Introduction

THIRSTY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Was the Flint water crisis a case of environmental racism? The question has been examined by numerous scholars, journalists, lawyers, and government committees. And the answer, at least according to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, was an unreserved and undeniable “yes.” Similarly, water shutoffs in Detroit have been denounced by the United Nations for contravening basic human rights to water and shelter. But, while most people agree that racism was a factor in these water crises, there remains only a superficial understanding of how these two unprecedented cases of environmental racism were put into practice. One of my aims in writing this book was to offer readers a holistic framework that spans far beyond the realm of water to include white supremacist attacks on the public infrastructure of these predominantly Black cities, including housing, education, collective bargaining, and Black political power more broadly. This reframing departs from the dominant narrative that continues to blame these cities’ problems on their residents. A key objective of this reframing is to challenge the notion that what happened in Flint and Detroit was somehow inevitable, the result of years of disinvestment and the loss of industry. I argue instead that what troubled Flint and Detroit was not their passive response to global economic trends but rather the
intentional actions and strategic plans devised and maintained by white elites. This reframing brings into account the actions not only of government but also of powerful foundations and other nonprofits, political organizations, media outlets, and prominent individuals and groups.

Environmental justice activists and scholars conceive of the environment broadly as the surrounds in which we live, work, learn, play, and pray, including the places where we are hospitalized, housed, and imprisoned. The environment, from this perspective, is not a people-free biophysical system but rather the ambient and immediate surroundings of everyday life activities and relationships linking people across deeply stratified social systems and uneven institutional arrangements. These include, but are not limited to, residential, working, and recreational. Originally forged from a synthesis of the civil rights movements, antitoxics campaigns, and environmentalism in the 1960s, environmental justice has focused on the class and racial inequalities of pollution. Today, hundreds of studies have substantiated the degree to which unequal laws and policies discriminate against people of color, the poor, indigenous and immigrant populations, and other marginalized communities.1

Given the robust history of environmental justice theorizing and movement organizing in this country, popular explanations of what environmental racism is and how it unfolded in Flint and Detroit are strikingly unsophisticated. For example, in “A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint,” New York Times reporter John Eligon asked, “If Flint were rich and mostly white, would Michigan’s state government have responded more quickly and aggressively to complaints about its lead-polluted water?”2 While this is a reasonable question, the journalist seems to assume that Black and white communities had equally safe water supplies until the lead pollution in Flint was “discovered” and complained about. Decades of research has consistently shown that race is a predictor of where hazardous waste is located in this county. Yet leading newspapers like the New York Times continue to ignore this history of racialized environmental discrimination. Moreover, the explanations typically offered in the press and in social media rest on a narrow understanding of what racism is—that is, bigotry rooted solely in the prejudice and discrimination of individual actors, in this case Governor Rick Snyder. Similarly, government reports documenting the Flint water crisis are equally problematic
in the way their authors understand environmental racism. For example, the report by the governor-appointed Flint Water Advisory Task Force concluded that “the Flint water crisis is a story of government failure, intransigence, unpreparedness, delay, inaction, and environmental injustice.” In effect, the report reduced the Flint water crisis to a series of government failures, a series of unfortunate “mistakes” by individuals and the agencies in which they work.

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE SCHOLARSHIP**

Recent scholarly work examining the Flint water crisis (FWC) and the Detroit bankruptcy, by contrast, is much more substantial than media and government reports, as one can imagine. In his book *Flint Fights Back,* Ben Pauli offers a systemic critique of the roots of the FWC, although it is grounded more deeply in the political dimensions of the anti-democratic emergency management structures and processes that besieged the iconic city. As a scholar and resident deeply involved in the city’s struggle for safe and affordable water, Pauli presents a firsthand perspective of the struggle against anti-democratic measures imposed by the state of Michigan and its allies. Anna Clark’s *Poisoned City,* though not an academic text, examines the historical and structural racism at the heart of the Flint water crisis. Likewise, Katrinell Davis’s book *Tainted Tap: Flint’s Journey from Crisis to Recovery* contextualizes the crisis within Flint’s long and troubled history and identifies the conditions and factors determining Flint’s attempts to transition from crisis to recovery.

More critical environmental justice scholarship highlights racial capitalism and the illiberal state as antagonists in the Flint water crisis. Malini Ranganathan, in “Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy,” analyzes the colorblind, illiberal discourses of race and property that legitimated the environmental racism exposed in the Flint water crisis. Esteemed critical environmental justice scholar Laura Pulido labels the FWC “a powerful example of both environmental racism and the everyday functioning of racial capitalism,” the latter becoming salient when the lives of the mostly Black residents were
subordinated to the city’s financial health. For Pulido, the poisoning of Flint residents was a deliberate act, a culmination of conscious decisions by elected officials and state agencies. Pulido, like other critical environmental justice scholars, affirms that because people of color are viewed as threats to white supremacy, they are deemed expendable by the state and legal system. This “racial expendability,” David Pellow argues, undergirds and supports a particular form of white supremacy whereby the white power structure profits from the environmental peril of people of color, not only in localities such as Flint and Detroit but all over the world.

What is missing from this scholarship is a deep dive into how particular actors, groups, and social networks mobilized both racial capitalism and white supremacy in operationalizing the state’s austerity-driven reforms. Toxic Water, Toxic System makes explicit the racial, ethnic, and gendered forms of environmental injustice that culminate from the collective, intersecting, and multiscale consequences of a seemingly anonymous authoritarian state willing to maintain white supremacy at any cost.

**WHITE SUPREMACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

The doctrine of white supremacy, as Martin Luther King Jr. described it in 1968, was nothing more than a rationalization that gave legitimacy and moral sanction to a profitable but deeply immoral system. Those concerned with matters of environmental justice, to paraphrase James Baldwin, have to question the intent of the state as it continues to be “collapsed into—become identical with—whiteness.” From this perspective, the real foundation on which the multiple and interlocking injustices imposed on nonwhite lives and livelihoods are forged are the state’s legal, economic, and political institutions. This is why Black activists in Detroit charge genocide—a topic I develop later in the book.

The only thing unique about the Trump presidency, I would add, is that he enthusiastically stepped out from operating behind the curtain of white supremacy. This former president pushed an unabashed brand of white supremacy, labeling Mexicans criminals, drug dealers, and rapists and calling Haiti and African countries “shitholes.” To this racist affront we can add the fact that within two months of Barak Obama taking office, white
protesters, backed by predatory monied interests, began a concerted racist campaign against the country’s first Black president. Journalist Jane Mayer writes that at rallies “Obama’s face was plastered on posters making him to look like the Joker from the Dark Knight films, his skin turned chalk white, his mouth stretched almost to his ears, and his eye sockets blackened, with a zombielike dead gaze, over the word ‘Socialism.’”

Photoshopped images of Obama as a primitive African witch doctor with a bone stuck through his nose also started to be circulated by white supremacy groups. Similarly, the US Justice Department’s investigation into the Ferguson, Missouri, police department after the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, on August 9, 2014, revealed the extent to which white supremacy is central to police enforcement in this country. The investigation found that the consistency and magnitude of police and court practices—enforcement, citations, outstanding warrants—impose a disparate impact on Black versus white individuals that itself violates the law. Everyday places that whites take for granted—sitting in their car, playing in the park, walking down the street—became environments for public lynchings of Black people. Let’s call it what it is. But in addition to the overwhelming statistical evidence, the investigation uncovered direct communications by police supervisors and court officials, so-called public servants, that revealed the degree to which racial bias and white hate drive this type of white supremacy. For example, an email from police, city, and court officials, including a former Ferguson police captain and a former police sergeant, depicted President Barack Obama as a chimpanzee. Another email thread circulated among public officials implied that Barack Obama would not be president for very long because “what Black man holds a steady job for four years.” Other email messages and interviews with court and law enforcement personnel expressed discriminatory views and intolerance about race, religion, and national origin. The report concluded that the “content of these communications is unequivocally derogatory, dehumanizing, and demonstrative of impermissible bias.”

The doctrine of white supremacy has not only devalued African American lives but also justified their unjust environmental burdens, as well. In failing to recognize how unjust environmental outcomes are a “structural part of the culture,” white culture, we turn a blind eye to the ways in
which white identity and white supremacy produce particular and everyday environmental harm in this country.

This book reveals, first, how white supremacy is reproduced every day in this country not only through acts of hate and aggression, as carefully documented by (among others) historian Carol Anderson in her brilliant book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide,* but also structurally and institutionally, by a racialized social machinery of rules, laws, and norms. In the United States white lives are made better and easier, every single day, simply by the way society is organized. Whites live longer, have better access to health care and better education, own more, and enjoy greater social status than do nonwhites. This privilege cuts across class: as Malcolm X so succinctly reminded us, a Black doctor in the United States is still first and foremost a Black person. This form of white supremacy is rooted in the multiple ways by which white people can access resources, spaces, and places—environments—that are simply off-limitst to people of color. Home ownership, investment in white suburbs, subsidized water rates, exclusive schools, clean parks, and opportunities for recreation offer just a few examples of exclusively “white first” access. Or as a recent US president liked to phrase it: “American first.” These forms of white supremacy are the consequences of years of structural adjustments maintained and reinforced by what George Lipsitz has coined the “possessive investment in whiteness.” In other words, environmental racism and other forms of environmental injustice are the results of strategic investments in whiteness by government and other powerful actors, not their failures.

Ignoring white supremacy, traditional environmental justice scholarship has tended to focus on the measurement of environmental disproportionality (a landfill here, a toxic waste site there), substantiating environmental prejudice (abnormally high cancer rates or asthma rates in poor communities of color) and then advocating for better government policies. This substantial body of research has not been without merit, effectively forcing the hand of federal and state governments to write environmental justice laws and regulations, regardless of whether they intend to enforce them. Business, too, has adopted a lexicon of environmental justice in its corporate image, but seldom does the discourse translate into meaningful action. But the strategy of bringing about environmental justice via the state has
proved to be largely hegemonic in that it ignores the integral role that government plays in producing unequal lives and segregated spaces in the first place. Moreover, this quantitative effort overlooks the multiple and intersecting ways in which racial oppression is foundational to and deeply ingrained in US history. When I asked my esteemed colleague Michael Omi what motivated him Howard Winant the write their pioneering book *Racial Formation in America*,\(^\text{17}\) he replied that *racial formation* was largely a response to the naïve way in which sociology was using race, as a simple variable to be measured or compared to something else, in an otherwise nonracialized society. This reductionist strategy, I suggest, has also served to limit incidents of environmental injustice to disparate events, occurring here and there, diverting attention from the larger social machinery under which environmental inequality is produced, structured, and normalized. This book seeks to advance racial formation theory beyond its focus on the state’s role to also include the primary role of nonstate actors and networks in creating and constantly maintaining the system of racial oppression that took hold in Flint and Detroit.

Second, I suggest that environmental justice scholarship has generally undertheorized contemporary processes of racialization in mobilizing white neoconservative policies. Sociologist Herbert Gans suggests that racialization is best understood as a social process.\(^\text{18}\) In particular he argues that racialization is a “socially agreed upon construction with a number of participants,” including “individuals, organizations, agencies and institutions that help bring about and benefit economically and otherwise from racialization.” A key toward understanding this process, Gans suggests, is to reveal which set of dominant actors set it in motion. Because white male elites are usually the official initiators, we need to examine which elites do what. This requires careful analysis, “distinguishing between experts, including scholars, as well as elected and appointed public officials.”\(^\text{19}\)

*Toxic Water, Toxic Systems* reveals how the careful racialized deployment of urban problems—finance, infrastructure, foreclosures, and so forth—have provided the necessary condition for Republican-led austerity policies to acquire legitimacy in Michigan. Among these austerity reformers, the term *urban* has become a dog whistle among whites to mean African American people specifically and people of color more generally. In some ways *urban* has become synonymous with segregationist policies of
the past. Today, new fiscal reformers are rehabilitating the urban as a new frontier for profit and control, employing code words like *illegality, foreclose*, and *crime*, often but not always conjugated with the modifier *Black*, to push forth their racist policies. In fact, racist tropes were repeatedly used in both Flint and Detroit to legitimate economic and political decisions that contributed to the reproduction of racial inequality. For example, Virginia Tech professor Marc Edwards referred to actions of residents who opposed his claims about the safety of their water as reflecting their “tribalism.” Likewise, activists resisting emergency management in Detroit have often been referred to as CAVE people, using an acronym that stands for “citizens against virtually everything.” The same racist tropes would never be used by so-called citizen scientists working in predominantly poor white communities. Nor would the same racial character flaws be evoked by state government to remove the authority of locally elected officials from white city councils. In fact, white cities in Michigan, such as Lapeer, that were also on the brink of bankruptcy were never threatened by emergency management or stigmatized for their financial transgressions. It is for this and other reasons, I argue, that racialization is inscribed into the very fabric of urban austerity in Michigan.

Third, environmental justice scholarship can do more to emphasize the multiple and intersecting ways in which environment racism decenters people’s lives. These experiences are often hidden from most, and so we have no idea what people of color go through in this country. In Flint and Detroit, poisoned water and water shutoffs cleave families apart as some people relocate, finding temporary relief and shelter elsewhere. Remaining families live in fear that welfare authorities might take their children from their homes for lack of water. Days are lost from working and children miss school days as families navigate new environs or try to figure out how to survive in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has referred to as “forgotten places.” Entire swaths of Detroit and Flint are left abandoned without water, leaving people unable to cook, unable to clean, anxious about bathing or showering, and terrified to nurse their infant children. Living precariously from one bottled water to the next means facing a rising tide of personal despair and indignity and having to ask for help and handouts from family, friends, and charity. For many, mortgage foreclosures stemming from the subprime mortgage debacle have led to homelessness as
entire generations of accumulated Black and brown wealth were forcibly taken, leaving homeowners homeless. In other words, we need a real accounting of the multiple and intersecting burdens—health, family, economic, political—that austerity-driven reforms impose.

Fourth, environmental justice scholarship needs to acknowledge the particular role of women of color, who have inspired much of the grassroots anti-racist mobilization and environmental movement in Michigan and elsewhere. I am struck by the resilience and tenacity of these local networks and communities that refuse to accept this new racial formation, offering care and love in the presence of greed and racism. Women of color continue to be the catalysts of major social movements both in the United States and across the globe. This is true in the case of Idle No More, Me Too, and Black Lives Matter. In Flint and Detroit, women have led the efforts of We the People of Detroit, the Genesee County Hispanic Latino Collaborative, Raise It Up, the People’s Water Board Coalition, and the Flint Democracy Defense League. Yet the leadership roles of African American and other women of color continue to be obscure in environmental justice scholarship and organizing. For example, African Americans (men and women) occupy a paltry 4.6% of leadership positions in environmental organizations; Hispanics/Latinos, 2.3%. Similarly, Black females account for 2% of full-time college and university faculty, and Hispanic females hold no more than 1% of full-time professorships. Scholars and activists who work in environmental justice can ignore this blatant omission of women of color scholars and organizers only at their own peril.

In insisting that the personal is political, women of color have cultivated a distinctive standpoint that has proven not only to be life saving but also to be a formidable challenge to elite white male interests and their egotistical worldviews. It is this standpoint that challenges the legitimacy of citizen scientists who continue to ignore the citizen in their science. It is this standpoint that challenges the unfairness of urban austerity in Michigan and elsewhere. The experience of constantly being targeted by a “machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis” has helped to cultivate in these women of color a distinctive standpoint from which to witness how these latest rounds of racist policies impact themselves, their neighborhoods, and other communities they love. “Four hundred years of
survival as an endangered species,” poet, writer, and activist Audre Lorde suggests, “has taught most of us that if we intend to live, we had better become fast learners.”  

Women of color have cultivated vital networks in their neighborhoods to counter what one woman called the “reptilian practices”—cold-blooded and lethal—“of shutting off water in the city of Detroit.” Women organized talking circles in Flint; women collaborated with pastors to mobilize humanitarian efforts; women were behind the citizen science efforts in Flint and Detroit, working with professors, doctors, lawyers, and think thanks to collect, analyze, and disseminate data in order “to set the record straight.” It was We the People of Detroit that brought the United Nations to their city to document the water shutoffs. It was We the People of Detroit that helped to document the city’s hepatitis A outbreak, the largest in US history.

For African American women like Monica Lewis-Patrick and Debra Taylor of We the People of Detroit, the knowledge gained at the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender has provided the stimulus for social thought and collective action consistent with the Black radical tradition. This praxis of collective intelligence is designed not only to analyze institutional racism but to resist it as well. History has shown us, Lewis Patrick insists, “that when ‘we the people’ stand up, they [elites] stand down.” This critical perspective counters the dominant narrative of urban decay that plagues Black cities like Flint and Detroit. “If you start looking at the cities across the country,” Lewis Patrick asks me, “where they are targeting with these egregious policies of water shutoffs? They are places like where? Boston, Philadelphia, St Louis, Detroit, Flint, and Benton Harbor.” Black cities. “That is why we are mapping it and digitizing it. . . . Because when we say it,” she continues, “we come across as these passionate ignorant activists that don’t know anything. . . . We’re just angry, mad, and pissed off at everybody.”

It is women like Monica Lewis-Patrick who have borne witness to the slow and, for them, not-so-subtle violence of urban austerity in Michigan, and who have invoked the Black radical tradition of care, ingenuity, and guts. Denied the help of sound or trusted government and surpassed by deep monied interests, these communities of color have nurtured a beloved community, working together to ensure the welfare of individuals in their own neighborhoods. For many in the community the simple fact