

ONEITA

THE MAGNIFICENT

INTERNATIONAL VISITORS (OR LOCALS) SEEKING
AN AUTHENTIC GLIMPSE OF DETROIT NEED TO LOOK NO FURTHER
THAN THIS WRITER TURNED CAB DRIVER

BY JEFF WARANIAK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY CYBELLE CODISH

“DO YOU KNOW WHO THE F*** I AM?”

That’s what the keychain says dangling from the ignition of Oneita Jackson’s cab. It might be the silent inscription of a plastic novelty, but it could just as easily come from Oneita’s self-described big mouth.

“People on six continents know who I am,” she says from behind the wheel of her blue Town and Country minivan — not your typical taxi, but Oneita, in her hound’s-tooth pants, mismatched earrings, green bug-eye sunglasses, and “Detroiter From Detroit” T-shirt, isn’t your typical cab driver.

“I’m a big deal,” she says. “People in other countries, they read headlines, and they get on planes to come see who this ‘Detroit Enigma’ is.” She laughs. “I crack myself up. It might be funny, but it’s a fact. Seriously, man.”

She is serious, man. When Spanish TV producers come to cover Detroit, they call Oneita to arrange meetings and shoots. When a French journalist flies in to write a story, he calls Oneita to show him the sights. When an unassuming German film student waltzes into Oneita’s cab at the airport, he decides to make her a documentary subject.

Everyone from Oscar nominees and NHL stars to Pulitzer Prize-winning authors routinely opt for a ride in Oneita’s cab.

Why? Oneita could — and would, gladly — list a multitude of reasons, but what it comes down to is this: Visitors to Detroit aren’t always sure what to make of this place — a city of under 700,000 marred by bankruptcy, embattled with blight, plagued with

the title of the most dangerous big city in America, all while attracting hundreds of new residents helping to foster trendy gastro pubs, ambitious startups, and shiny retail standouts like Shinola.

It’s a confusing place to navigate, physically and socially, and as visitors pass through a city simultaneously young and old, changed and unchanged, proud and neglected, they have things they want to see for themselves; they have questions.

If there’s one person who can answer those questions and provide an authentic, entertaining display of the city, it’s Oneita Jackson.

And *that’s* why people want to ride in her cab.

NEWSPAPER CHICK

When Oneita picks me up outside my building near downtown Detroit for a ride-along, she’s waiting with gifts in hand: an organic, locally made Drought juice and a copy of a book on the English language titled *A Handbook to Literature*.

“Do you have this book yet?” she asks as I slide into the passenger seat. When I tell her no, she tells me to keep it — a gift from one writer to another. I’m grateful, but I tell her she really doesn’t have to.

“Listen. You just walked up against the wrong Oneita,” she says, peering at me over bug-eye shades.

“You do *not* tell me what I don’t have to do. I am 46 years old. I do what I want to do, and my mom always says, when somebody is trying to do something for you, you let them.”

So I take the book.

She explains it’s a copy of a title given to her by a professor for one of her first English classes at How-

ard University in Washington, D.C., her home of 14 years before moving to Detroit in 2002, a move she made to work at the *Detroit Free Press*, first as an intern, then a copy editor, and later a columnist.

Detroiters might recall her “O Street” column, an editorial featuring her observations and social commentary on everything from Detroit culture and national politics to her son’s eighth-grade graduation.

The column earned her a *Free Press* Columnist of the Year award in 2008, but was suspended in 2010 following an incident of graffiti. A camera captured her scribbling her name on a bench at the unveiling of the newly constructed Bagley Pedestrian Bridge — an incident she doesn’t regret, in fact she commemorates it each year with a party. But she wishes people would get one thing straight.

“A lot of people think I was fired from the *Free Press* after the graffiti, but I was not.” Truth is, after the incident, Oneita asked to be moved to a copy editing position and stayed with the paper for two more years before quitting in 2012 to drive a cab.

“I always wanted to drive a cab,” she says of the career move. “Not like when I was three I wanted to drive a cab, but when I was in D.C., I had a cool cab driver, and I would talk to him all the time, and I thought that’s something that I could do one day, but I never had the guts to do it.”

‘WRITER. DRIVER. FIXER.’ AND AMBASSADOR

Guts or no, Oneita made the leap, first driving a standard yellow taxi, and eventually the minivan she drives today, technically a registered limousine.



But like anything else she does, Oneita decided early on she would do things her way. She wouldn't just be another cab driver but a "Street Concierge." But not just a street concierge, either.

According to her business card, Oneita Jackson is three things: "Writer. Driver. Fixer." If that last one sounds vague, it's supposed to be, but suffice to say that if you need *anything* or *anyone* in Detroit, they're just a phone call or two away.

Off the card, Oneita's also a "Detroit Ambassador" and a tour guide, the latter of which is what brings me to her cab; I've booked her for her one-hour city tour, an offer she extends to fares as she shuttles them to and from the airport.

"I don't have a standard tour," she'd explained to me on the phone. "It's whatever you like. I ask people what they're interested in and sometimes they've already seen the big, big, big sites, so I do the nooks and crannies. And since I'm a newspaper chick, I ask people, 'Do you want to see the headlines or what's behind the headlines?'"

I opt for the behind the headlines tour, which also comes with the offer to see "her Detroit."

"My Detroit is everything," Oneita says. "I have friends who are young people. I have friends who are judges, educators, crackheads. I have friends who have been in federal prison. I don't purport to know everything about the city, but if you want my Detroit tour, we do my stuff, which means we jump out of the car and we go say hi to my friends, and I run my mouth and ask 'Have you been to this place, have you been to that place?'"

Sounds like fun, I'd said.

"Oh, and you buy me lunch."

ONEITA'S DETROIT

We start the tour on the east side of the city with a quick trip past the Manoogian Mansion and surrounding homes. Oneita rattles off a list of past and present homeowners, including some familiar names like Kid Rock. "I saw him riding his bike on Belle Isle once, so he really does live there."

We swing by Roostertail, Pewabic Pottery, and Rose's Fine Food before seeing the Ossian Sweet House, the home of Dr. Ossian Sweet and his wife, Gladys. The black couple was met with an angry mob after moving into the then all-white neighborhood in 1925, and when the violence escalated on their second day of residence, shots were fired from the second floor, and the occupants of the house were charged with murder.

"These are the things people need to know," she says as I read the plaque indicating its place on the National Register of Historic Places. She explains she'd taken author and screenwriter Richard Price to see the place when he was in town participating in a Moth radio event last year. As a native metro Detroiter who's lived just a few blocks from the place for about a year, I'm embarrassed to admit I've never heard of the place.

Next stop, we make the obligatory drive through the famed Heidelberg Project, where among the folk

art clocks, weathered plush toys, and cardboard cut-outs, Oneita points out a small, green circle on the side of a polka-dotted house.

"That's my dot, man!" she says. "I'm so Detroit, I have my own dot on the side of the Dotty-Wotty house! If you're somebody, if you're significant enough, he lets you paint a dot," she explains, referring to Tyree Guyton, the man behind the Heidelberg. She adds, laughing, "You should know I don't take myself too seriously. Like, I think I'm fabulous,



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but who cares? Yeah, I like me, I'm a star in my own head, but at the end of the day, who really cares?"

The truth is that Oneita actually is a local star of sorts; a lot of people care about what she has to say.

She's made appearances on NPR, WDET, WWJ, and Local 4 News as a guest commentator. She's also a frequent guest lecturer in high schools and colleges throughout Michigan. Her voice may be gone from the *Free Press*, but it's a familiar one in the Detroit community, and despite her background as a journalist, she's no longer interested in seeing her name in print.

"If *The New York Times* called, I'm still not interested in journalism," she says. "I did my bid. I did what I was supposed to do."

For now, she's all about her cab, though like any good writer, she's always writing, her latest project being a series of satirical but serious stories titled *The Nappy-Headed Negro Project*. The stories are gathered from her experiences driving a cab and her social encounters as a black woman in Detroit.

'BEHIND THE HEADLINES'

We snake our way through more east-side streets and wind up back in my own neighborhood north of the East Jefferson corridor where I start to realize what the "behind the headlines" tour really entails.

"Don't go to this gas station here," she says. "Just don't. It's not the right place."

Noted.

Down another street, "This is where people pick up hookers."

Also noted.

After passing by a police officer in the neighborhood, she complains about the lack of law enforcement in the area. "It's like, if *we* know where the drug houses are, how come *they* don't?"

I ask if these are the things she typically points out on her tours.

"I don't know how to do anything else but honesty," she says. "It depends on what [visitors] ask to see, where they're from or what they've read, but everybody who meets me gets honest."

With Oneita, there's no rose-colored Detroit revitalization talk, nor is there the complete and utter hopelessness voiced in a good deal of the national media. Her tours don't over- or undersell the city, showcasing all its aspects — from the desolate Packard Plant and Michigan Central Station to the action of downtown and Midtown.

She only asks that people form their own opinion about the city after they've seen it for themselves. As she puts it, "I'm an ambassador, not a booster," though, as a former copy editor, there are certain facts she still wishes outsiders would check.

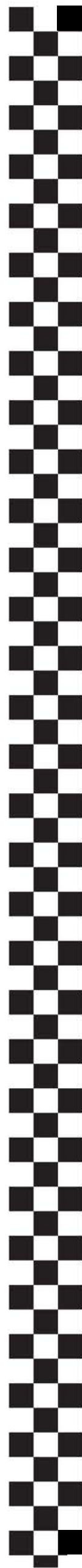
"I wish people knew that Detroit is more than black and white people," she says. "A lot of people think it's not an international city, but all you have to do is go to Eastern Market on a Saturday and just pick a demographic. They're there."

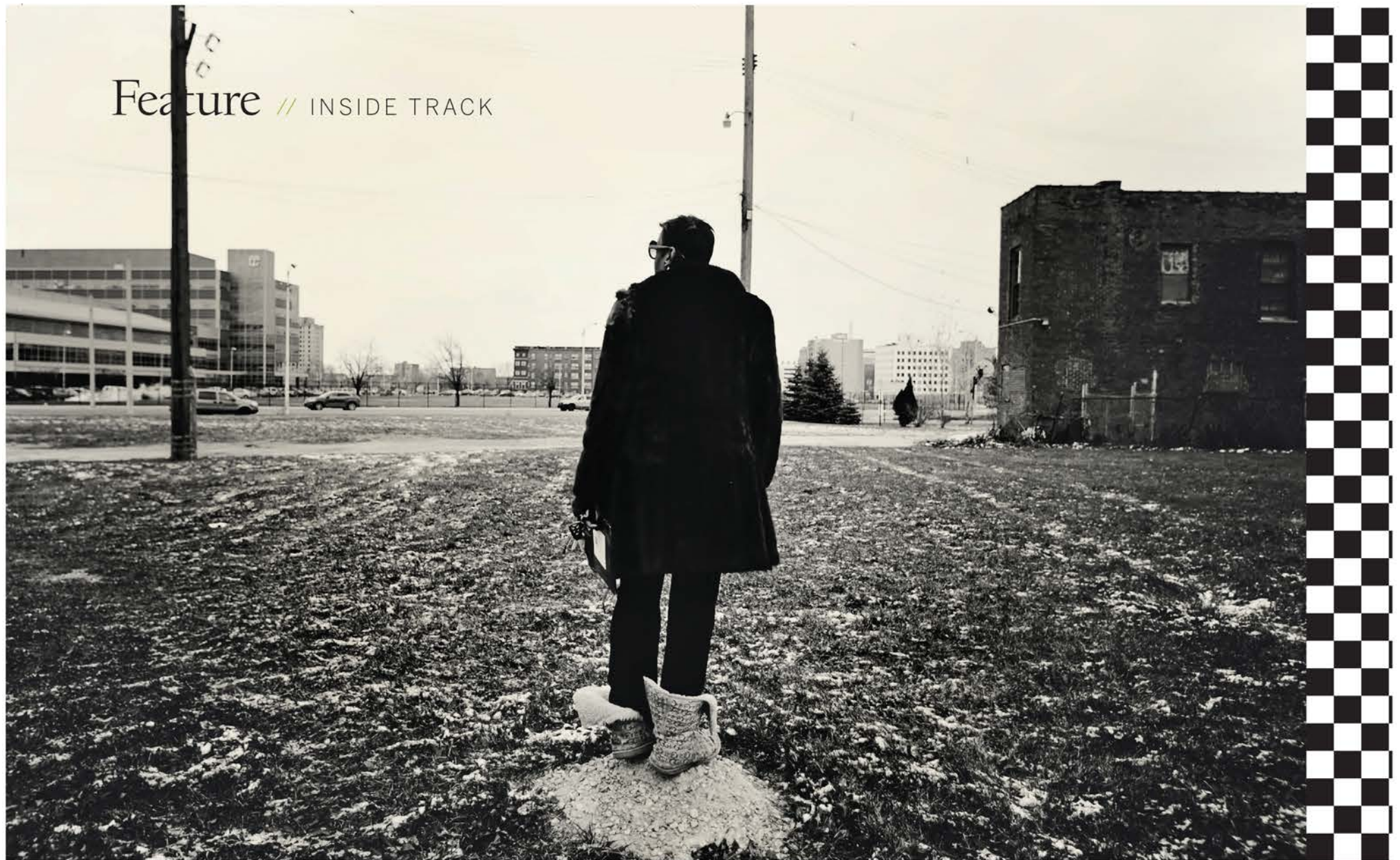
WELL-CONNECTED FRIENDS

Eastern Market is another standard on the Oneita city tour, and it's where we head next because she has plenty of people to see and spots to show me.

There's Busy Bee Hardware, the Pure Shea Soap Store, and Savvy Chic boutique, all owned by Detroiters who fall under the category of "Oneita's friends" — an expansive and loosely defined category of associates and acquaintances that includes the likes of Channel 4 broadcaster Devin Scillian, Phil Cooley of Slow's Bar-B-Q, and Dan Carmody, president of Eastern Market.

In fact, prior to writing this story, Oneita had sent me a copy of a letter that Carmody wrote on her behalf recommending her cab services. "ONEITA THE MAGNIFICENT," the letter reads. "She is





lively, entertaining and will provide you with fascinating stories about Detroit and Detroiters as you are conveyed. Please take my advice and use the Oneita cab. You will not be disappointed.”

But it’s not just liveliness and entertainment that make Oneita’s cab worth taking, it’s her kindness and generosity, too.

When I tag along a second time to witness some typical Oneita “street concierge” trips, she helps a Saudi Arabian woman who’s relatively new to the city purchase a car.

Oneita offers her “Saudi Sister” advice on everything from model to color in between polite corrections of the woman’s shaky English.

On another occasion between fares, Oneita picks up a friend who’s waiting for a bus and drives her home, waiting outside the door until she gets in. Everywhere we go, Oneita is greeted with a hug or a wave, and as I tag along passenger-side, she treats me like precious cargo, habitually sticking her arm out when making a sharp turn.

“It’s a mom reflex,” she says.

DETROIT’S DUBIOUS REPUTATION

As our tour starts to wind down, the conversation steers toward the state of Detroit and how the city is changing. In matters pertinent to her, she says, the city’s changed little.

When she first came to Detroit from D.C., she was concerned with the lack of police officers on the streets. And more than a dozen years later, she has yet to see a difference — a serious personal concern since within her first seven months of driving a cab, four fellow drivers were killed.

“My neighborhood has all these millennials from

the suburbs and wherever else they came from, and that’s cute,” Oneita says.

“That’s very cute. But I need to see some police officers. I need to see more emphasis on a well-sustained public transportation system.”

According to Oneita, the lack of public transportation is a major factor contributing to the city’s poor

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reputation internationally. It’s a subject she addressed frequently in her column and one she can speak to firsthand as a commuter familiar with the convenience of D.C.’s public transit, as well as Detroit’s bus system, which she used for three years while working at the *Free Press*.

“People are shocked, do you hear me? *Shocked* when they come here and they have to pay for a cab to get from place to place,” she says.

“You have world-class arts, culture, people, and no world-class transportation,” she says. “Visitors can’t get around!”

I ask Oneita what she thinks about the M-1 Rail

project on Woodward Avenue and how that might contribute to the city’s public transit options.

“I don’t think about it. I mean, who is it for and what is its purpose? It’s not for me to get from where I live to get to downtown. It’s for the people who are close to downtown to get into downtown. So whatever, really.”

And what about the growing popularity of ride-sharing platforms like Uber and Lyft? “The Uber drivers never know where they’re going,” Oneita says. “They have their little GPS and they have a slick car and they don’t know anything.”

Compared to the level of familiarity Oneita has with Detroit and its people, that may be a fair assessment, though she admits that unlike other drivers and services, she’s not just about taking people from A to B. She can be, but it’s not her style.

“I’m an experience,” she says, and that assessment is an accurate one.

There’s just no one like Oneita. No one else who, when talking about Detroit or the people she meets in her cab, speaks in words like “pusillanimous” and “perspicacious.”

There’s no one who can arrange for last-minute tickets to the auto show for a customer and lecture on the significance of the Oxford comma.

And there are plenty more one-of-a-kind reasons Oneita has for those who might consider enlisting her services: “I have a reputation. I know people. People think I’m funny. People think I’m interesting. I drive safely ...”

But if she’s going to cite just one reason why visitors should ride with her, Oneita goes for the obvious and, in her opinion, the honest.

“Why *wouldn’t* you?” ■