Knowledge mobilization strategy

Section a):

The proposed knowledge mobilization plan is based above all on the insights acquired through my work on the fictional representations of the Volkswagen in American literature. Curiously, American literature often represents the original Volkswagen Beetle as a fully indigenous “place of memory,” all while thematizing a certain German-ness of the car’s identity, an approach that renders it an object with complex cultural affiliations. My readings of the American corpus on the subject are based on an analysis of the evolution of car culture in the United States, one that perceives the car as an object to be studied in terms of a system of cultural values, rather than just as a means of transport. In the American cultural landscape, the car stands at the intersection of issues of class, interculturality and ethnicity. At *MotorCities*, I will work specifically on projects that will allow me to use both my intimate knowledge of texts devoted to the cultural history of the automobile in the American context, and my experience exploring the main archive collections devoted to automotive history in the region, which are among the largest in the United States. That said, even though it is not as central to the present knowledge mobilization project, my work on the German corpus is also centered around the automobile, and more broadly, around literature devoted to material culture from the perspective of diversity. Indeed, one of the most surprising results of my research on the German corpus of the 1950s is the observation that the Volkswagen Beetle was not initially seen as the “people’s car” that it was originally meant to embody, the car that was supposed to be accessible, for example, to a middle-class family aspiring to a return to normality during the post-war period. Contrary to what historians have suggested, the car is much more frequently conceived as an object allowing curious events to take place, uniting unique communities (including ruffians and all manner of thieves), and facilitating the transmission of legends and extraordinary intercultural content. Such content includes, for example, the art of gallantry, in France and elsewhere, as it is practiced in various critical situations related to driving, such as an accident or a traffic jam. All of the projects in which *MotorCities* has invited me to participate are driven precisely by issues of diversity and interculturality.

My first planned knowledge mobilization activity is collaborating on the creation of the *Making Tracks II* website, a follow-up to the already existing site, *Making Tracks: The African American Experience in the Auto Industry* (http://www.makingtracks.org/), founded about ten years ago through a partnership between *MotorCities*, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, and the Ford Motor Company. The site presents a series of audio clips that draw portraits of African Americans who became leaders in the automotive industry, retracing their migration journeys north to settle in Detroit, the “Motor City,” and the many hurdles they had to overcome as black people to establish themselves in an industry they had largely helped set up. The site also offers a timeline that traces important inventions developed by African Americans (such as the first three-position traffic light invented by Garrett A. Morgan in 1923, for example), as well as historical events that had a real influence on the development of the automobile industry and the labor movement in Michigan between 1839 and 1947. *The Making Tracks I* website currently extends up to the year 1950. With the “Black Lives Matter” movement in full swing, *MotorCities* has recently decided to develop a new website that will also include the period from 1950 to the present day. This type of project will benefit both individuals interested in the history of the automotive industry and the African-American community that is the subject of its research.

In addition, I will be joining a committee made up *MotorCities’* employees and members of the board of directors, dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion. In December 2019, the organization’s board of directors set up a working group in charge of examining the most appropriate means of integrating these principles both internally and throughout the organization’s programming. The committee has already identified a number of minority groups whose contribution to the development of Michigan’s auto industry has not (or not sufficiently) been considered in the *MotorCities*’ preservation work. Since the list is rather extensive, I will only mention three examples that I have discussed at length with *MotorCities*: indigenous communities, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. The organization has proposed that I act as its intermediary and initiate dialogues with certain individuals identified as “key contacts” within these groups in order to better understand in what way(s) *MotorCities* can showcase their respective contributions to automotive History (with a capital H) and thus tell more automotive histories (lowercase plural). The beneficiaries are, first and foremost, minority groups or those who have often been marginalized when it comes to the narrative of technological development in the United States from the turn of the 20th century to the present day, and whose history links them, geographically, to the 10,000 square miles of Southeast and Central Michigan covered by *MotorCities*.

The third project I will be involved in is called the *Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide*: https://www.motorcities.org/southwest-main. This is an online guide which has just been published on the MotorCities website and which traces a century of contribution to the automotive industry by workers, businesses, and unions in the Southwest Detroit neighborhood. Parts of the guide have yet to be written; namely, content concerning the particular contribution and links to the automotive industry of certain cultural communities – Mexican, Polish, Irish, Maltese, and Arab American – remains to be produced. The project on which I will be working in very close collaboration with Ron Alpern, one of the main authors of the guide and an expert in the history of labor movements in Detroit, aims to complete the sections of the guide relating to the contribution of cultural communities in the form of short essays, through a series of well-defined stages and by way of collaborations between the aforementioned communities and Michigan universities. This approach will facilitate the initiation of certain members of these communities into archival and historical research, and enable the communities to have their say in the choice of materials that will appear in the guide. The primary beneficiaries of the guide and the entire process of its creation are both the cultural communities and residents of Southwest Detroit, and the master’s/doctoral students recruited to participate in the project.

Finally, independently from *MotorCities*, I will also continue my work on Volkswagen in order to develop presentations intended for the general public to be utilized in one or more museums in the region. Due to the leading role Michigan has played in the development of the automotive industry, there are numerous museums specifically devoted to the automobile in the region where I live. I have already approached the independent Gilmore Car Museum, one of America’s top five automotive museums, which actually encompasses seven different museums, including the Classic Car Club of America Museum, spread out across its ninety-acre campus. This museum group offers a series of conferences each winter. I have already contacted their director of education, Mr. Fred Colgren, and offered to give one or more of the following four lectures: 1) a presentation related to my work on the German corpus of the 1950s, already mentioned on the first page of my knowledge mobilization plan; 2) a comparison of the main advertising campaigns devoted to the Volkswagen beetle in the United States and Germany from the 1960s to the present; 3) an overview of the main fictional representations of the “Bug” in American literary texts and cinema, and 4) a presentation devoted to the specific history of the Volkswagen group in Michigan.

Sections b) and c):

Since the team for the creation of the *Making Tracks II* website has not yet been assembled, I will work with the *MotorCities* diversity committee to identify the most qualified individuals who will then be invited to participate in putting the site together. This first step will take place in the very first weeks of my postdoctoral fellowship. There is a high probability that specialists associated with the Charles H. Wright museum and the Ford company will once again be recruited, allowing me to develop links with these important institutions.

In the first three months of my fellowship, I will likewise aim to 1) identify the specific objectives of the second version of the site, and 2) organize monthly meetings with the team members. In the subsequent three months, I will additionally 1) work to identify the organizations and individuals who will be invited to participate in a second committee, this time devoted to setting up awareness-raising activities that will take place following the website’s launch, and 2) work to determine the nature of the audiences targeted by these awareness-raising and dissemination efforts. It is likely that schoolchildren will be included among these audiences. Indeed, one of the activities related to the launch of *Making Tracks I* took place in a high school in Detroit. The planning of the research portion of the project will become the top priority in the three months after that: together with my colleagues, we will decide on several African-American leaders from the second half of the 20th century to be profiled on the site, as well as an initial selection of historical data to be presented on the timeline, which will be extended to cover this period. In the remaining three months, we will establish a schedule and a specific work plan for the larger research work that will need to be carried out later for each profile and for the stories that will appear on the timeline. The current relevance of the historical timeline could not be more pronounced, especially with regard to its coverage of the 1960s. For example, it will include the famous “Walk to Freedom,” a major mass demonstration linked to the civil rights movement that took place on June 23, 1963 in Detroit, and following which Martin Luther King Jr. gave his groundbreaking “I have a dream” speech, delivered a few weeks later in Washington, D.C. Yet another leader participating in the civic protest was Walter Reuther, the American trade unionist chairman of United Auto Workers at the time. The timeline will fully highlight the significance of the Detroit march – often overlooked in favor of the Washington protest, which brought together more people. In view of the events that have occurred in recent months in the United States, highlighting the contribution of the African-American minority to Michigan’s technological development will make it possible to identify role models of positive leadership, especially for the younger members of this community.

With regard to the committee devoted to diversity issues, my work as an intermediary will be first and foremost one of reaching out to the various key contacts, no doubt via videoconference calls, and verifying whether they have historical resources relating to the participation of their community in the development of the automotive industry. Together with these contacts, we will reflect on the means by which these resources can be put to good use. For example, they could apply for funding opportunities through the scholarship program offered by *MotorCities*, which would allow various groups to set up their own revitalization projects, or conversely through the development of knowledge dissemination activities to be integrated within *MotorCities*’ internal programming. For this second path of action, one of the methods up for consideration would be that of collecting oral histories. Since many of the contacts targeted by the committee have been inside witnesses of the evolution of the automotive industry in Michigan with access to privileged information, we are considering conducting interviews with some of them, which would then appear on the *MotorCities* site in the form of audio or video recordings. Both *MotorCities* and myself currently think it a realistic goal for me to connect with five key contacts within a four month period. However, we feel that this number could easily shift in either direction, depending on my obligations within other projects.

For my contribution to the *Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide*, I will also act as an intermediary, along with Ron Alpern, in communicating with the cultural communities mentioned above. It will be a question of continuing the discussions already undertaken by Mr. Alpern with various leaders within these communities – mostly activists, or descendants of people who have played an important role in the automotive industry in Southwest Detroit. The first step, which will take up the first four months of the grant period, will initially consist of verifying whether the communities themselves have historical resources that can be interpreted and then incorporated into the guide. We will also ask the leaders to recruit specific people within their community to participate in the project, as well as the workshops we plan to organize. It seems likely, at present, that these communities will recruit individuals both from groups of young activists and from groups of elders and retirees for the task. During the following four months, we envision launching a pilot project with a specific community – most likely with the Mexican community, since the talks with this group are at the most advanced stage at the time of writing. In this context, I will be responsible for recruiting a master's or doctoral student from one of the universities in the region. The student must be enrolled in a reputable program offering a specialization in one of the following fields: the chosen community (ideally based on approaches drawn from cultural history), the history of labor movements, the history of technology, or the history of the automobile. The student will work under my supervision. Depending on the student’s degree of prior experience with archives and field of expertise, I will introduce them to the process of archival research and/or the selection of useful collections and documents from the relevant libraries in the region (or their websites, depending on the evolution of the pandemic), namely: The Reuther Library at Wayne State University, which has an archival collection on labor and urban affairs, the Detroit Public Library, which has a National Automotive History Collection and the library linked to the Detroit Historical Society. Once the student has analyzed the resources, and have become familiar with them, including the resources provided in the initial stage by the cultural community (if applicable), the student and I will identify the challenges posed by the material in question and organize an initial meeting (or a videoconference if there is no other choice) with representatives chosen by the cultural community. We will then give them a detailed presentation of the *Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide* and explain the nature of the contribution that is expected from them: an essay about their community’s links to the automotive industry, whether it consists of portraits of particular entrepreneurs, for example, or provides relevant information and anecdotes about factories and community sites in their neighborhood. During this session, I expect the student who contributed to the archival research to present the historical content we uncovered; he or she will not interpret the content, but will paint an overall picture and identify certain controversies revealed at first reading, which will doubtlessly be linked to political issues (for the Mexican community, a good example would be the repatriation of certain members involved in the automotive industry during the Great Depression). The principle guiding our project is to let representatives of the cultural community choose what they deem representative of their community's experience in the automotive industry and assess their sources. In fact, they will be invited, after this first meeting, to go to the archives (or to the library websites) themselves and compliment/complete the work done by the student. It will be, incidentally, the latter who will introduce the community representatives to the process of in-depth library and online research by organizing a workshop in which I will also be present for support, in a capacity akin to that of an archives staff member. Towards the end of the second third of the grant period, a third encounter will be organized with the representatives of the cultural community we will have chosen to focus on, during which they will present the results of their research and analysis of the material, and the main lines of the essay they intend to write on their community's links to the auto industry. We will not seek to endorse their choices; the purpose of this meeting will be above all to determine whether they wish to write the pages of the guide themselves, or whether they would rather have us find and hire a professional writer to write the pages that will be published in the *Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide* in the last third of the grant period. Along with this pilot project, starting from the second third of the grant year, I plan to recruit a master's or doctoral student for each of the four remaining large cultural communities – Polish , Irish, Maltese, and Arab American – from the universities in the region, and to identify a professor within the student’s department to supervise them (just as I will have supervised the pilot student). Ideally, each ethnic community will be associated with a different university. Recruiting from universities in the region should pose no particular challenge: the Residential College where I teach, for example, has been offering a program called “Semester in Detroit” for over ten years, whose mission is precisely to develop long-term relationships with nonprofits and community leaders in Detroit. Daniel Clark, who is likewise working on the guide, teaches history at Oakland University. Other contributors teach at Marygrove College and Central Michigan University. Our goal is to apply the pilot project model, which will have first been tested with one cultural community, to as many communities as possible during the final third of the grant period. During the latter two thirds of the period, I will act as liaison between the different universities. An event bringing together the various communities could be organized either at the very end of the grant year or at a later date.

Finally, for the purpose of disseminating my work on Volkswagen, I will reach out to the Gilmore Car Museum again in the coming weeks – I cannot at the this time confirm my participation in its annual series of conferences – and approach other museums in the region if I am unable to establish a collaboration with the first. Due to the large number of museums devoted to the automobile in the region, establishing partnerships with these institutions in order to present my research results there is an approach that I deem likely to yield results starting from the first month of the grant period, at the latest. Several of the automotive museums in the region are dedicated primarily to local manufacturers. Without in any way denying their own merits - I am thinking in particular of the vast complex called *The Henry Ford* – I consider my expertise as a comparative researcher and Germanist, in a region in which over 20% of the population claims German ethnic origins, to be of value to these establishment. My goal is to give at least two or three of the lectures listed above, which will ideally take place during the last third or at the very end of the grant period. That being said, to prepare for these lectures, it will be absolutely necessary for me to consult certain documents I previously obtained from German or American universities by way of interlibrary loans during the first year of my postdoctoral fellowship, which I worry may not be possible at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.