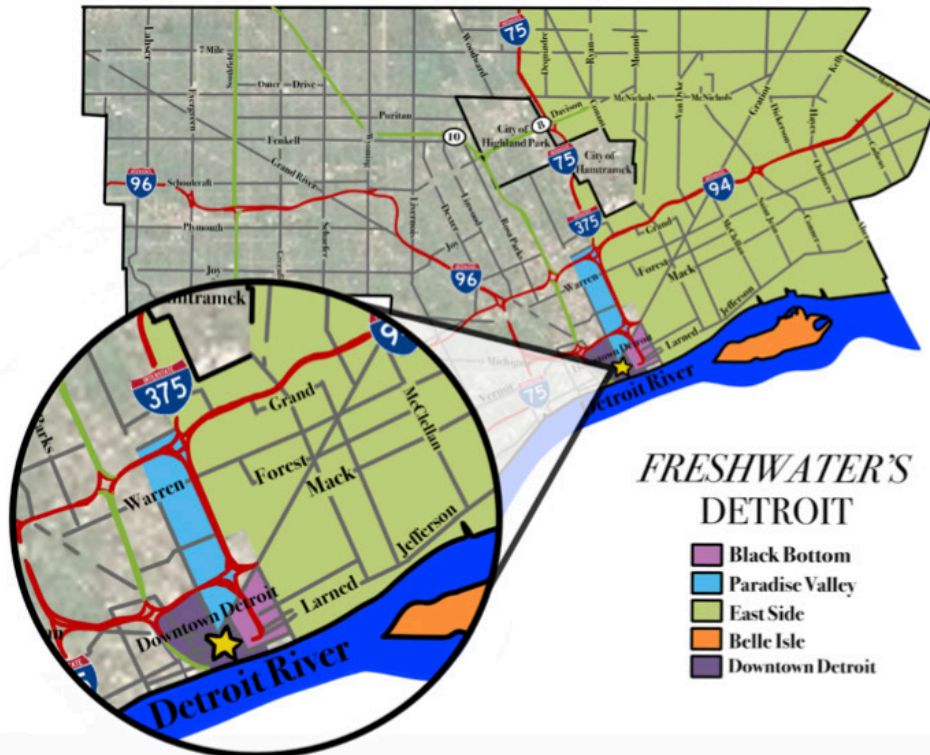
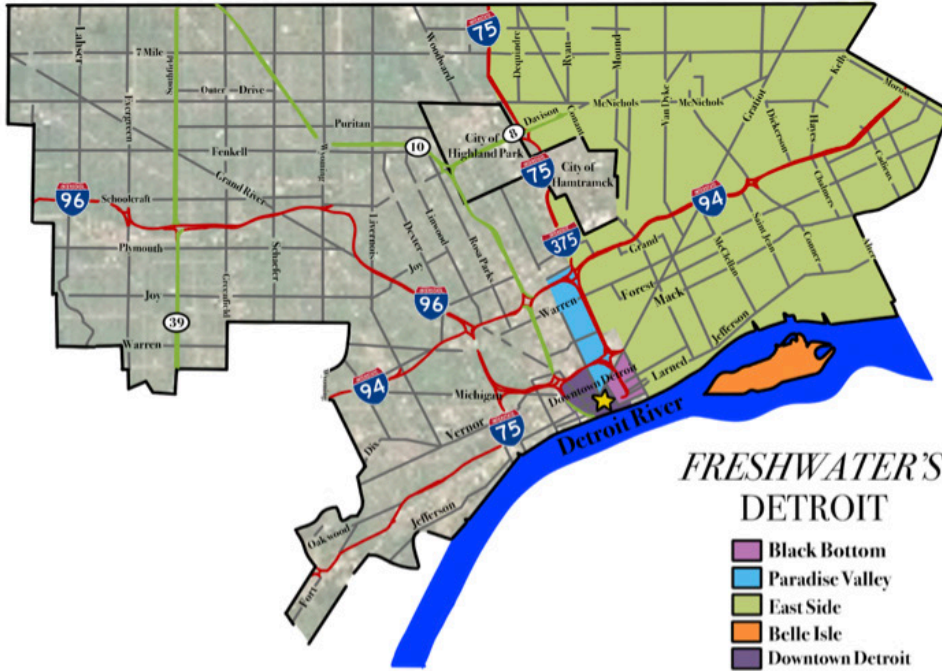
## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT FROM DREAM HAMPTON

Freshwater is a short film about flooded Midwestern basements, memory and my beloved, disappearing Black city. Basements are of course where we Midwesterners store those artifacts that are too precious to discard but for any number of reasons, we've not made room to live with or display--family photos we've promised ourselves we'd one day organize, a prom dress we convince ourselves some family nibbling may someday repurpose, the flag from daddy's casket--all seems safely stowed, until spring showers happen every season and the foundation of our home, like the infrastructure of our city, faces a losing battle with rising still water, with neglect and decay. The stillness of the pandemic encouraged the making of this short film. A handful of artist friends who love Detroit like I do used that time in isolation to consider our landscape, which often looks like nature reclaiming its space.

The process of making Freshwater was itself a healing as I'd done three film and television projects in 2018 at a breakneck pace. They were released the first three months of 2019 and one of them was what is considered a success, so I spent all of 2019 talking about that series. I made Freshwater to remind myself I'm an artist, to sit in a vision, however small, to collaborate with people I respect and admire. Producer ill weaver mapped a simple and deliberate way to make this film that included a non deadline and an interview with the film's composer, the brilliant artist and musician Sterling Toles, that sounds like my own narration. Halima and Bryce and Cleo talked to their young daughters about appearing in Freshwater, taking time with us to explain the process and gain consent. Desmond Love, Erik Howard and I decided to photograph Detroit across all four seasons. It is an unhurried film, that like the increasingly swollen Detroit River, is meant to flow.

# Mapping FRESHWATER in Detroit

This map is a simple rendering that highlights some of the specific areas of Detroit named in FRESHWATER. At 139 square miles, Detroit is larger in area than Manhattan or cities with larger populations, like Boston or San Francisco. On Detroit's east side, where the filmmaker is from, the city is lined by the Detroit River. This map highlights some of the areas named in the film.





## Black Bottom

Black Bottom Archives, a Detroit-based organization that archives Black history of Detroit's once booming Black neighborhoods writes,

"Black Bottom was the center of Black life in Detroit, beginning in the early 1900's and continuing through the Great Migration, when Black people moved to the city in large numbers from the American South. From the 1950's to the 1970's, the City of Detroit completely demolished the neighborhood in the name of "urban renewal." Hastings Street, which once held the largest concentration of Black-owned institutions and businesses in the city. [It] was demolished to build the Chrysler Freeway."

## Paradise Valley

During the 1920s, the Black population in Detroit swelled from 41,000 to 120,000 during the Great Migration. As Black people came from the South they looked for places where they could safely live. In Paradise Valley, Black residents' daily needs were amply met by more than 300 Black-owned businesses. Ranging from drug-stores, beauty salons and restaurants to places of leisure such as nightclubs, bowling alleys with bars, theaters and mini-golf courses this area was a center of cultural life that was a vibrant part of Detroit until the 1960s, where a freeway was built through the heart of the community in the name of urban renewal.

## East Side

Detroit's far east side began like much of Detroit, as a French settlement in the 1700s. Land was divided into ribbon farms; long, narrow strips of land that stretched from the waterfront to deep inland. The design provided settlers with access to waterways for drinking water, fishing and transportation and to land for timber, farming, and game. Today Detroit's east side is home to Detroit's Downtown, Belle Isle, Black Bottom, Paradise Valley and many other neighborhoods.

## Belle Isle

Known as Wah-na-be-zee (Swan Island) to the Chippewa and Ottawa Native American tribes, Belle Isle is a public park on an island situated on the Detroit River. It features acres of recreational space for residents to enjoy including the famed Giant Slide, a conservatory, picnic areas, parks, lakes, trails and the country's oldest aquarium. Belle Isle has historically been a gathering place for Black Detroiters' family reunions, celebrations or just sunny afternoons.



# Participants

**dream hampton**

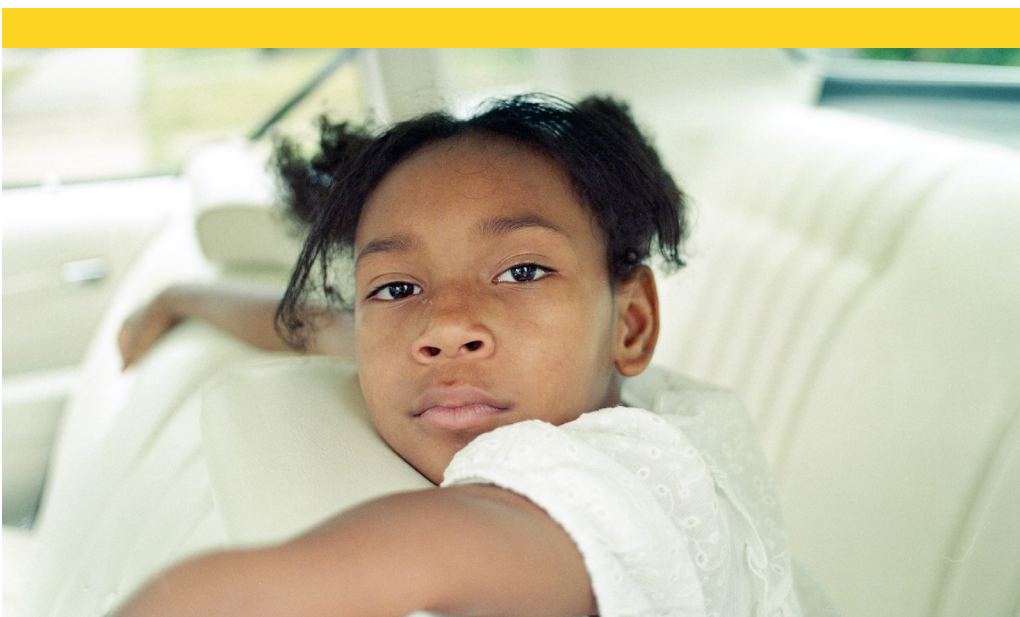
writer, producer,  
filmmaker and narrator

**Nia Rah Cassells**

passenger, visual  
narrator, daughter

**Bryce Detroit**

driver, visual narrator,  
Baba/father

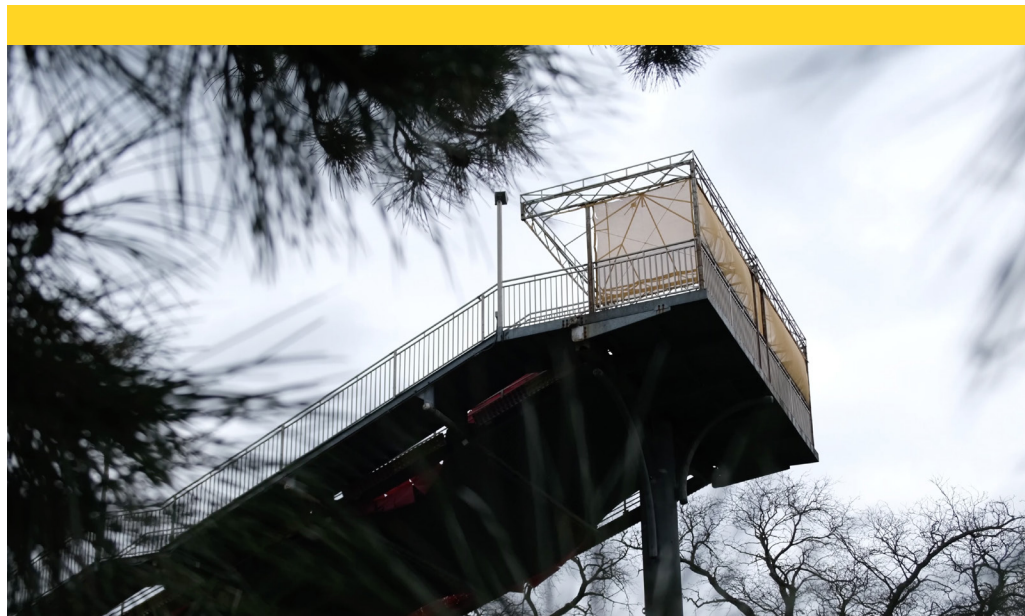




# Key Issues

FRESHWATER is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Climate change
- Water rights and water access
- City of Detroit
- Black history
- Biographies/Autobiographies
- Archiving and documenting
- Family Storytelling
- Environmental infrastructure







# Background Information

FRESHWATER is a film that asks us to think of how the memories of our lives are kept, cultivated and remembered. What does it mean to keep the things closest to our hearts and lives as they are continually being submerged in water? What happens to memory when the places we once knew go away? Detroit is a city that is changing. Every year, floods damage thousands of people's basements, destroying their property, their homes and sometimes their lives. Detroiters must decide where and how their possessions and memories of their past can survive as the climate shifts and the city becomes wetter.

What we now call the Detroit River was once known as the Bending River by the three indigenous Anishinaabe nations of the Council of Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi. They relied on the river for sustenance, travel and food long before the City of Detroit existed. The French, who forcibly established the City of Detroit in 1701, called the river "le détroit du Lac Érié," meaning "the strait of Lake Erie." For centuries, that water has been a repository for memories, resources, industry, travel

Lined by the Detroit River along its eastern boundary, tucked between two of the Great Lakes (Lake Huron and Lake Erie), Detroit's relationship to water, water access and water rights is challenging and complex. These waterways have been the site of industrialization, battles, fishing, freedom, travel and transport. Detroit's water has played a significant role in American history. The river separates the US from Canada, earning Detroit the codename 'Midnight' for slaves on the Underground Railroad. Years later, those same water pathways were used during Prohibition to smuggle illicit goods in the city.

FRESHWATER asks us to consider how the city's infrastructure contributes to what Mitch McEwen calls, "calculated distributions of combined sewer overflows" that have resulted in flooding, inequitable sewer infrastructure, and restricted access to water.

In the last fifteen years, Detroit residents and activists have increased their organizing around fair water access for the city's residents. Citing the basic understanding that water is a human right, supporters from in the city and around the world, have called for the city to stop cutting off people's water, to create an infrastructure for healthy water to be readily accessible and to compensate the city for its water being diverted to other places.

FRESHWATER is also a film about memory. It explores how climate and environmental change in Detroit intersect with our possessions, our home spaces and personal histories.



## **The Reality of Water Access in Detroit**

“On July 28, 2010, through Resolution 64/292, the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights.” -United Nations

Detroiters have been in an ongoing fight with the city, state and federal government to embody this resolution through fair water practices for its residents. They are challenged by citizens and private corporations who believe water should be for sale to the highest bidder. There are many groups taking action to demand stronger water infrastructures and shared resources for more equitable water access.

According to We The People Detroit, a group designed to support Detroiters to get fair water access, “In 2014, as one effect of Detroit’s bankruptcy, the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) initiated a massive water shutoff campaign against Detroit residents who had unpaid water bills. For many Detroit residents, like others across the globe, water has become increasingly unaffordable. In a city where nearly 40% of its people live in poverty, many Detroiters must choose between their water bill and other necessary payments. Since 2014, over 100,000 Detroit residents/homes have lost access to water services. The water shutoffs and subsequent lack of empathy from city leaders calls to question the developing Detroit that is shown throughout the media.”

We The People Detroit are one of many organizations and community efforts to ensure Detroiters from all walks of life receive equal access to water.

What are the ways you can support efforts to make sure we can all have access to clean, affordable water to survive?

## Remembering a Changing City: Archives, Media and Memory

Memories are the anchors of our existence. From big events to tiny details, we carry with us endless moments, names, neighborhoods, intersections and stories that become the fabric of our life. Poet MARS. is a life-long Detroiter who, like FRESHWATER's narrator, remembers the city in different phases of existence. His work explores details about Detroit's constantly changing life. His work often explores Detroit's green spaces that used to be homes or blocks that have changed over time. In FRESHWATER, the narrator talked about returning back to a familiar street only to see it all but gone. In his poem, "Field Notes 2 on a City Pastoral. 02" MARS. offers his reflection on Detroit spaces reclaimed by time that have now become gardens full of life.



### Field Notes on a City Pastoral. 02

Gardens in Detroit be blessed / Auntie Vet and her tomatoes / Mr. Liggins  
and his green onions / in Cass Corridor, Pat carefully tends to twelve  
raised garden beds / each sprawling and spilling / from strawberries to  
ground cherries / from kale to swiss chard / this year, the peaches came  
/ their bulbous fuzzy heads bouncing in the wind / grapevines climbed  
the alley's fence / and each neighbor plucked bowl fulls of plump green  
orbs / how wonderful – this garden's generosity / this year, the fall squash  
vines run rampant / becomes the chicken coop's wild neighbor / Kiki, who  
once plotted escape / day after day spreading her wings in the alley / now  
clucks / now stamps her pointy feet in place / stirs the ground beneath  
her / she, who once, granted herself a kind of freedom – chicken wire be  
damned / who still laid the eggs each morning / now contained / she, who  
beat her wings as prayer and plea / begs to bid the squash a kind of death  
/ Kiki – who knows / winter will come.

# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The discussion prompts, which follow specific chapters of the film, are an invitation to dialogue. Please select discussion questions that are relevant to your community.

## Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- **What images stood out to you the most in FRESHWATER?**
- **What themes emerged throughout the film?**
- **What feelings did FRESHWATER evoke?**
- **How did memory play a role in the narrator's story?**



# THE FIGHT FOR DETROIT'S WATER

In the film the narrator says that, “the flooding eats your memories; it destroys them. It literally takes your old photographs, your prom dress, your father’s boots...flooding is water being trapped and having nowhere to go.”

The narrator in FRESHWATER contrasts two types of water. The moving water of the Detroit River, which she cites as being a part of happy memories in her childhood and trapped water caused by flooding, which results in destroyed property, possessions and memories. In this film, water is both a resource and a challenge.

- How do Detroiters protect themselves from the potential damage of floods?
- What are things the city should do to protect its residents from future flooding?

In FRESHWATER the narrator talks about how many Detroiters do not have the means (money, time or other resources) to protect their homes from the impact of severe flooding. What are the outcomes that may happen if people’s homes continue to get flooded every year?

In contrast to the challenges, the narrator speaks warmly about the ways water was a focal point of connection, family and personal strength. What role did water play in the narrator’s childhood memories, growing up in Detroit?

# MEMORIES OF A HISTORICALLY BLACK CITY

“So much of what’s important about Detroit is the Blackness of it...” -narrator, FRESHWATER

Detroit is a hub of Black American culture. Detroit’s history is largely defined as a place Black people historically risked everything to arrive—as slaves on the Underground Railroad, then by bus, car and train during the Great Migration. Black history in Detroit is the story of art, music, political action, social innovation, ongoing acts of resistance, community kinship, creative survival and so much more. The film lists many geographical locations that are closely connected to both the Detroit River and the city’s expansive Black cultural history.

- From Hart Plaza to Belle Isle and Detroit’s Black Bottom neighborhood, what are some of the places that were named that you remember?
- What can you learn about them?

Flooding isn't the only cause of Black people losing their neighborhoods, homes, and gathering places in Detroit. From banks and mortgage companies swindling Black homeowners, sweeping gentrification efforts downtown to destroying neighborhoods like the Black Bottom, where the narrator was born and so much of her family gathered, there have been many efforts to marginalize Black people's space and experience in the city. In *FRESHWATER*, the narrator reflects on how it feels to see places so close to her heart become different or disappear.

- How does the narrator describe feeling when she thinks of the places and spaces that make up her childhood?
- How have some of the neighborhoods and places she named been impacted by Black people losing their homes, memories, or personal objects?
- What becomes of places when they are made to disappear?



## ALL THE FRESH WATER

In FRESHWATER, the narrator says, “I think about what it would look like if Detroit suddenly became home to a bunch of climate refugees...and we had all the fresh water.” Climate change is rapidly creating radical shifts in weather patterns that will result in people all over the world having to leave where they live in favor of environments better suited to human survival. Those people are being called, “climate refugees”. What image(s) does that term evoke?

Some of the most important considerations in Detroit becoming a haven of survivable climate is the question of available fresh water and infrastructural preparedness. Michigan is part of the Great Lakes Region which has access to 90% of the available fresh water on this continent. While there are thousands of Detroiters stuck in a cycle of having to clean out their flooded basements every year, who struggle to afford access to water or who are regularly losing their possessions and memories to displacement, the rest of the world is looking at Detroit as a place of possibility.

- How might Detroit be impacted if it became a place where people come to survive our changing climate?
- How would that impact Detroiters who are already struggling to keep their lives and homes above water?
- What are ways the city’s leaders and residents can support Detroiters who need help managing the flooding that happens every year in the city?

# CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY

## OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions.

**Take a moment to reflect on what it means to “go home”. Is it to a house? A street? A favorite outside place? When you think of it, how has it or hasn't changed? What do you remember? What do you miss? What, if anything, has gotten lost to time, erasure, weather or removal? What will you love about it forever, no matter its shape or form? How do you remember home?**

**We can't survive without fresh water. In this film, water is connected to memory, family, joy, and space. It is also connected to loss, erasure and cyclical damage. How has the presence or absence of water impacted the story of your life? How is water a part of your life memories or experiences?**

## TAKING ACTION

Learn about how the climate crisis is threatening to make many geographical areas across the world unlivable due to sea level rises, ocean temperature increases, persistent arid conditions, dried out water sources and an increase in extreme weather events. Make a plan in your community for ways to anticipate these shifts.

Learn about the activists in Detroit fighting to ensure that all Detroiters have access to clean water and share the story of their work.

Take time to learn more about Detroit's rich history of Black cultural spaces, places. Start with the places named in FRESHWATER (Belle Isle, Hart Plaza, Black Bottom, Detroit's East side, downtown, The Detroit River and more).

# Resources

Detroit is full of organizations and people fighting to preserve, document and archive the city's rich history and changing landscape. It also is home to many community organizations and groups thinking about the impact of water on the city's residence.

[FRESHWATER](#) the film's official website.

[We the People Detroit](#) offers information, resources and contact information for how to support Detroiters getting fair access to water.

[Black Bottom Archives](#) is an online digital platform that focuses on memory, community storytelling and the historical preservation of Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood.

[New Detroit](#) is an organization dedicated to documenting and sharing Detroit's Black history.

[National Resources Defense Council](#) works to inform everyone about flooding as a climate change crisis we should all be prepared for.

[Listen to this 10-minute news report](#) produced by National Public Radio about Detroit's struggle with flooding.

[Hydrate Detroit](#) is a volunteer run organization dedicated to supporting Detroiters with water access and flooding support.

[Artwork Archive](#) offers a step-by-step guide to create a community archive.



# Credits & Acknowledgments



## Discussion Guide Writer

Morgan Mann Willis (she/they) is a Detroit-based writer, community organizer and strategic planner. They work with creative projects, nonprofit organizations and individuals to bring their work to life. She's a Kresge Arts in Detroit Fellow, avid traveler and lover of Detroit's waterways and green spaces.



## Map Designer

Venusloc (Vanessa Reynolds) is a self-taught multimedia artist born and raised in Detroit. Their work has been featured in publications such as Fourculture, Your Mom's Berlin, and exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, and MdW fair, Chicago. In 2023, They were awarded a Kresge Artist Fellowship for video art.



## Field Notes on a City Pastoral. 02, by MARS.

MARS. is a writer and cultural organizer born and raised in Detroit. Their work has been published in Obsidian Literature & Arts for the African Diaspora, Michigan Quarterly Review: The Mixtape, Foglifter Journal, Gertrude Press, and elsewhere. MARS is a 2021 Kresge Literary Arts Fellow in Poetry and a 2019 Lambda Literary Art Emerging Writers Fellow in Poetry. Their debut chapbook, FLOWER BOI, is available via Gold Line Press.

## DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCER

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