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Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

The lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water is popularly framed as a case of "environmental racism" given that Flint's population is mostly black and lower income. In this essay I argue that we see the environmental racism that underlies Flint's water poisoning not as incidental to our political-economic order, nor even as stemming from racist intent, but as inseparable from liberalism, an organizing logic we take for granted in our modern age. I expand on the idea of "racial liberalism" here. While upholding the promise of individual freedoms and equality for all, racial liberalism—particularly as it was translated into urban renewal and property making in mid-20th-century urban America—drove dispossession. In Flint racialized property dispossession has been one major factor underlying the city's financial duress, abandonment, and poisoned infrastructure. Yet, through austerity discourse, Flint is disciplined as if it were a financially reckless individual while the structural and historical causes of its duress are masked. Tracing the history of property making and taking in Flint and the effects of austerity urbanism on its water infrastructure, my central argument is that our understanding of Flint's predicament—the disproportionate poisoning of young African-Americans—can be deepened if we read it as a case of racial liberalism's illiberal legacies.

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When lead enters the body, it infiltrates all of it: the nervous system, the brain, the liver, the bones; no bodily system is spared. For children and developing fetuses lead contamination of the brain and nervous system at any level is clinically unacceptable. Studies show that even moderate to low levels of exposure to lead may result in poisoning associated with behavioral problems, poor academic performance, attention deficit, and hyperactivity (Needleman 1990; Silbergeld 1997; Markowitz and Rosner 2013). Knowledge about the

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deleterious effects of lead on children in America is at least a century old, compelling—at last in the 1970s—a sustained public campaign to eliminate lead from gasoline and paint. Yet over half a million children in the US today are poisoned with lead, with poorer black children living in housing built before 1950 most at risk. Compounding the problem of lead in old housing is that of deteriorating lead-laced water pipes embedded in America's postindustrial urban landscape.

In Flint, Michigan, all children under the age of six—nearly 9000 in total—are now being treated as if they were exposed to lead due to the contamination of the town's water system. On the surface, the causes of the 2015–2016 water tragedy in Flint seem well understood. In 2014, the city of Flint, home to a population that is 57 percent black and in which 42 percent live below poverty line, was ordered by unelected “emergency managers” to switch its primary water source from treated water provided by the Detroit water department (sourced from Lake Huron and the Detroit River) to the untreated water of the Flint River. At the time it was known that the Flint River is rich in corrosive chemicals purged from the factories of its industrial past—the very same factories in which Flint's working class residents toiled to produce America's famed motor industry. These chemicals cause lead to leach from crusted-up old pipes into water that is then used for drinking, cooking, and bathing. As a move that would save Flint's ailing finances some \$5 million, the switch was justified in the detached, calculative language of fiscal austerity. The effects of Flint's slow poisoning will be felt for decades to come.

How do we understand Flint? How do we understand not just Flint, but the larger historical landscape of racialized dispossession in which Flint is located and in which certain bodies and spaces are enduring sites of taking and of violence—of robbed life years (Gilmore 2007; McKittrick 2011)? How do we read such dispossession in ways that acknowledge and disrupt the sanctioned *illiberalism* of contemporary urban America? In media reports over the last year, Flint has been characterized as a classic case of “environmental racism” (see, for instance, Eligon 2016; Craven and Tynes 2016). Does this characterization suffice?

While I am sympathetic to the proactive language of “environmental racism,” in this essay I want to call attention to the limitations posed by two dominant readings that have filtered into the public discourse on Flint: first, a reading of environmental racism as comprising intentional racist acts by individual actors and second, a reading of environmental racism not as intentional but such that it nevertheless involves race as “correlated” with the prevalence of pollution. Both readings, I argue, constrain our thinking by treating racism as either an aberration (i.e. the sentiments of a few rotten individuals living in an otherwise race-neutral society) or as an unfortunate externality of market and political forces. Instead, I argue that we must

read environmental racism as inextricable from the workings of liberalism, specifically *racial* liberalism as it took root in America's cities from the mid-20th century onwards. In its focus on racial liberalism, this essay is in close conversation with Laura Pulido's piece on Flint and racial capitalism (this issue), and posits these formations as mutually reinforcing drivers of Flint's slow poisoning.

By "liberalism" I do not mean the politics of the US left *per se*. I mean good, old-fashioned liberal philosophy which emanated from the likes of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Jefferson, among other thinkers in the North Atlantic, and which was translated, reformed, and indigenized across the world in all spheres of policy, especially urban planning (see Joyce 2003; Roy 2008). A varied and complex system of political thought that spans the left and right (and in many contexts today is more closely associated with the beliefs and policies of the economic right), liberalism is centered on the promise of individual freedoms and equality for all. Some combination of market relations, the rule of law, moral restraint, and a minimally interfering state are all said to help deliver on this promise. Liberal universalism has provided the framework for disenfranchised groups to demand and achieve substantial gains—indeed defenders of liberalism espouse an official stance against racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. At the same time liberalism constrains how we think about race and racism, disavowing, for instance, the racial foundations of capitalist exploitation. By propagating what Singh (2005, 5) has called "a civic mythology of racial progress," liberalism subtly encodes shifting architectures of racial hierarchy—architectures that are rendered invisible and depoliticized by egalitarian claims. Thus we find that racial liberalism continues to "fuse technologies of racial domination with liberal freedoms to represent people who are exploited for, or cut off from, capitalist wealth as outsiders to liberal subjectivity [and] for whom life can be disallowed to the point of death" (Melamed 2006, 2). When particular lives that are nominally "equal" to other lives are treated as if they in fact do not matter, liberalism betrays its illiberal impulses. My central argument is that our understanding of Flint's predicament—the slow poisoning of an entire generation of African-Americans—can be deepened if we read it as a paradigmatic case of racial liberalism's illiberal legacies.

Deepening Our Understanding of Environmental Racism Through Racial Liberalism

In the aftermath of Flint's poisoning two popular yet constraining readings of environmental racism have filtered into mainstream discourse. The first reading rests on an understanding of racism as the prejudice of individual actors. Representative of this reading is progressive filmmaker Michael

Moore's tweet in December 2015: "This is a racial killing. Flint MI is 60% black. When u knowingly poison a black city, u r committing a version of genocide #ArrestGovSnyder." While overtly racist speech and actions are patently on display in America today, arguments like Moore's rapidly face a dead-end. Republican governor Snyder was quick to defend himself: "In terms of saying it happened because of the nature of the community here? Absolutely not" (quoted in Martinez 2016). A *New York Times* journalist suggested, moreover, that the charge of environmental racism is "not simple" because, as his reasoning had it, one of the emergency managers that supported the decision to switch Flint's water (Darnell Earley) is black (Eligon 2016). While I am not arguing that those in power should not be prosecuted for criminal acts, I *am* suggesting that equating environmental racism with the prejudices harbored by particular individuals is insufficient. Not only does such a reading inevitably run up against the "burden of proof" problem. Even more problematic, such a reading reproduces the notion that America is basically a colorblind society with occasional exceptions to the rule. This fallacy, as critical race theorists have argued (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2006; Kendi 2016; Omi and Winant 2015), allows a majority to distance themselves from pervasive institutional racism.

It is for this reason that environmental justice (EJ) scholars and activists reformulated the definition of environmental racism originally put forth by civil rights activist Benjamin Chavis as the *deliberate* targeting of low-income minorities, to a more *structural* definition that accounts for discrimination beyond conscious intent (e.g. Bullard 1993; Holifield 2001; Morello-Frosch 2002; Pulido 1996). Because of the EJ movement of the last four decades we have turned our gaze to the non-individualistic, non-intent-based factors that implicate racial minorities in poisonous conditions. This is an important stride forward. However, the challenge in this reading is that, with few exceptions, in the absence of malicious intent, race and class are often reduced to "independent variables" underlying poor environmental quality. For instance, in a second dominant narrative we tend to see on Flint intent has been put aside to spotlight race and poverty as "explanatory factors" for the city's neglect (e.g. Martinez 2016; Craven and Tynes 2016; Blow 2016). The story is often left at that, without drawing out deeper causation related to structural racism.¹ As a result, not only do we lose sight of the recursive and complex interactions between race and class, we also treat race as a given, leaving the question of what Omi and Winant (2015) call "racial formation"—the historical processes by which economic and political forces determine racial categories—unquestioned. By isolating race as simply one among many predictors of poor environmental quality, we fail to see how

¹For an exception in the news media see historian Highsmith's (2016) article in the *LA Times*.

racial hierarchy is foundational—and not simply incidental—to the workings of capitalism and an ostensibly democratic, liberal market society.

I therefore want to suggest, following critical race and postcolonial theorists, that we closely examine the racialized workings of such an ostensibly liberal market society. Race, as Brahinsky (2014, 1261) puts it, is not simply an “externality” of a neutral economy and society. Race is and always has been foundational to our economic and geopolitical order. Abroad colonialism was made possible through racial capitalism. In America white appropriation of black labor and red land provided two of the fundamental pillars of the nation’s wealth (Borstelmann 2001). “Negro slavery seemed the very basis of American capitalism,” insisted James ([1938] 2012, 58) in his vital retelling of the history of capitalism (see also other key works on capitalism in the black radical tradition, e.g. Du Bois [1935] 2014; Williams [1944] 1994; Robinson 1983).²

This insistence on theorizing capitalism as a fundamentally *racial* capitalism has been at the forefront of Laura Pulido’s scholarly project on reconceptualizing environmental racism. Pulido’s (2015, 810) work challenges the idea of “nonracial economic processes” and pivots instead on the multiplicities of racisms at work. Racism, defined here as projects that reproduce hierarchy based on essentialized racial categories, is inextricable from social, economic, and political life, and is made all the more insidious by its normalization in an age of “color blindness” and “postracial politics” (see also Bonilla-Silva 2006; Omi and Winant 2015). More recently Pulido (2015, 2016) has suggested that we need to focus on the role of white supremacy and racial capitalism in reproducing environmental racism. White supremacy is not simply the material privileges (e.g. clean water, not living near a highway, green space, etc.) that subtly accrue on the basis of a system that invariably favors white skin. As a concept, white supremacy also embeds a historiography of how racial hierarchy came to be—how it was instated as an organizing, taken-for-granted logic.

My goal in this commentary is to undertake a parallel move to Pulido’s (this issue) by focusing on an organizing logic we take for granted in our modern era: liberalism. Today “liberalism is hegemonic” across the left and right, writes Caribbean-born radical philosopher Mills (2011, 27) who is among those (others include, e.g. Melamed 2006; Sheth 2009; Singh 2005) associated with the term “racial liberalism.” Liberalism is “the main (if not the only) game in town” (Mills 2011, 27), so much so that we rarely name it (and when we do, it produces much confusion as my mostly “liberal”

²A good number of alternative US histories of capitalism-as-racial capitalism (e.g. Johnson 2013; Baptist 2014) have been published in the last few years. Following Hudson (2016), however, it is important that we recognize the long tradition of black radical thought that has typically been silenced in critical and Marxist accounts, not to mention mainstream accounts. As Hudson (2016) argues, new scholarship on capitalism suffers when it “disowns the radical origins—and uses—of its inquires.”

American undergraduate students can attest to). At liberal philosophy's heart lies a terribly seductive belief in the moral primacy of individual freedoms, particularly the freedom to own property. All individuals are free to safeguard their person and their property, especially from the excesses of the state, and in this regard all individuals are purportedly equal.

But *who* is the liberal individual? As Marxist and feminist scholars have argued, liberalism is profoundly contradictory: all individuals are free so long as they are "individuals" in the first place (Macpherson 1962; Pateman 1989). Behind the liberal notion of individuality lies a series of social credentials and preconditions that separates out the deserving from the undeserving (Mehta 1990; Singh 2005). Not only has male-ness long been a precondition for liberal individuality (women's suffrage was granted generations after male suffrage in nations that pioneered liberalism, for instance); but the liberal individual is so conceptualized that whiteness is also a precondition for individuality (Mills 2008). Those who do not conform to the ideal of the liberal individual are seen as unfamiliar and unruly, their self and property open to questioning and taking (see also Harris 1993; Sheth 2009). In short, liberalism involves a profound "intolerance of the unfamiliar" (Mitchell 2004, 31). Despite its commitment to benevolence and moral egalitarianism, and despite the fact that struggles against discrimination have historically been waged and won in profoundly liberal terms, liberalism contains within it a decidedly illiberal "exclusionary impulse" (Mehta 1990). It is a political formation ridden with limits and contradictions that can sometimes provide the motor force for emancipatory struggle.

In what follows I trace how Flint's 20th-century history is bound up in paradigmatic practices of racial liberalism: *conjoined processes of racialized property making and property taking*. Property is certainly not the only arena in which the contradictory processes of racial liberalism play out. Indeed, racial liberalism is also bound up in international empire building and transnational capitalism and in domestic conceptions of racial progress (Melamed 2006; Singh 2005). Nevertheless, state-led urban renewal and property making projects in mid-century America and the residential segregation it etched into the landscape remain vivid, material instantiations of racial liberalism. While a number of political-economic processes are responsible for the devaluating of black bodies in Flint and elsewhere (see Pulido, this issue), residential segregation is one important factor explaining Flint's water tragedy, and the chief one I choose to focus on here.

My goal in bringing to the fore racial liberalism and the politics of property is to deepen our understanding of environmental racism and the prospects for EJ action. At the same time, I am acutely aware that there is an impossibility in this task: EJ emerged *within* the liberal (Rawlsian) rubrics of "distributive and procedural justice" as presumed by western liberal law. Dominant EJ narratives on Flint, as I demonstrated above, continue to embrace liberal notions

of individual racist intent (after all, in a liberal society the rational individual is the basic political unit) and the idea that race can be isolated from other legal, social, and political formations. We should remember that the latter move is essential to sustaining the *raison-d'être* of EJ: “justice,” “law,” “democracy,” and “regulation” provide the liberal rubrics to which EJ action must find recourse. Seeing these apparatuses as *inherently* raced, as the theoretical framework of racial liberalism does, would seem to thwart the potential for justice-oriented action. Thus the difficult, soul-searching questions become: Can EJ turn a self-reflexive eye on its own liberal roots?³ Can we build what Heynen (2015) has called “abolition ecologies” both inside *and* outside of liberalism? These are questions I take up in the final part of this paper. But first I turn to the broad contours of “separate but (un)equal,” racial liberalism’s mode of operation in the urban sphere.

Racial Liberalism’s Urban Workings: Separate and Unequal

As I write this, President Obama has just visited Flint and vowed to increase federal support for its beleaguered residents. In the middle of a speech that promises that the government will step up to ensure the safety of Flint’s water “because that’s part of the basic responsibilities of a government in the United States of America” (quoted in Shear and Bosman 2016), Obama stops and asks for a drink of water. Light laughter ensues. It is a stunning moment: here is the country’s first black president, famously cast as ushering in a “postracial America,” performing a publicity stunt in a context saturated with the legacies of a state carrying out its “basic responsibilities,” in particular, the pernicious project of housing segregation.

At the core of housing segregation in the United States is the doctrine of “separate but equal.” As historian Guyatt (2016) has recently argued, subtle echoes of this quintessentially liberal doctrine can be found in early American classical liberalism. “Separate but equal” was ultimately codified via the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case upholding the infamous Jim Crow laws in the late 1800s. But even where Jim Crow laws were not officially in force, “separate but equal” provided the modus for urban planning. Under “separate but equal,” “equal” was of course never meant to be actualized. In the standard retelling of American urban history, the South experienced “de jure” urban segregation as a result of the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, in which whites and non-whites were barred from using the same facilities, and the quality of schools, hospitals, transportation, housing, and myriad other

³I am grateful to a lively exchange between Joshua Barkan and Laura Pulido at a plenary session of the American Association of Geographers in Chicago in 2015 for reminding me of the potential impossibility of thinking of EJ outside of western liberal law and philosophy. At the same time, as I have argued with a colleague (Ranganathan and Balazs 2015), I remain optimistic that EJ has the potential to travel beyond its liberal roots and be compatible with alternative radical traditions.

services reserved for non-whites was deliberately maintained at an inferior level. By contrast, cities north of the Mason-Dixon Line, cities like Flint, Detroit, Ferguson, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, are said to have experienced “de facto” segregation in which personal white prejudice, economic inequality, and macroeconomic fluctuations were more important than government actions in producing inequality and segregation. Yet, the notion of *de facto* segregation obscures the very purposeful actions undertaken via urban policy—both in its more statist New Deal avatar at the beginning of the 20th century and its more market-driven, neoliberal avatar at the end of the century—to create racial separation (Derickson 2016; Rothstein 2014).

As housing expert Rothstein (2014) has argued, the myth of de facto segregation too conveniently excuses public institutions from the legacy of reproducing what in reality is *separate and unequal*. Perhaps no other public institutions were more responsible for solidifying housing inequality in America for decades to come than the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), both of which were signed into order in the early 1930s by President Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression. Both institutions were charged with reviving the depression-hit housing industry by refinancing and insuring loans to certain worthy individuals and rendering loans more costly or refusing them altogether to other devalued individuals. In city after city, from Ferguson to Flint, the FHA not only insured loans overwhelmingly to whites but also subsidized the construction of entire white suburbs by guaranteeing financing to builders that excluded African-Americans, “aliens,” and other minorities. Even after explicit racial language was removed from the FHA’s underwriting manuals and covenants, racially coded geographic terms such as “compatibility among neighborhood occupants” and “harmonious neighborhoods” continued to be used for loan insurance purposes (Rothstein 2014).⁴

The FHA did much harm in formerly integrated inner city neighborhoods. It framed integrated neighborhoods as “slums” in order to demolish them and build segregated public housing and schooling in all-black neighborhoods—housing that provided very little opportunity for wealth accumulation. Well into the late 20th century, well after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 mandating racial dispersion through market-oriented development was passed, private developers purposely steered low-income, poor-quality housing (the infamous “Section 235 Housing”) to non-white neighborhoods (Gotham 2000).

⁴As recently as 9 May 2016, Rothstein (2016) finds racially coded language in the refusal of the City of Yuma, Arizona to permit a lower-income, Latino housing development to be built next to a white development on the pretext that the development would “bring crime into the neighborhood, that some of the homes might be purchased by single-parent families, and that ‘unattended children would roam the streets.’” An appeals court noted that where whites are involved, it is called “letting children play in the neighborhood.”

Because they could not pay for the upkeep of substandard housing, low-income minority occupants were forced to default on their mortgages and abandon their homes.

The net result of decades-long public policy was a consolidation of white wealth in the form of state-subsidized housing equity, which in turn translated into larger inheritances and better educational opportunities for the next generation. By contrast, “unfamiliar” non-white individuals (and some non-ideal whites) excluded from the liberal promise of property ownership could not build nor bequeath wealth, and in fact did worse still: they inherited debt and punishing credit scores. Herein lies an important truth about racial liberalism’s operating logic, at least as far as property goes: while upholding the rhetoric of equality for all, racialized dispossession is actively produced. Yet, that very same racialized dispossession is framed and penalized as if it were the fault of individual wayward behavior, not the public policy that drove it. In the 20th century, this individualizing language is that of loan delinquency, bad credit scores, and criminal behavior. In fact, a discourse of punishment—and the wider “carceral geographies” (Derickson 2016, 5) that embed it—now extends from individuals to entire cities. Before discussing how such austerity urbanism framed Flint, I turn to the core dimensions of Flint’s spatial segregation.

Segregation and Abandonment in Flint

The City of Flint is deeply implicated in its ghettos, City of Flint institutions created them; City institutions maintain them. (a public memorandum to the City of Flint from the 1970s quoted in Highsmith 2015, 175)

Flint’s 20th-century history resembles that of many other cities of the North, cities where state-sponsored racial segregation simply cannot be written off as “de facto.” As I stated above, while Jim Crow laws were never officially implemented north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the idea that the North was somehow racially innocent—that here, “de facto” segregation involving white preferences and black poverty were primary drivers of segregation, and not official policy—belies the fact that state and city actors worked hard to reproduce racial separation over the course of a century. In a remarkable new history of Flint, Highsmith (2015) details the roles of the HOLC, the FHA, General Motors, white suburban capitalists, landlords, and city and state governments in fueling the segregation and economic abandonment of Flint. This history is essential for explaining how the water tragedy of 2015–2016 has been decades in the making.

When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s devastating the city’s car and real estate industries, the HOLC descended on Flint to revive the housing market. In the main, it was tasked with acquiring foreclosed homes, refinancing home loans, and offering mortgage subsidies. But beneath this great

liberal property making strategy lay an insidious spatial strategy of separating risky from non-risky, colored from whites, undeserving from deserving, unfamiliar from familiar. HOLC's "residential security maps," which were eventually replaced by FHA's "redlining maps," ranked mortgage risk by neighborhood on a descending scale from A to D, implicitly equating white neighborhoods with low risk (i.e. A and B) and black and mixed-race neighborhoods with high risk (i.e. C and D). Officially, HOLC agents were told not to mention racial demographics in their appraisals. However, their documents were replete with racially and ethnically coded language. Besides containing more decrepit homes and having poorer transportation and utility services, C and D areas in these documents were purported to be experiencing an "infiltration of a lower grade population" (Highsmith 2015, 40). Given its non-white industrial workforce and the fact that many whites had already started moving out to the suburbs where they were lured by developers, most of Flint was ranked high-risk (C and D).

HOLC policies did not stop there. They further mandated that local banks charge higher fees and interest rates when lending to C and D neighborhoods. As Highsmith (2015, 43) puts it,

the HOLC's policies did even more than promote segregation and provide a blueprint for the future redlining practices of the FHA. They also contributed in some measure to the economic exploitation of African Americans and other residents of so-called declining neighborhoods.

As elsewhere, the project of liberal property making pivoted on certain pre-conditions for individuality. Particular "individuals" were therefore worthy of rendering value to, while others were to be devalued. Notions of equality enshrined in liberal statutes did little to counteract the ravages of racial capitalism that systematically underdeveloped black America in this period. If anything, such liberal statutes provided the false impression that any situation that detracted from equality was a failure in otherwise sound policy or an unfortunate outcome of individual prejudice.

If the HOLC set in motion inner city disinvestment and abandonment, the FHA sealed the color line from the 1930s–1970s by denying "high-risk" neighborhoods federally backed loans. Even if black neighborhoods in Flint could have technically been able to qualify for loans—because they exhibited decent services, decent housing stock, and decent credit—FHA officials instructed appraisers to manipulate numbers to ensure a D grade indicated by red on FHA maps (thus the term "redlining"). Neighborhoods that contained blacks in Flint in the 1960s were deemed "unquestionably slums" and thus ineligible for federal home insurance (Highsmith 2015, 47). Flint's white pockets and growing white suburbs took this as a sign: strict racial segregation would have to be maintained in order to benefit from government largesse. They were right, of course. Federal and state support flowed abundantly to

white neighborhoods mid-century, resulting in a suburban real estate boom and an influx of property wealth for whites. The yawning wealth disparity aggravated annexation wars, with white suburbs seceding from Flint because its taxpayers resented having to pay for Flint's upkeep.

As if the effects of the HOLC and FHA were not grave enough, Flint's black neighborhoods were targeted for slum demolition, blight removal, and highway building in the 1970s (which, needless to say, found strong footing among the town's car lobby), all under the umbrella of "urban renewal." Instead of revitalizing the property market as it purported to do, urban renewal throughout the latter part of the 20th century hugely intensified racialized dispossession by deliberately under-appraising homes and under-compensating homeowners for eminent domain (which was rolled out in the name of highway building) and relocation schemes. According to Highsmith (2015, 191),

The new social geographies that emerged because of urban renewal were not merely cases of de facto segregation ... Rather, urban renewal produced a policy-driven web of administrative segregation that helped to make Flint one of the most racially divided, economically polarized, and spatially fragmented cities in the United States.

As property depreciation and ghetto formation surged, soon worsened by globalization, deindustrialization, and the loss of jobs in the late 1970s–1980s, whites (and many blacks who could afford to) left Flint in droves by the end of the 20th century. In the wake of this exodus Flint was left with empty houses, boarded up stores, and weedy overgrown lots. Such property abandonment further spiraled disinvestment, ultimately laying the groundwork for infrastructural abandonment. Today, at fewer than 100,000 residents, Flint has a lower population than it did in the 1920s, so much so that in Flint, as in Detroit, "urban shrinkage has shifted from being descriptive to being prescriptive" (Safransky 2016, 7). The city is now debating a host of "shrink to survive" market-driven measures to demolish neighborhoods, repurpose abandoned lots, and cut services.

Looking back, the infrastructural abandonment of Flint following on the heels of property abandonment seems all but inevitable. When unelected managers chose to cut infrastructural costs by switching its residents to toxic water in 2014, they justified this move in the shrewd, neoliberal language of fiscal austerity. Flint's eviscerated property tax base simply could not support a costly (and apparently life supporting) water system declared its unelected emergency managers. Through austerity discourse Flint itself is framed and punished as if it were a financially reckless individual, while structural and historical causes of its financial duress are thoroughly masked. Thus, federal and state support for Flint has steadily been withdrawn in the last decade and its credit ratings slashed even as residential water rates

have been hiked to meet austerity standards. By all accounts, water rates may continue to go up over the next few years. “Austerity” here is not race-neutral. Its conditions of possibility arise from racial taking—from the historical movement of wealth across the color line to those who qualified as liberal individuals, from those who were fundamentally unfamiliar to the rubrics of liberalism. Dispossession wrought by racial liberalism has not ended but is refashioned under the name of austerity, and all the more tragically through the poisoning of water.

Abolition Ecologies Inside/Outside Liberalism

Racism can no more be reduced to individual intent than race can be considered simply one among several variables that “impact” water quality. My goal in this brief contribution has been to foreground the operating logic of racial liberalism in explaining Flint’s water tragedy. I traced Flint’s troubles to the project of separate and unequal housing carried out under the auspices of an ostensibly democratic and egalitarian liberal political order from the early 20th century onwards. Racialized property making and taking, I argued, were core to the seemingly benevolent program of urban renewal and improvement. It is this more foundational logic of racism that I sought to recover here, one that is elided by standard environmental racism narratives.

My agenda here is aligned with Nik Heynen’s (2015) notion of “abolition ecology.” Abolition ecology is an approach to studying unjust urban natures that is informed by black radical thought, postcolonial (and decolonial) theory, and indigenous theory and praxis—traditions that have typically recognized the limitations of thinking within the liberal pale. Heynen (2015, 2) asks:

[H]ow can internalizing the deep historical spatial logics of the “ghetto,” the “plantation,” the “colony” and the “reservation” push UPE [urban political ecology] to wrestle with both the racialization of uneven urban environments and also the abolition of white supremacy from the metabolic processes that produce racially uneven urban environments?

While abolition ecology is vitally important for bolstering progressive scholarship, we must remember that much of the work of EJ takes place not within the academy but at the grassroots—via faith-based groups, anti-eviction movements, crowdsourced toxics inventories, citizen science meetings, neighborhood gatherings or everyday acts of guerilla gardening, for instance. Such grassroots formations may seek to strategically work *within* existing liberal policy frameworks (of property, for instance) to shift discriminatory outcomes. As a result, antiracist platforms supporting grassroots activities might call forth the very same norms of individuality, property

making, and state regulation that produced racialized dispossession in the first place. A close look at the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] action plan for Flint,⁵ for instance, reveals this very approach. The action plan takes recourse to the language of homeowners rights, home inspections, and neighborhood stabilization to address Flint's challenges. This was precisely the liberal language that infused the appraisal documents of the HOLC and FHA. While a deracialized version of this language could provide a plan for the way forward—a challenge that radical scholars have always been taken to task for not having advanced—to what extent does this liberal framework limit our questioning of the very processes that we seek to problematize, the very processes that may have led to the Flint crisis in the first place? The difficult question then becomes: Should we forge a program of abolition ecology from *inside* or *outside* liberalism? And can such a question even be asked, given how hegemonic liberalism is?

Mills (2008) argues that we must recoup liberalism from its dominant racialized incarnation in which rights are color-coded; we must deracialize liberalism by laying bare the whiteness of liberal theory, re-narrating the history of liberalism, and extending actual rights—not just those enshrined in statutes—across the color line. Sartori (2014, 3), a historian of liberalism and colonial empire, has similarly sought to recover liberalism from its illiberal legacies by asking how the conditions arise for property to become “a plausible standpoint for the *critique* of domination and exploitation,” rather than simply the vehicle for continued domination. For Sartori, the question of interest cannot simply be reduced to pro- and anti-property arguments. Instead, the question is one of “how property became available as the standpoint for a specifically liberal critique of capitalism and colonialism” (3). I read this as an invitation to consider how liberalism's contradictions and ambivalences provide openings for counter-hegemonic struggle.

Ultimately, the question of whether to forge abolition ecologies *inside* versus *outside* liberalism is a *dialectical* one that resembles the dialectical thought of WEB Du Bois, Cedric Robinson, Frantz Fanon and others in the black radical tradition. Given the intersections between racism, capitalism, liberalism, colonialism, and sexism, for example, such thinkers have urged us to simultaneously critique the whiteness and sexism of Marxism while recovering its potential for anticapitalist action; simultaneously critique the liberal discourse of “freedom,” while recovering its potential for genuine emancipation; and simultaneously theorize the politics of social justice both within and against racial liberalism. Similarly, radical EJ movements could be deepened via an explicit unmasking of racial liberalism while also accepting and strengthening liberalism's potential for fighting structural environmental

⁵See the NAACP 20-point list of priorities to address the needs of Flint's residents: <http://www.naacp.org/press/entry/naacp-releases-20-point-list-of-priorities-to-address-the-needs-of-flint-re>.

discrimination. This will take explicit recognition of the tactics deployed not just in civil and environmental rights activism—tactics that take strong recourse to liberal frameworks—but also subversive maneuvers that are pitched against or rework liberalism. These subversive maneuvers constitute the “quiet encroachments of the ordinary” (Bayat 2000) that are at play in the global urban landscape. In America examples of such quiet encroachments include Latino residents negotiating housing, water, and sanitation access informally at the rural-urban fringes of California’s Central Valley in spite of formal regulatory mandates (Ranganathan and Balazs 2015) and radical black farmers cultivating food collectively on Flint’s and Detroit’s abandoned lots in ways that defy the norms of private property ownership (Safransky 2016). As a first step, however, and one that I have attempted here, it is critical to expose what is obscured and excluded by the liberal promise.

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