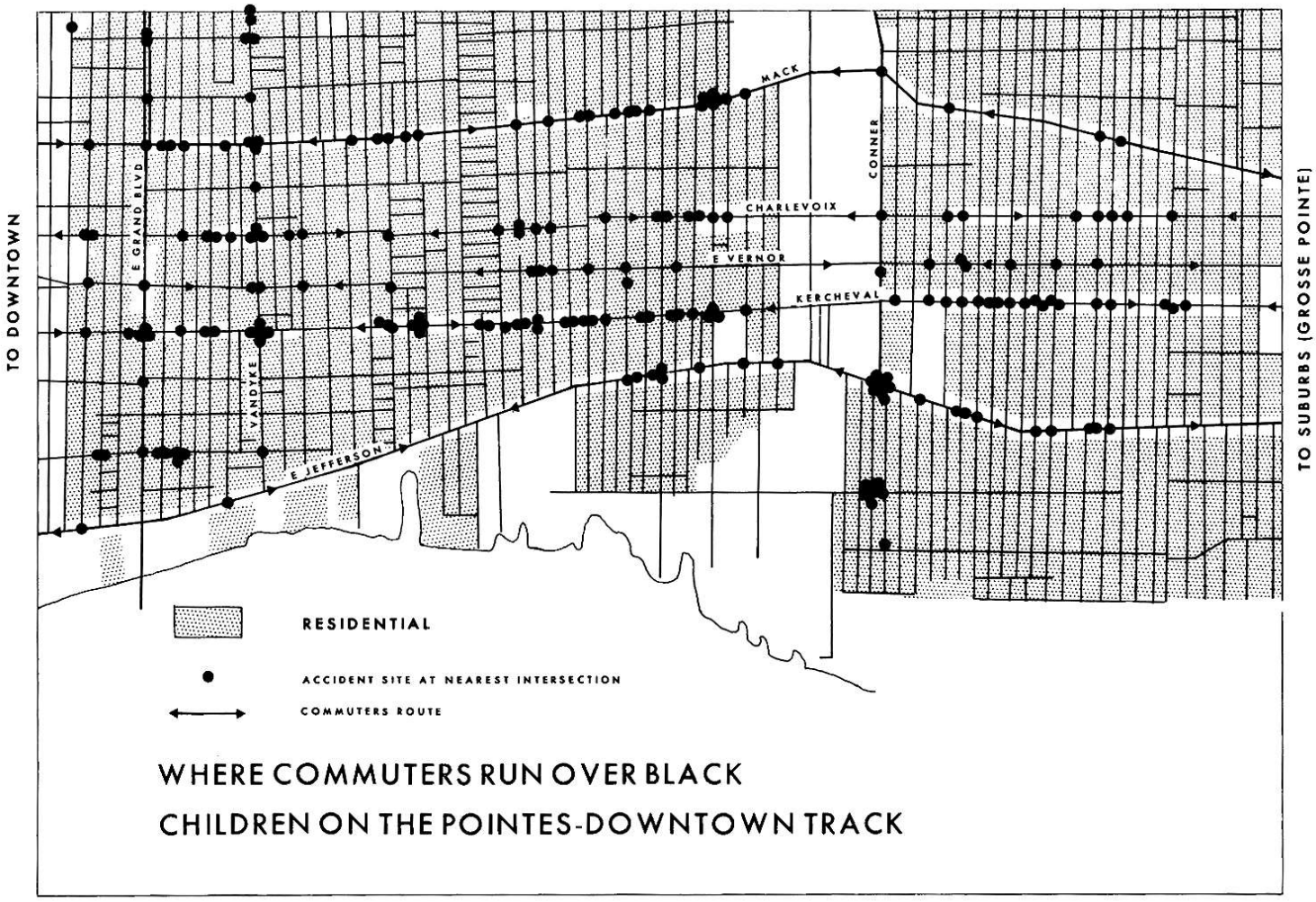
Nightingale

Black History Month



Where Commuters Run Over Black Children on the Pointes-Downtown Track (1971) by Gwendolyn Warren is one image from a report, "Field Notes №3: The Geography of Children" which documented the racial inequities of Detroit children.

Gwendolyn Warren and the Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute

Data feminism commits to challenging unequal power structures and working toward justice.

Catherine D'Ignazio Follow
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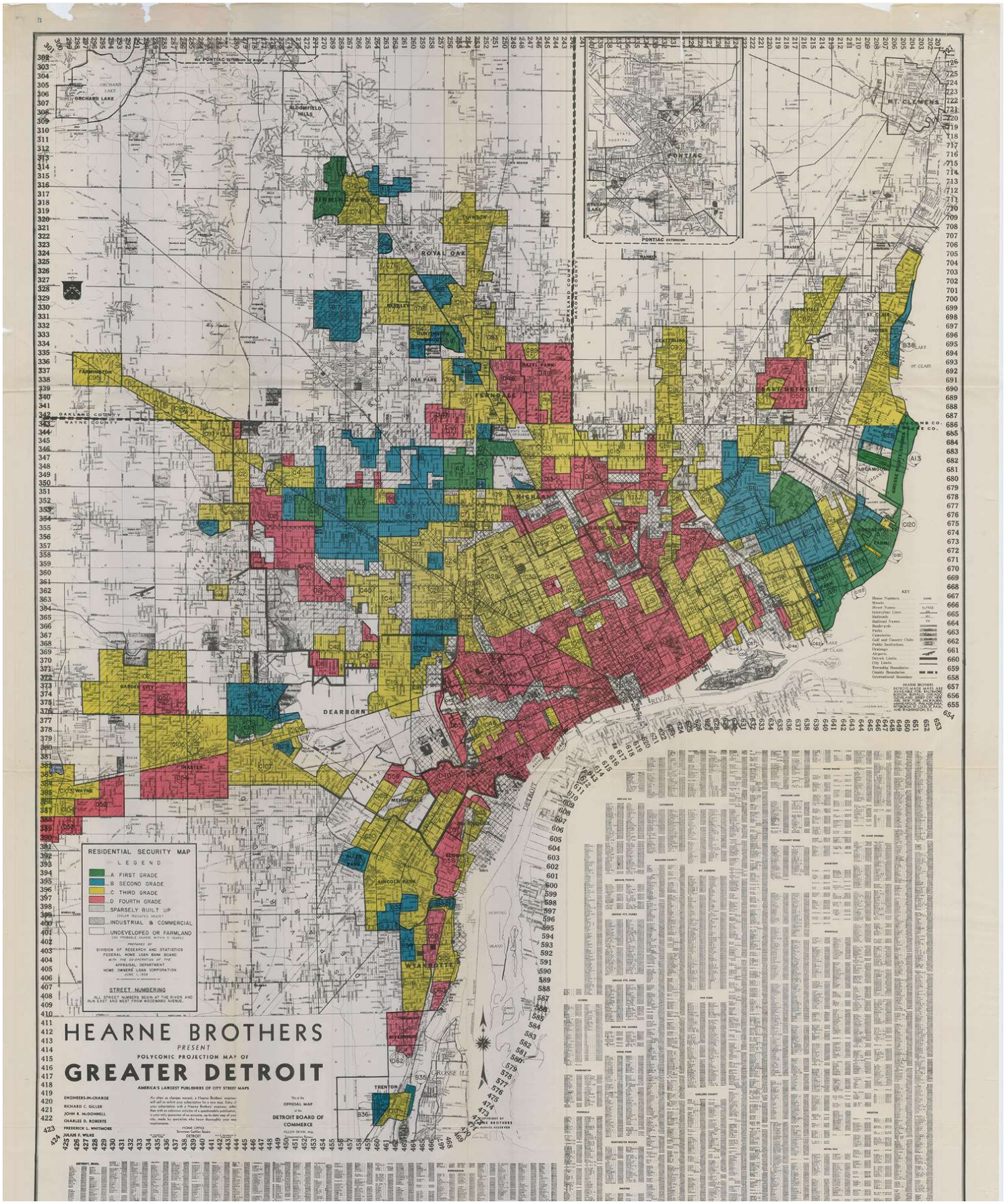
This is an excerpt, with permission, from the forthcoming book Data Feminism (MIT Press, 2020) by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein.

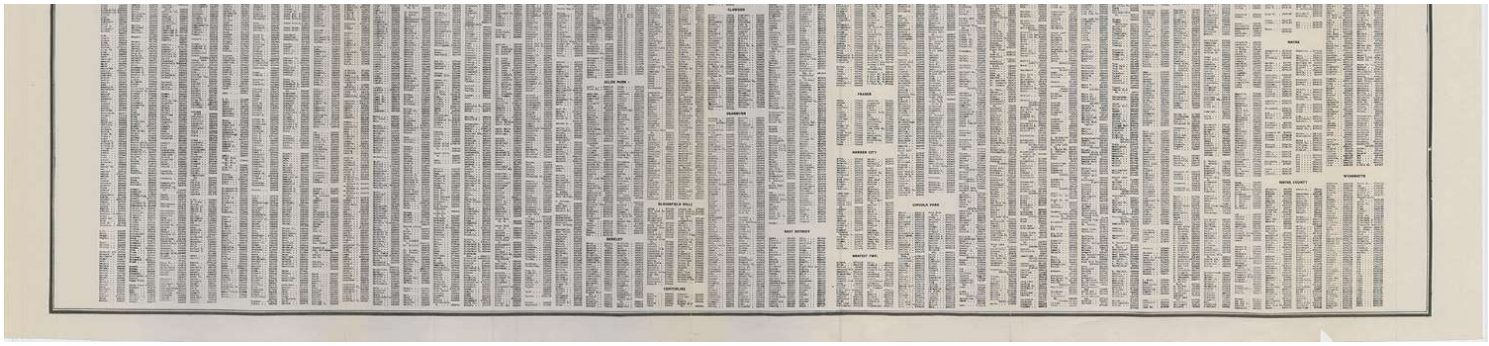
In 1971, the Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute (DGEI) released a provocative map, Where Commuters Run Over Black Children on the Pointes-Downtown Track. The map (figure 2.1) uses sharp black dots to illustrate the places in the community where the children were killed. On one single street corner, there were six Black children killed by white drivers over the course of six months. On the map, the dots blot out that entire block.

The people who lived along the deadly route had long recognized the magnitude of the problem, as well as its profound impact on the lives of their friends and neighbors. But gathering data in support of this truth turned out to be a major challenge. No one was keeping detailed records of these deaths, nor was anyone making even more basic information about what had happened publicly available. "We couldn't get that information," explains Gwendolyn Warren, the Detroit-based organizer who headed the unlikely collaboration: an alliance between Black young adults from the surrounding neighborhoods and a group led by white male academic geographers from nearby universities. Through the collaboration, the youth learned cutting-edge mapping techniques and, guided by Warren, leveraged their local knowledge in order to produce a series of comprehensive reports, covering topics such as the social and economic inequities among neighborhood children and proposals for new, more racially equitable school district boundaries.

Compare the DGEI map with another map of Detroit made thirty years earlier, the Residential Security Map below. Both maps use straightforward cartographic techniques: an aerial view, legends and keys, and shading. But the similarities end there. The maps differ in terms of visual style, of course. But more profound is how they diverge in terms of the worldviews of their makers and the communities they seek to support. The latter map was made by the Detroit Board of Commerce, which consisted of only white men, in collaboration with the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, which consisted mostly of white men. Far from emancipatory, this map was one of the earliest instances of the practice of *redlining*, a term used to describe how banks rated the risk of

granting loans to potential homeowners on the basis of neighborhood demographics (specifically race and ethnicity), rather than individual creditworthiness.





"Hearne Brothers Polyconic Projection Map of Greater Detroit" 1939 (link)

Redlining gets its name because the practice first involved drawing literal red lines on a map. (Sometimes the areas were shaded red instead, as in the map above) All of Detroit's Black neighborhoods fall into red areas on this map because housing discrimination and other forms of structural oppression predated the practice. But denying home loans to the people who lived in these neighborhoods reinforced those existing inequalities and, as decades of research have shown, were directly responsible for making them worse.

Early twentieth-century redlining maps had an aura very similar to the "big data" approaches of today. These high-tech, scalable "solutions" were deployed across the nation, and they were one method among many that worked to ensure that wealth remained attached to the racial category of whiteness. At the same time that these maps were being made, the insurance industry, for example, was implementing similar data-driven methods for granting (or denying) policies to customers based on their demographics. Zoning laws that were explicitly based on race had already been declared unconstitutional; but within neighborhoods, so-called covenants were nearly as exclusionary and completely legal. This is a phenomenon that political philosopher Cedric Robinson famously termed *racial capitalism*, and it continues into the present in the form of algorithmically generated credit scores that are consistently biased and in the consolidation of "the 1 percent" through the tax code, to give only two examples of many. What's more, the benefits of whiteness accrue: "Whiteness retains its value as a 'consolation prize,'" civil rights scholar Cheryl Harris explains. "It does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose."

Who makes maps and who gets mapped? The redlining map is one that secures the power of its makers: the white men on the Detroit Board of Commerce, their families, and their communities. This particular redlining map is even called Residential Security

Map. But the title reflects more than a desire to secure property values. Rather, it reveals a broader desire to protect and preserve home ownership as a method of accumulating wealth, and therefore status and power, that was available to white people only. In far too many cases, data-driven "solutions" are still deployed in similar ways: in support of the interests of the people and institutions in positions of power, whose worldviews and value systems differ vastly from those of the communities whose data the systems rely upon.

The DGEI map, by contrast, challenges this unequal distribution of data and power. It does so in three key ways. First, in the face of missing data, DGEI compiled its own counterdata. Warren describes how she developed relationships with "political people in order to use them as a means of getting information from the police department in order to find out exactly what time, where, how and who killed [each] child." Second, the DGEI map plotted the data they collected with the deliberate aim of quantifying structural oppression. They intentionally and explicitly focused on the problems of "death, hunger, pain, sorrow and frustration in children," as they explain in the report. Finally, the DGEI map was made by young Black people who lived in the community, under the leadership of a Black woman who was an organizer in the community, with support provided by the academic geographers. The identities of these makers matter, their proximity to the subject matter matters, the terms of their collaboration matter, and the leadership of the project matters.

For these reasons, the DGEI provides a model of the second principle of data feminism: challenge power. Challenging power requires mobilizing data science to push back against existing and unequal power structures and to work toward more just and equitable futures. As we will discuss in this chapter, the goal of challenging power is closely linked to the act of examining power, the first principle of data feminism. In fact, the first step of challenging power is to examine that power. But the next step — and the reason we have chosen to dedicate two principles to the topic of power — is to take action against an unjust status quo.

Learn more:

- To read more about the principles of Data Feminism, or to preorder the book, visit datafeminism.io.

- Check out this recently released book chapter on the Detroit Geographical Expedition & Institute by Gwendolyn Warren, Cindi Katz and Nik Heynan.

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