



## Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism

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## Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism

### Introduction

In this essay, I argue that the recent poisoning in Flint, Michigan, is a powerful example of both environmental racism and the everyday functioning of racial capitalism. As a journal devoted to left and radical thought, I believe that *CNS* (*Capitalism Nature Socialism*) needs to adopt a more intersectional conception of capitalism in which its deeply racialized nature is fully recognized (see also Ranganathan 2016). The Flint case is especially interesting because the immediate source of the problem is not a reckless emitter or a polluter cutting costs – the typical drivers of environmental injustice. Instead, the Flint disaster is the result of the local state acting within the context of neoliberalism. Specifically, Flint has been operating under austerity politics due to its abandonment by capital. As such, the case highlights the larger historical, political, and economic context in which vulnerability, contamination, and death are produced.

As has been well publicized, a central cause of the poisoning was an austerity measure imposed by the municipal Emergency Fiscal Manager (EFM). The EFM, of course, was imposed by Michigan's governor in response to Flint's financial crisis. The story is significant not only because of what happened but also because it attracted widespread attention (Craven and Tynes 2016). It is one of those rare moments when the larger public can actually “see” the structural nature of environmental racism, which, in turn, offers us a chance to move beyond highly contracted conceptions of racism that have characterized the liberal and neoliberal eras (López 2014; Melamed 2006).

My argument is that the people of Flint are so devalued that their lives are subordinated to the goals of municipal fiscal solvency. This constitutes racial capitalism because this devaluation is based on both their blackness and their surplus status, with the two being mutually constituted. It is no accident that US surplus populations are disproportionately nonwhite. The devaluation of Black (and other nonwhite) bodies has been a central feature of global capitalism for centuries (Robinson 2000) and creates a landscape of differential value which can be harnessed in diverse ways to facilitate the accumulation of more power and profit than would otherwise be possible (McIntyre and Nast 2011; Pulido 2016). “Racial capitalism captures the sense that actually existing capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region and nationality and is lived through those uneven formations” (Lowe 2015, 149–150).

Flint was abandoned by capital decades ago, and as it became an increasingly poor and Black place, it was also abandoned by the local state. This abandonment can be seen in shrinking services, infrastructure investment, and democratic practices. Such treatment, including deliberate poisoning, is reserved for those who are not only racially devalued but considered incapable of contributing to accumulation. This goes beyond conventional understandings of surplus labor as simply, “reserve” labor. Drawing on Collard and Dempsey’s typology of non-human surplus, I argue that Black Flint residents constitute three forms of surplus: “Outcast,” “Underground,” and “Threat,” all of which will be elaborated on. Although there are white Flint residents, they suffer a fate similar to their Black neighbors insofar as the entire city is racialized as Black. The situation in Flint is of concern to all of us, not only because of its tragic nature, but because as a racially devalued, surplus place, it is a testing ground for new forms of neoliberal practice that will become increasingly common.

In my analysis of the situation, I stress Flint officials’ knowledge of the potential consequences of their actions. This is important in terms of appreciating their logic and ultimate decision to embark on the wholesale poisoning of Flint residents. Although full knowledge is not required for environmental racism to exist, it is a critical part of *this* story and illuminates the logic of the neoliberal state. The task is to trace the racial logic embedded in the many decisions that resulted in this disaster (Ranganathan 2016). We must see racism as a material discursive formation that is routinely and differentially harnessed across space and time by capital and state power. For *CNS* readers, this means acknowledging the degree to which racism as an ideology is manifest in economic practices and structures.

### **The Poisoning of Flint’s Water Supply**

I use the word “poisoning” deliberately. “Contamination” can erase agency and consciousness. Poisoning suggests a deliberate and indeed evil act. The poisoning of the Flint water supply is similar to other conscious assaults on workers and people of color: unprotected uranium mining on Navajo land, atomic bomb tests adjacent to Native land, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, and the sterilization of Latinas. These atrocities were enabled by white supremacy. People of color not only subsidized the larger white nation, but their individual lives were so devalued that their “premature deaths” (Gilmore 2007, 28) simply did not matter. Each instance of violence was an attempt to resolve particular social, political, and economic crises (O’Connor 1987). Flint enables us to understand capitalism at a moment defined by crises of finance capital and neoliberalism.

### **Historical Background**

Originally Ojibwe land, Flint was settled by white people in the early 19th century. Soon after, the town began specializing in carriage production. This set the stage for the development of the automobile industry in the early 20th century, led by General Motors (GM). This included the development of a vibrant labor

movement, and the Flint sit-down strike of 1936–1937 is now part of US labor lore. Local labor politics and activism reflected larger racial divisions and included radical Black worker organizing such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) (Georgakas and Surkin 1975). By the early 1980s, however, facing global competition GM began shifting assembly work abroad, leading to the shuttering of numerous plants in Flint. Ultimately, GM shed approximately 70,000 jobs in the Flint metro area, leaving about 10,000 workers in the area today (see Highsmith 2015 for an overview). Despite Governor Snyder’s proclamation that Michigan is “the comeback state,” Flint has never recovered from the devastation of deindustrialization. For many, Flint became the poster-city for deindustrialization with Michael Moore’s film, “Roger and Me” (1989), in which Moore sought to get the CEO of GM, Roger Smith, to come to Flint and confront the devastation left in the wake of GM’s departure.

Since deindustrialization Flint has suffered from depopulation, including white flight, devastating urban renewal (Highsmith 2015), high poverty and crime rates, and a series of fiscal crises (see O’Connor 1973). This deep restructuring was exacerbated by the 2008 recession that not only resulted in a housing crisis but also in the loss of even more GM jobs. In 2008 GM declared bankruptcy, received billions in a federal bailout, and Flint proper’s GM employment dropped to a mere 6434 (Highsmith 2015, 272).

These processes of abandonment have led to the city becoming poorer and Blacker, as those with more options (including white skin), left Flint. As of 2010, there were 102,434 residents in Flint, 56.6% of whom were African American and 37.4% white. The median household income is \$24,679, giving the city a staggering poverty rate of 41.6% (US Census Bureau 2015), 167% higher than the national average.<sup>1</sup> The subprime housing crisis was so severe in Flint that the average home price dropped to \$17,000 (Highsmith 2015, 273).

Similar to other old industrial cities, Flint’s population has fallen 50%, from a high of over 200,000 residents to its current level. This means a smaller and poorer population is left to shoulder the cost of city services, including pensions for those who have left the city. Not surprisingly, city services have declined, infrastructure deteriorated, and debt sky-rocketed.

### ***How to Poison a City***

In 2010 Rick Snyder, a venture capitalist, was elected governor of Michigan. In 2011 he declared Flint to be in a financial crisis and placed it under emergency management. He did so under Michigan’s Public Act 436, which allows the governor to assign an EFM to municipalities and school districts. EFMs render the usual powers of the mayor and city council superfluous, as their very *raison-d’être* is to return the city to fiscal solvency. Despite the deeply mythologized tradition of local rule in the US, it is not guaranteed. Local rule is granted by states (Lewis 2013). Consequently, the imposition of an EFM, in the words of one

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.areavibes.com/flint-mi/employment/>.

resident, “totally decimates democracy” (ACLU of Michigan 2016). Flint “enjoyed” four such managers between 2011 and April 2015, when Snyder announced that Flint’s fiscal crisis was solved. At that point, the city was turned over to an advisory board. The question of *how* exactly Flint became financially solvent is crucial. Many different measures were enacted, including changing the water supply.

Historically, the city of Flint used the Detroit River for its water (Craven and Tynes 2016). Flint had an agreement with Detroit that it tried to renegotiate at the time of the crisis in order to lower its costs. Although it was presented to the public as if Detroit was terminating its agreement with Flint, the truth is that Flint’s EFM rejected the renegotiated terms and thus sought an alternative water source (ACLU of Michigan 2016). Flint identified Lake Huron as a potential water source, but this would require the creation of a new regional water authority and pipeline. The plan would save the city \$18 million over eight years. The catch, however, was that the pipeline would not be completed for two years, sometime in 2016. Until that time, then EFM, Darnell Earley, decided to use the Flint River.

A logical question to ask at this point is, “Why didn’t they use the Flint River in the first place?” Answer: Because it is notoriously polluted from GM’s longstanding industrial activity (Carmody 2016; Craven and Tynes 2016). As one resident explained, “... everyone knows how gross the Flint River is!” (ACLU of Michigan 2016). For various reasons, the Flint River is not only highly polluted but also hard to treat. Consequently, nobody considered it to be a suitable source of municipal water. When the city of Flint switched its water source to the Flint River, the GM facilities in Flint initially did likewise, as they were served by the same water system. However, GM soon complained that the water was so corrosive that it caused engine parts to rust. Accordingly, GM asked city officials to be allowed to return to the Detroit River and was granted permission to do so (ACLU of Michigan 2016).

This should have been a major red flag: If the water was corrosive to car parts, might it not present a problem to humans and other living beings? State and local officials should have immediately intervened in Flint residents’ water supply. But they did nothing. In retrospect, this presents one of those “Aha!” moments when we see not only how utterly devalued and disposable Flint residents were in the eyes of EFMs, but we also see the power and logic of a larger set of social relations which prioritize fiscal solvency above all else.

In reality, the Flint poisoning episode was only partly due to the industrial contamination of the Flint River. It was also due to deteriorating infrastructure. As contaminated water passed through crumbling pipes, the lead was leached into the city’s water. This is a crucial point that cannot be taken for granted or simply accepted without close scrutiny. Any analysis of racial capitalism requires attention to the past and how wealth, power, and poverty have historically been created (Ranganathan 2016). In this case, infrastructure is the manifestation of past wealth and capacity, and its eroding status, which is actively being produced in the present, signifies the politics of abandonment (Gilmore 2008; Harvey 1989, 303). Crumbling infrastructure is where past economic regimes meet the present. Gilmore (2002), among others, has argued that the neoliberal state is

characterized by heightened capacity in some arenas, such as security and policing, and reduced capacity in others, like welfare and social investment more generally. Infrastructure maintenance is a form of social investment. The decision to neglect infrastructure so that it becomes toxic must be seen as a form of violence against those who are considered disposable. This is the politics of abandonment.

While any place can be abandoned, poor people of color are routinely deserted because they have the least value and power. Flint embodies several instances of abandonment. Flint was first abandoned by capital. Second, although Flint still has a percentage of white residents, it has largely been abandoned by white people, along with their wealth and privilege. Consider that in 1970 whites comprised 70% of Flint residents. Today they are 37%. And finally, Flint has been abandoned by the state at multiple levels. Locally this is manifest in the EFM's decision to ignore the potential health and environmental consequences of contaminated water. But it also exists at the federal level, evidenced by the absence of any significant policy or plan to address the needs of de-industrialized places. Indeed, Earley, the EFM who made the decision to switch water sources, was able to envision and execute such an act precisely because we live in a culture which routinely abandons devalued people. Flint's Congressional Representative, Dan Kildee, explained, "There's a philosophy of government that has been writing these places off" (Craven and Tynes 2016).

The water tests, both their findings and the secrecy surrounding them, reveal a shocking disregard for human life. Testing indicated alarming lead levels. Some tests found lead levels seven times over the federal legal limit, while others were 10,000 times over (ACLU of Michigan 2016). The readings triggered discussions between environmental officials in Flint, the state of Michigan, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Miguel Del Toral of the EPA, a public health hero, was pivotal in uncovering the scope and gravity of the poisoning, its deliberate nature, and the cover-up on the part of local and state officials. When Del Toral saw the lead levels, he immediately inquired about what kind of anti-corrosive agent(s) Flint was using. Given the levels of contamination, public health standards in a wealthy, industrialized country demand the most stringent mitigation efforts, right? Wrong. The city of Flint responded to Del Toral's inquiry by stating that it was "optimizing anti-corrosive measures" (ACLU of Michigan 2016). The reality was that Flint had no measures in place. While he does not call them liars, Del Toral explained, "I don't know what anyone's intention is, so I can't assign intent. But clearly they did not have treatment in place ... I was pretty stunned" (Smith 2016). Underscoring the politics of austerity is the fact that, according to CNN, adding the agent would have cost \$100 per day (Craven and Tynes 2016).

Realizing the magnitude of the crisis, Del Toral broke with EPA protocol and shared the information with a resident, who then shared it with the ACLU of Michigan and Michigan Radio (Smith 2016). Thankfully, Del Toral had the moral integrity to act, as this amplified the story that activists had been mobilizing around since 2014.

The decision to require the city of Flint to continue using Flint River water after being presented with evidence that it was hazardous, is beyond egregious.

Recall the evidence: GM's rejection of the water due to its corrosiveness; the lead tests; and the city's refusal to apply anti-corrosive measures. While some have attributed this poisoning to "bureaucratic bungling," nothing could be further from the truth. The fact that officials knowingly provided poisoned water to Flint residents shows the nefarious lengths the local state is willing to go to prioritize fiscal solvency and the utter disregard in which Flint residents are held.

Residents complained vociferously about the quality of the water from the beginning, but their complaints were largely dismissed. At one point the Flint city council voted to return to the Detroit River, but EFM Jerry Ambrose overruled. Instead, residents were repeatedly told that their water was fine, despite the fact that it was at times cloudy, foul tasting, smelly, carried a host of contaminants, including E. coli bacteria, disinfectant, TTHM (a carcinogenic byproduct of chlorine), and lead (Del Toral 2015). The poisoned water resulted in an array of health problems, ranging from rashes, burning eyes, to Legionnaires disease. While ten people in Flint have died to date from Legionnaires, thousands have been permanently impacted by lead poisoning (Hulett 2015). Lead is a neurotoxin that is especially harmful to children, as it can result in reduced intellectual ability as well as a range of behavioral problems.

Despite their best efforts to ignore complaints, officials could only circumvent other damning evidence through lies and deceit. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to address the lying, it is important to acknowledge that it existed and that officials were aware of the possible consequences of their actions. According to Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech, who conducted extensive water testing in Flint, the problem was not a mystery. "If anyone had looked at this who was reasonably competent for five minutes, they would have predicted that this would have occurred" (ACLU of Michigan 2016). The question of knowledge, agency, and responsibility is important not only because it underscores how disposable poor Black people have become, but it reveals a morally bankrupt culture.

In October 2015 Governor Snyder finally allowed Flint to return to the Detroit water system. He has sought to avoid any finger-pointing by asserting that "right now I want to stay focused on solutions and taking actions to solve problems" (ACLU of Michigan 2016). In January Snyder went so far as to apologize, saying, "I'm sorry, and I will fix it" (Bosman and Smith 2016). As of March 2016 Michigan says that the water is safe to drink, though many still use bottled water. Millions are being spent on trying to address the consequences of lead-poisoned children. In addition, five officials have resigned and one has been fired. The US Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Michigan Attorney General's Office are all conducting criminal investigations and congress is holding hearings.<sup>2</sup>

## Flint and Racial Capitalism

So why is this catastrophe the result of racial capitalism versus plain capitalism? Moreover, what does such an analysis offer? It is a story of racial capitalism

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed timeline of events until the story broke, see Del Toral (2015, 6–7).

because a nonracial materialist analysis does not fully explain this tragedy, nor could racism alone. Racial capitalism, according to Robinson (2000), insists that racism is a constituent logic of capitalism. This challenges conventional Marxist and left thinking in several ways. For one, it refutes the idea that racism can be reduced to class (Omi and Winant 1986; Roediger 2008). In addition, Robinson challenges the idea that racism began with colonization. He shows that it actually predates it, which is important in affirming that racism does not always conform to the needs and desires of capital and elites. Conceptualizing racism as a material/discursive formation that produces differential human value and is embedded in the global landscape, is quite distinct from conceptualizing it as additive. Racial difference, similar to gender inequality (Mies 1998; Wright 2006), creates a variegated landscape that cultures and capital can exploit to create enhanced power and profits (McIntyre and Nast 2011). Just as the spatial fix is fundamental to capitalism, so too is human difference. As Melamed has argued,

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups – capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. (2015, 77)

Essential to grasping the racialized nature of capitalism is appreciating capitalism's precedents and early forms. These structures and processes not only produced particular distributions of wealth and power, but also inform the structures, ideologies, and cultural practices of today. While Marxism has generally collapsed such processes under primitive accumulation and seen race as derivative (San Juan 1992, Chap. 3), other scholars, including predecessors of contemporary critical ethnic studies, have developed sophisticated analyses of the racial dimensions of colonization (Fanon 1965; Galeano 1973; Said 1979), slavery (Hudson 2016; Johnson 2013), unfree labor (Resendez 2016; Smith 2013), genocide (Madley 2016), land access (Almaguer 1994; Saxton 1995), and racially differentiated labor markets (Barrera 1979; Marable 1983; Roediger and Esch 2012; Wilson 1992). While not every structure and practice is overtly racist, meta-economic, and political processes in the US are saturated with racial meaning and consequences.

Care must be taken in how racism is conceptualized in the contemporary period. Racism and white supremacy are not stagnant and evolve over time (López 2014; Melamed 2011; Winant 2001). Though various nonwhite groups, especially the poor of color, continue to subsidize the well-being of whites and the wealthy of all colors, class distinctions within racial categories are increasingly significant (Melamed 2006). A hallmark of neoliberalism, no longer is the color line black/white, or hard and fast (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Through the civil rights movement, the development of state anti-racisms (Melamed 2011), and economic polarization (Wilson 1980), the US now has a Black president and escalating



white poverty. Growing white poverty, however, does not mean the demise of racism, but rather its new deployments.<sup>3</sup> Though elites of color are still subject to discrimination, they do not experience the hardship and suffering of poor people of color and/or poor native peoples. Poor, segregated, people of color, whether on a reservation, el campo, or in the inner city, experience a distinct, brutal reality that is key to the accumulation of power and profits for elites.<sup>4</sup> Their “value,” if one can call it that, is in their general expendability (Márquez 2013). This disposability allows both capital and the state to pursue policies and practices that are catastrophic to the planet and its many life forms because much of the cost is borne by “surplus” people and places (Gilmore 2008; Harvey 1989, 303). McIntryre and Nast (2011) refer to such concentrations of disposable people as a necropolis, which exists in relation to the biopolis – places where the well-being and reproduction of subjects matter.

Some may argue that racism is not relevant in Flint because white people were also hurt. Such logic refuses to grasp how racism operates as an ideological process. Flint is considered disposable by virtue of being *predominantly* poor and Black. Here, racism is a process that shapes places, and in this case, produces a racially devalued place. Accordingly, the white people who live there, most of whom are poor, are forced to live under circumstances similar to that of Black residents. White people living in a Black space find that their whiteness is of only limited utility in escaping the devaluation associated with poor Black people and places. This also explains the converse – why white segregation enables the maximum exploitation of white privilege (see Lipsitz 1998).

This is not a new argument. Gilmore has documented how anti-prison activists reached a similar conclusion when trying to understand the discriminatory nature of incarceration. Activists concluded that, “You have to be White to be prosecuted under white law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under black law” (Gilmore 1999, 22). Flint is a spatialization of this process. It embodies the value inherent in differing laws and practices. The local state, completely engulfed in the culture of neoliberalism and austerity, chose to respond to an urban fiscal crisis by poisoning its people. It felt it had the latitude to do so because its residents simply do not matter – they are disposable.

### ***The Urban Fiscal Crisis and Racial Capitalism***

Numerous political and economic shifts led to Flint’s financial crises. First, of course, was the globalization of capital and the deindustrialization of Flint, but the city was also purposefully abandoned by the state, what has been called, “organized abandonment” (Gilmore 2008; Harvey 1989, 303). Abandonment is not produced solely by capital flight, but depends also upon culture and ideology. Duggan (2003) has shown how neoliberal politics and culture have actively

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<sup>3</sup>As I write, overt racism is growing as the white working class experiences downward mobility, and is partially fueled by the Trump campaign.

<sup>4</sup>Though indigenous people share many similarities with other communities of color in terms of environmental injustice, their conditions and experiences are also distinct as nations fighting against colonization (see, e.g. Simpson 2014).

contributed to the evisceration of the welfare state while often drawing on racist tropes. For example, the strategic use of the Black welfare queen is essential in helping to erode support for transfer payments (López 2014). This has, in turn, become part of a larger populist, anti-state discourse that not only blames the public sector for societal problems but also ensures that taxes are not raised.

The refusal to raise taxes and compel the wealthy and corporations to pay their share is crucial. Cities not only confronted a demand for public services from an increasingly impoverished population, but they were unable to maintain infrastructure – hence the corroding pipes. In Flint, worried about public opinion but unable to raise taxes, politicians and city officials began borrowing money. Under finance capitalism, financial services have grown exponentially, in tandem with influence and power of finance (Haven 2014; La Berge 2015; Lake 2015), resulting in a double blessing for the rich: Not only did they avoid higher taxes but they actually profited by lending money to the state. Poor cities such as Flint began defaulting and spiraling into a situation in which EFMs were deemed necessary. At the same time, the truth of how the situation occurred in the first place was obscured (see O'Connor 1973; Ranganathan 2016).

The financialization of capital is reflected in urban policy, including the EFM's actions. Lake (2015) has specified how urban policy becomes financialized. First, social and urban policy become subordinate to protecting and growing the economy; second, only those social and urban needs compatible with a particular vision of economic growth are given attention; third, conventional tax policy is replaced by financial policy, in which government is basically subsidizing private business; and fourth, public and urban policy itself is financialized, by such things as social impact bonds. Lake summarizes how this works in a place like Flint:

[T]he financialization of urban policy entails the repurposing, redesign, and implementation of urban public policy as a financial instrument ... governed by the needs of a finance-based economy rather than a practice aimed at addressing social or urban needs. (2015, 76)

This explains why the debt-paying bond-holders and the EFM were so powerful in Flint.

Under Michigan Public Law 436 EFMs have enormous latitude and decision-making power: they can sell assets, void union contracts, enter into new contracts, and even switch water sources, but the one thing they *cannot* do is void a contract with bond-holders. *Why* bond-holders are sacred is significant. Their status is not only a profound testament to the values of the US economy and culture, but must be seen as a form of violence. The relationship between bond-holders and Flint residents is an exploitive social relationship – it is a taking of both money and life (Pulido 2015). According to EFM logic, the well-being and basic needs of devalued human beings are secondary to repaying bond-holders. As one Flint resident lamented, “people are not sacred” (ACLU of Michigan 2016). Indeed, people in Flint were continually told that they were expendable when their many requests to return to the Detroit River were rejected. Not only were they lied to and told that Flint's water was fine, but EFM Jerry Ambrose said, “It is

**Table 1.** Michigan cities under EFM, 2009–2016.

Name	Date	Percent Black (2010)
Allen Park	2012	2.1
Benton Harbor	2010	89.2
Detroit	2013	82.7
Ecorse	2009	46.4
Flint	2011	56.6
Hamtramck	2013	19.3 <sup>a</sup>
Highland Park	2013	93.5
Inkster	2012	73.2
Lincoln Park	2013	5.9
Pontiac	2009	52.1
Royal Oak Township	2013	95.3
Wayne County	2015	40.5

Sources: Lewis (2013), Abbey-Lambertz (2013), and Michigan Department of Treasury (n.d.).

<sup>a</sup>Hamtramck stands out for its large South Asian population.

incomprehensible to me that [seven] members of the Flint city council would want to send more than \$12 million a year to the system serving southeast Michigan” (ACLU of Michigan 2016). But what is really incomprehensible is a system that prioritizes fiscal solvency over human lives and how this has become an accepted part of US society.

But, again, it is *which* lives are subordinated to fiscal solvency that is key. Michigan cities placed under EFMs are disproportionately African American<sup>5</sup> (Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

Abbey-Lambertz (2013) has pointed out that African Americans constitute only 14% of Michigan’s population, yet they are approximately 49% of those living under EFM.<sup>7</sup> This is a shocking statistic: Half of Michigan’s African Americans are not living under any pretense of local democracy. As one Flint resident sarcastically wrote, “State Take Over Coming to a Black City Near You” (Williams 2013). Nor has the over-representation of Black places under EFM escaped the notice of the mainstream media. “Coming in the wake of deindustrialization, recession, and persistent poverty, state intervention has disproportionately impacted the people who – because of race and class – have been given the least opportunity to succeed in America” (Lewis 2013).

Having established the vulnerability of Black places, let us return to surplus populations and devaluation. As explained earlier, key to the devaluation of Black Flint is its status as a surplus population. But calling Black residents “surplus” does not adequately convey their relationship to capital. We need to

<sup>5</sup>Care must be taken when analyzing the demographics of EFM’s, as the history and geography of EFM, municipal bankruptcy, and urban financial crises are long and varied. Municipal financial crises cannot be equated with EFM since most states prohibit intervention in local fiscal crises. For example, both Stockton (2013) and San Bernardino (2012) went bankrupt, but since California law did not allow state intervention, there was no EFM. The cities filed for Chapter 9 (Pew Charitable Trusts 2013). These cities were not necessarily any better off than Flint, they just underwent a different process.

<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that at the time of this writing Puerto Rico is also in a financial crisis. The US Congress passed and President Obama signed PROMESA, which will create a federally appointed control board with broad powers. Many opposed it as a form of neocolonialism.

<sup>7</sup>Her calculations were actually based on a smaller sample (Abbey-Lambertz 2013).

more fully theorize the role of surplus in contemporary capitalism. Generally, surplus populations embody varying degrees of integration into the workforce, ranging from precarious employment to the permanently unemployed. Many have argued that the most peripheral surplus populations have zero value to capital. “Once relegated as permanent surplus ... these populations are little more than human waste, excreted from the capitalist system” (Yates 2011, 1680). While this is often true, Gilmore (2007) has demonstrated capital’s ability to transform surplus populations into profit through the prison industrial complex. Though Flint inhabitants are *potential* prisoners, they are still city residents, and thus we need to more fully understand their relationship to capital.

Collard and Dempsey (2016) have developed a typology that describes how various forms of nature are valued by capital. Though their schema centers on nonhuman nature, it is helpful in understanding Flint. Utilizing their framework, Flint’s Black residents can be seen as embodying at least three distinct forms of surplus: “Outcast Surplus,” “The Underground,” and “Threat.” Outcast Surplus refers to the widely held idea that surplus is of no value to capital. This position has been implicit throughout this essay and will not be elaborated on. However, I believe that Flint’s relationship to capital is more complex than Outcast Surplus suggests.

“The Underground” refers to both human and nonhuman nature that perform services for capital but which are not recognized or valued. Examples include unpaid domestic work or ecosystem services (Collard and Dempsey, 2016). I argue that Flint is performing unpaid labor for capital by preparing the larger society for increased struggles over basic reproduction, including such necessities as water. It is inconceivable that a wealthy or even a middle-class neighborhood in the US (of any color) would deliberately be given poisoned water. Yet, it is entirely conceivable that such a thing could happen in a poor, nonwhite place. Places like Flint are where crisis is being “worked out” and the newest tools and practices of neoliberalism are being fashioned. Flint is a training ground for “disciplining” places by finance capital. What is happening in Flint today, the rest of us can expect in the coming years: the continued devaluation of life and the sacredness of bonds.

Of course, this is not new. This is what happened in the Global South in the 1980s through austerity, debt, and structural readjustment (George 1990). One Flint resident actually said that the community felt like a “Third World Country” (ACLU of Michigan 2016). Did she know how accurate this was? Flint’s water disaster signals the inability to provide a hallmark of the “first world” to its surplus residents: clean, tap water. As President Obama stated,

I will not rest ... until every drop of water that flows to your homes is safe to drink, and safe to cook with, and safe to bathe in, *because that’s part of the basic responsibility of a government in the United States of America.* (Pearce 2016, A8, emphasis added)

It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of potable water to the US’s sense of self. While I was growing up, the jokes about Mexico’s drinking water were legendary, “Don’t drink the water!” Water was both a symbolic and material

manifestation of Mexican economic, political, and social inferiority. Mexico, as a “third world” country, was incapable of providing safe tap water, while in the US, this was taken for granted (Salzman 2012). Though there have been moments when potable water was temporarily unavailable in the US, increasingly poor Black, Brown, and indigenous communities are unable to consistently access sufficient, clean water (Jennings 2016; Marcum 2014). This is a singular moment in US history as we confront our downward mobility.

The final relationship that Flint has to capital is as “Threat.” Marx largely dismissed the revolutionary potential of surplus populations, arguing that they lacked the proper consciousness and discipline. While it is true that surplus populations may have different forms of consciousness than workers, many theorists have overlooked the revolutionary potential of nonwhite populations, in particular, how materialist demands have been incorporated into antiracist struggle. Too often these are seen as “racial” issues, devoid of economic content. This is a misreading, particularly of Black history, which is filled with poor Black people fighting for both economic and racial justice (Georgakas and Surkin 1975; Kelley 1990; Quizar 2014; Woods 1998). Robinson has dubbed this powerful revolutionary consciousness and history the Black Radical Tradition (BRT). It is “an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle ... in its most militant manifestation ... the purpose of the struggles informed by the tradition became the overthrow of the whole race-based structure” (2000, xxx–xxx). This does not mean that all Black people are poised for revolution. But it does acknowledge that a powerful tradition exists among the Black diaspora that can be drawn upon. The class struggles of white workers have only rarely included the fight against racial capitalism. Not only have most whites been partially pacified by their privileged status, but the “wages of whiteness” (Roediger 1990) have enabled capital to extract greater levels of surplus than would otherwise be possible. In contrast, Black people have been forced to struggle against racism, class exploitation, and gendered oppression for centuries – often directly against the white working class. Evidence of the BRT can be seen in its role in ending slavery as well as current efforts to dismantle the prison industrial complex.

In many ways, the BRT has been the great engine of social change in the US. As activist Anne Braden explained in reference to the 1960s,

When African Americans began to organize ... the foundation moved and the whole building shook. That is why people were able to organize against the war. That’s why women were able to organize. All that happened because of the black movement. (Rostan 2001)

Accordingly, Black people in Flint, in addition to serving as Outcast Surplus and the Underground, may also represent a Threat. Indeed, the BRT is readily apparent in abandoned places like Detroit, where residents are forging new possibilities (Quizar 2014; Newman et al., *forthcoming*; Boggs 2011). The BRT must be recognized as a great asset in the fight against neoliberalism and capitalism’s complete domination of people, places, and nature.

## Conclusion

I have argued for the need to rethink capitalism as racial capitalism. Specifically, I have tried to show that the Flint water disaster cannot be understood solely as a result of capitalism, nor as the result of racism. Social science's core concepts of "race and class" are often insufficient in illuminating the various ways in which racism can be used to expand the power and profits of capitalists and other elites. Most importantly, their very formulation assumes that capitalism is not racialized. While the case of Flint focuses on African Americans, it is essential to remember that racial processes also produce the environmental landscapes of white people as well (Park and Pellow 2011; Pulido 2000). Analyzing racial capitalism requires that we shift our lens to consider how both ideology and history inform and are shaped by material processes – just because a situation is not popularly *recognized* as a racial one does not mean that it is not. As Linebaugh reminds us,

It never took any multicultural brilliance to discern that the actual fundamentals of the USA are threefold: a) it was robbed from indigenous peoples; b) its swamps were drained, forests felled, and fields prepared by African slaves, and c) the railroads, factories, mills and mines were built ... by immigrants from Europe and Asia. (2016, 70)<sup>8</sup>

There is very little in the US that falls outside the scope of racial capitalism.

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<sup>8</sup>Like many left scholars, Linebaugh overlooks the importance of Mexico and Latin America in the history of US expansion and imperialism (Gonzalez 2011).

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