Thinking With Flint: Racial Liberalism's Illiberal Legacies

When lead enters the body, it manages to infiltrate every organ in the body: 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. At even moderate to low levels of exposure, studies show that lead poisoning is associated with behavioral problems, poor academic performance, attention deficit, and hyperactivity (Markowitz and Rosner 2013; Needleman 1990; Silbergeld 1997). Knowledge about the 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 paints. Yet, over half a million children in the US today are poisoned with lead, with poorer black children living in housing built before 1950 statistically most at risk. In fact, black children were nearly three times more likely than white children to be found with high levels of lead poisoning (defined as ≥10 micrograms per deciliter) in a national survey conducted between 1999-2004 (Jones et al. 2005).

In Flint, Michigan, all children under the age of six—nearly 9,000 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 are now well understood. In 2014 the city of Flint was ordered by unelected "emergency managers" appointed by Republican governor Rick Snyder 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 was 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. Compounding the problem of leaded pipes are the chipping, lead-laced walls of Flint's dilapidated and aging housing stock, home to its majority black population. 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 racial 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; Nixon 2013; Pulido 2015)? How do we read such dispossession in ways that acknowledge—and disrupt—the very *coloniality*, the sanctioned *il*liberalism, 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 Craven and Tynes 2016; Eligon 2016). Does this characterization suffice?

Deepening our Understanding of Environmental Racism

The notion of environmental racism has traveled some distance in the last four decades from its original and more forceful sense put forth by civil rights activist Benjamin Chavis in 1981 as the deliberate targeting of low-income communities of color for the placement of toxic facilities and life-threatening poisons. Over time,

environmental justice (EJ) activists and scholars have turned our gaze on the structural, non-individualistic, non-intent based factors that implicate racial minorities in poisonous conditions. Racist intent does not matter, prominent EJ advocates and scholars argued (e.g. Bullard and Johnson 2000; Morello-Frosch 2002). And in any case, intent is impossible to prove in a court of law. Industrial location behavior, the dynamics of the real estate market, waste management policies, and class differentiation in the labor force—in short, the *political-economic* relations of capitalism—are teased out in critical EJ scholarship as primary drivers of racial discrimination. But too often in this wider genre of social science analysis as Brahinsky (2014: 1261) points out race is "sidelined as a superstructural effect of capitalism".

But race is not simply an externality of a neutral economy. Race is, and always has been, foundational to our economic and geopolitical order: "Negro slavery seemed the very basis of American capitalism", insisted CLR James (1938 [2012]: 58) in his vital retelling of the history of capitalism. "Slavery made cotton king; cotton became the very life food of British industries; it built up New England's factories" (see also other key works on capitalism in the black radical tradition, for e.g. Du Bois 1935 [2014]; Robinson 1983; Williams 1944 [1994])[1]. Indeed, in America "white appropriation of black labor and red land formed two of the fundamental contours of the new nation's development and its primary sources of wealth" (Borstelmann 2001: 10).

This insistence on theorizing capitalism as a fundamentally *racial* capitalism has been at the forefront of Laura Pulido's scholarly project, greatly helping to deepen radical scholarship on environmental racism. Pulido's (2015: 810) work challenges the idea of "nonracial economic processes" and pivots instead on the "multiplicities of racisms at work" (Pulido 1996: 143). 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) has suggested that we need to focus on the role of white supremacy in environmental racism. More than 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, and not overt racist sentiment *per se*, white supremacy is a historiography of how racial hierarchy came to be—how it was instated as an organizing logic.

My goal in this commentary is to undertake a parallel move to Pulido's by focusing on the organizing logic of what we most take for granted in our modern era: liberalism. By liberalism I mean not its more quotidian usage as the motley politics of the US left, but good old-fashioned liberal *philosophy* that emanated from the likes of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Jefferson in the North Atlantic, and subsequently was translated and indigenized in non-western colonies. I argue that Flint's predicament—the slow poisoning of an entire generation—can be read as a case of racial liberalism's illiberal legacies.

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[1] A good number of alternative histories of capitalism-as-racial capitalism (e.g. Baptist 2014; Johnson 2013) have been published in the last few years, including Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2014) popular *The Case for Reparations*. Following Hudson (2016), however, it is important that we recognize the long tradition of radical black thought that has typically been silenced in critical and Marxist accounts. As Hudson argues, new scholarship on capitalism suffers when it "disowns the radical origins—and uses—of its inquires."

Today "liberalism is hegemonic" across the left and right, writes Caribbean-born radical philosopher Charles W. Mills (2011: 27) who is most associated with the term "racial liberalism"—"the main (if not the only) game in town". So much so, we rarely name it (and when we do, it produces much confusion as my mostly "liberal" undergraduate students can attest to). At liberal philosophy's heart lies a terribly seductive belief: the moral primacy of individual rights and freedoms, particularly the freedom to own property. All individuals are free to safeguard—especially from the excesses of the state—their person and their property, and in this regard, all individuals are purportedly "equal". But *who* is the liberal individual? As feminist and Marxist scholars have argued, liberalism is profoundly tautological: all individuals are free so long as they are first "individuals". Liberalism takes as natural the patriarchal and classed orders in which *male, landed* individuals have always profited (Macpherson 1962; Pateman 1989). Mills applies this critique to race: "the liberal individual [is] so conceptualized that whiteness is a prerequisite for individuality" (see also Harris 1993). Maleness and whiteness are thus inseparable from property. Those who do not conform to the ideal of the liberal individual are seen as unfamiliar, their property open to question and taking. Because liberalism has a profound "intolerance of the unfamiliar" (Mitchell 2004: 31), despite its commitment to benevolence and moral egalitarianism, it contains within it a decidedly illiberal "exclusionary impulse" (Mehta 1990).

I trace how Flint's 20th century is bound up in paradigmatic practices of American racial liberalism: urban improvement, segregation, property making, and abandonment. In "thinking with Flint" to construct a genealogy of racial liberalism and the racial state, my goal is to further 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 given by western law. Can EJ turn a self-reflexive eye on its own roots?[2] Can we build what Nik Heynen (2015) has recently called "abolition ecologies" both inside *and* outside of liberalism? These are questions I take up in the final part.

The Urban "Improvement" Paradox

It's important that we recognize that alongside its episodes of vicious and open racism, the nation has always incubated a form of racial "*improvement*" that sees space as a solution to the problem of race…Racial separation was a national preoccupation…and it was presented as impeccably *liberal* in its intention and effects (Guyatt 2016: 11-12).

As I write, 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

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[2] I 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.

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 racial state carrying out its "basic responsibilities"; in particular, the pernicious project of improvement and the segregation it calls forth.

The term "improvement" is characteristically liberal. Used abundantly in classical liberal texts in Europe (e.g. John Stuart Mill's 1869 treatise *On Liberty*) and in classical liberal rhetoric in America (e.g. the speeches of Thomas Jefferson), it invokes a civilizing mission—the disciplining and upliftment of particular bodies—as well as a conjuring of new spatial relations. At its core, improvement entails a deep paradox. It can only proceed through the production of difference: the separating out of the deserving from the undeserving, the pliant from the rebellious, the Europeans from the non-Europeans, the more familiar from the less familiar. After all, only when the group to be improved is delimited, when members are thoroughly reduced to their "essential" characteristics, can the program for improvement be justified and unleashed.

In Britain's colonies across South Asia and Africa throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, urban improvement carried out under the auspices of "city improvement trusts" entailed massive slum demolitions, decongestion through road widening, and the building of sanitary infrastructure (Kidambi 2001; Legg 2007; McFarlane 2008; Swanson 1977). Such measures, undertaken with ferocity in the aftermath of disease outbreaks, mimicked improvement missions in England's industrial towns. In both cases, the bodies and homes of the working class, depicted as ignorant, dirty, and morally wayward, were the target of the improvement offensive. New and upgraded housing built according to scientific standards was provided for many displaced working class families in England since: "better houses would make better men" as one housing reformer put it (Hole 1866: 112). However in the non-western colonies, improvement involved racialized adaptations. Poorer non-white natives were not considered "individuals" worthy of property in the liberal sense. They were often forced to fend for themselves by building informal shacks or were relegated to areas of the city where improvement was only partially completed, leaving them worse off than before. The net result in most colonial cities was the entrenchment of racial segregation in the first half of the 20th century.

I provide this brief global history because of its marked resonance with the coloniality of the urban American context, where improvement in the form of property making and urban renewal in the 20th century ultimately deepened segregation. While the abolition of slavery was being debated and pursued in the early 1800s, American liberals like Thomas Jefferson looked to black colonization—the emigration of freed slaves to Africa—as the only viable solution to the country's race problem. Colonization, as historian Guyatt (2016) has recently argued, was to allow the "improvement" of non-whites—their transformation into liberal individuals—without the spatial mixing of the races. Though (external) black colonization never materialized to any significant degree, the mantra of "separate but equal", which evolved from this early debate into the infamous Jim Crow laws—internal colonization—became *the* paradox at the heart of American racial liberalism. Flint's 20th century bears the legacies of this paradox.

Segregation and Abandonment in Flint

> The City of Flint is deeply implicated in its ghettoes, City of Flint institutions created them; City institutions maintain them (a public memorandum to the City of Flint quoted in Highsmith 2015: 175)

In "separate but equal", "equal" was never meant to be. Herein lies the greatest truth about racial liberalism's operating logic: in holding up the rhetoric of equality, improvement, and inclusion, separation and exclusion are allowed to proceed apace because the public conscience is absolved. The slogan of equality, and even the occasionally successful implementation of equality-enhancing measures, must be present to mask the reality of structural inequality.

Flint's 20th century history resembles that of many other post-industrial and quintessentially liberal cities of the North. While Jim Crow laws were never officially implemented north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the idea that the liberal North was somehow racially innocent—that here, "de facto" segregation and white preferences 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 Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), General Motors, white suburban capitalists, landlords, and city and state government actors 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 car and real estate industries of cities like Flint, the HOLC, signed into order by President Roosevelt, descended on America's urban landscape to "improve" 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 housing revival lay an insidious spatial strategy of separating risky from non-risky, blacks from whites. HOLC's "residential security maps", which were eventually replaced by FHA's "redlining", ranked mortgage risk by neighborhood on a descending scale from A to D, implicitly equating white neighborhoods with low risk (A and B) and black and mixed-race neighborhoods with high risk (C and D). Not surprisingly given its black industrial workforce and the fact that many white workers had already started moving out to the suburbs, most of Flint was ranked high-risk (C and D). HOLC policies did not stop here. 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". This then marked the beginning of black property dispossession, a process that was to lay the groundwork for economic and infrastructural abandonment at the turn of the millennium.

If the HOLC set in motion racial ghettoization and disinvestment, the FHA from the 1930s-1970s sealed the color line by all together denying "high-risk" neighborhoods federally backed loans. Even if black neighborhoods in Flint could have technically been able to qualify for loans—because of decent services and decent housing stock—FHA officials instructed appraisers to manipulate numbers to ensure a D grade indicated by red

on FHA maps (thus the term "redlining").   Specifically, neighborhoods that contained blacks in Flint 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 receive government largesse. They were right, of course. Federal and state support flowed to white neighborhoods mid-century resulting in a 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 tax-depleted black ghettoes were targeted for slum demolition, blight removal, and highway building (which of course found strong support from the town's auto lobby) in the 1960s and 70s. Instead of revitalizing the property market as it purported to do, urban renewal throughout the latter part of the 20th century hugely intensified black property dispossession by failing to sufficiently appraise homes and compensate homeowners for renewal and relocation schemes. As property depreciation and ghetto formation surged forward, worsened later by deindustrialization and the loss of jobs in the late 70s-80s, whites (and many blacks who could afford to) left Flint in great droves by the end of the 20th century, leaving behind empty houses, boarded up stores, and weedy overgrown lots. The prosperous white suburbs, however, lived on.

Abolition Ecologies Inside/Outside Liberalism

Looking back, the abandonment of Flint seems all but inevitable. When unelected managers chose to cut infrastructural costs by switching its residents to toxic lead-laced water in 2014, they justified this move in the neoliberal language of fiscal austerity. This language appears neutral, rational, and defensible, but in reality rests on racial liberalism's utterly illiberal legacies. "Austerity" here is specifically the result of racial taking—of the historical movement of wealth across the color line to those who qualified as liberal individuals, not to those who were fundamentally unfamiliar to the rubrics of liberalism.

My goal in this brief contribution has been to foreground the operating logic of racial liberalism in explaining the environmental racism that is Flint. Yes, this is clearly a case of minorities being subjected to structural and institutional racism and thereby being implicated in poisonous, life-threatening conditions. However, we must remember how racial segregation was carried out under the auspices of an ostensibly benevolent and egalitarian political order—one that genuinely sought to "improve" the human condition through property making. We must therefore be watchful of social and environmental justice agendas that call forth those very same norms of property making. A close look at the NAACP action plan for Flint[3] reveals this very challenge: a recourse to the language of homeowners rights, home inspections, and neighborhood stabilization, for instance. This was precisely the liberal language that infused the racist appraisal documents of the HOLC and FHA. While this rights-based language certainly provides a possible plan for the way forward—a challenge that radicals have always been taken to task for failing to

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[3] See the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (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

have—to what extent does the liberal framework given by EJ 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?

Recently, Nik Heynen (2015) has put forth the idea of "abolition ecology", an approach to studying unjust urban natures that is informed by antiracist, postcolonial (and decolonial), and indigenous theory and praxis—traditions that have typically recognized the limitations of thinking within the liberal pale. He asks: "how 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?" In thinking with Flint to trace the genealogy of racial liberalism, I tried to bring the history of liberal improvement in colonial cities of the global South, as well as the relatively untold genesis of "separate but equal" that originated in America's external and internal colonization projects, to bear on Flint. In other words, I tried to reflect on Flint from inside the belly of the liberalism beast and its transnational mutations.

The burning question is: should we build an action-oriented program of abolition ecology from *inside* or *outside* liberalism? I end with the realization that there are arguments to be made on either side. Charles W. Mills (2008) argues that we must recoup liberalism from its dominant racialized incarnation in which rights are color-coded; we must thus "deracialize liberalism" by re-narrating the history of international liberalism, by critiquing its whiteness, and extending actual rights—not just those enshrined in statutes—across the color line. On the other hand, a vast postcolonial scholarship on urban informality shows that ordinary people claim land and space in ways that already fall well beyond the norms of liberal property rights, though these still may be central to urban capitalist process (e.g. Anjaria 2011; Ghertner 2015; Roy 2009; Weinstein 2008). In fact, scholars are recognizing that urban informality is not just restricted to the global South. Safransky (2016) shows that in Detroit's postindustrial landscapes (which is similar though even more vast than Flint's) radical black farmers have reclaimed abandoned lots for growing food and community gardens, and have asserted more collective forms of ownership in the landscape, often challenging the city's private property ordinances. Property making, then, whether in its liberal or radical forms, may well be a means to counter the illiberal legacies of racial liberalism.

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