

# Detroit to Flint and Back Again: Solidarity Forever

Critical Sociology

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## Abstract

For several years the authors have been working in Detroit with grassroots coalitions resisting Emergency Management. In this essay, we focus on how community groups in Detroit and Flint advanced common struggles for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right, particularly during the period of 2014 to 2016. We explore how, through a series of direct interventions – including public meetings and international gatherings, independent journalism and social media, community-based research projects, and citizen-led policy initiatives – these groups contributed to challenging neoliberal governance, to undermining the legitimacy of state officials and their policies, and to shifting public consciousness around the human right to water.

## Keywords

Flint, Detroit, water, Emergency Management, community organizing, human rights

## Introduction

Connections between Flint and Detroit are etched in earth and memory. The footpaths of indigenous peoples link the wide, shallow traverse of the Flint River to the narrow crossing of Detroit waters. In the colonial period these pathways became known as the Saginaw Trail (Ellis, 1879). Later, they formed the highways carrying the first cars to roll off assembly lines (Szudarek, 1996).

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Embedded in these connections are stories of resistance. From early efforts to halt colonial expansion to the sit-down strikes, Women's Emergency Brigade, and the formation of the UAW, AFL and CIO, Flint and Detroit have been tightly linked. As early industrial sites, both became destinations for the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North. By the last three decades of the 20th century, both had become majority African American.

In recent years, connections between these cities have also shaped the contours of the state's role in poisoning Flint's water supply and in dismissing widespread concerns for clean, safe, affordable water. Detroit and Flint are both targets of the new urban austerity models associated with what Jamie Peck and Heather Whiteside (2016) call the 'financialization of American urban governance'. Peck and Whiteside show how neoliberal logic and governance strategies have evolved beyond 'the tyranny of tight budgets' toward 'a profound restructuring of the institutions of urban governance' (2016: 247). This restructuring has ushered in a 'postdemocratic' form of municipal governance that uses financial crises to justify supplanting local democracies with state-appointed Emergency Managers (EMs) (pp. 239–40, 253). These unelected technocrats have unlimited powers to void contracts, impose pension reforms, eliminate public services, and privatize public assets. In Detroit, Emergency Management resulted in mass water shutoffs during and following the drive to municipal bankruptcy; in Flint, it resulted in mass lead poisoning and continued state inaction. For most people living in both cities, Emergency Management has been disastrous.

Emergency Management has also been met with a shared commitment to resisting the stripping of local democratic control and to developing new forms of political space. As David Solnit (2004) explains, neoliberalism has provoked a new radicalism requiring the creation of alternative structures, languages, and methods of organizing. In this essay, we explore the creative resistance emerging as the people of Detroit and Flint continue to fight together for the restoration of local democratic control and to ensure clean, safe, affordable water as a basic right for all. This resistance has received little mainstream attention and has been publicly denigrated by political and corporate elites, who have consistently portrayed the people of Detroit and Flint as incompetent, corrupt, and incapable of self-governance. Kevyn Orr, the EM appointed by Governor Rick Snyder to govern over Detroit, summed up this attitude well when he called Detroiters, 'dumb, lazy, happy, and rich' (Stamm, 2013).

Nevertheless, for several years Flint and Detroit activists have continued to raise objections to the systematic dismantling of democracy and to policies enacted by EMs concerning access to water. Their collective efforts have steadily shifted the narrative away from the denigrating images fostered by elites, towards those of ordinary people defending communities from policies implemented by unaccountable, dictatorial officials. By the Spring of 2016, the City of Detroit had been cited by the United Nations for human rights violations due to its water shutoff policy, and the poisoning of the Flint water supply had become a national scandal. Increasingly there were calls for criminal indictments of those whose decisions resulted in the denial of clean water to tens of thousands of people (D-REM, 2016e, 2016f; Lazare, 2016).

The authors have been working in Detroit with grassroots coalitions embodying the connections mentioned above. In this essay, we explore how community groups in Detroit and Flint advanced common struggles for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right, and offer an account of grassroots activism that has directly confronted neoliberal governance across the State of Michigan. We analyze how networks of solidarity were forged through community organizing, interventions into mainstream media portrayals of the water crises, and the articulation of counter-narratives that center the experiences, needs, and collective power of those most directly affected. Whereas other analyses tend to focus on Detroit and Flint as distinct sites of state-sanctioned violence and resistance, we insist that the experiences and resistance of these communities are best understood as interconnected and mutually empowering. Whereas other analyses also highlight research into the physiological and psychological effects of water shutoffs or poisoned water, individuals

and communities' experiences of trauma, the complexities of relations among aid agencies and communities following water shutoffs and lead contamination, or the structural dimensions of government failures, our analysis focuses on how grassroots coalitions built understanding and effective communication strategies within their own communities as well as on regional, national, and international scales. One of the things activists consistently prioritized was the public sharing of stories. They created spaces for such sharing to take place, orienting these spaces with awareness of the political background of mass water shutoffs and lead poisoning: both resulted from Emergency Management, and are but the latest manifestation of longstanding efforts to seize resources from some of the most vulnerable communities in Michigan.

To best reflect the work of grassroots organizations and communities, we draw from archives of published, broadcasted, filmed, and recorded reports, statements, conversations, and events, which, together with our own participant perspectives on organizing efforts as we experienced them, offer stories of the activism that linked Detroit and Flint, strengthening both communities. We highlight throughout the methods employed by activists in confronting neoliberal governance. Specifically, we show how Detroit and Flint activists managed to center the voices and experiences of people whose knowledge has not mattered to EMS, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Environmental Quality, or the Governor. Against the background of systematic denials of credibility afflicting the very same populations targeted for Emergency Management (Doan, 2017), activists created spaces where people could listen to, amplify, and help one another disseminate their own stories about water. These stories were then woven into broader counter-narratives and 'collective action frames' (Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Snow, 2000) focused on the disastrous abuses and failures of neoliberal governance in the state, across the country, and globally, and on what is to be done together, in response.

As Robert Benford and David Snow explain, collective action frames are the ever-evolving products of the 'framing processes' or 'meaning work' in which social movement participants find themselves engaged. In contrast to less interactive and dynamic 'schemas,' collective action frames are '*action-oriented* sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of social movements' (2000: 614, our emphasis). These frames typically weave together the 'core framing tasks' of diagnosing situations and structures as unjust or otherwise problematic; articulating and defending proposed solutions and strategies; and providing rationales for engaging in transformative collective action (p. 615). While frames of various sorts serve to organize our experiences and guide action, collective action frames are intended specifically to 'mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists' in the midst of ongoing struggles (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). In this essay, we utilize the concepts of framing processes and collective action frames as helpful theoretical lenses. We find these concepts useful because of the way they help to bind together a diverse series of discussions, events, films, and other artworks, illuminating these, in part, as so many contributions to a dynamic and still-evolving collective effort to discover, amplify, and work together on the basis of common experiences and understandings. We show how, through a series of direct interventions – including public meetings and international gatherings, independent journalism and social media, community-based research projects, and citizen-led policy initiatives – community groups in Detroit and Flint contributed to undermining the legitimacy of state officials and their policies and to shifting public consciousness around the human right to water.<sup>1</sup>

## Pipelines and Perceptions

Detroit has provided water to the City of Flint since 1967, the year of the Detroit Rebellion. Within a few years Detroiters had elected Coleman A. Young, one of the first and strongest African

American mayors in the United States. Young's election reverberated across the country and throughout Michigan. Many whites living in the region perceived emerging African American political power as a threat and, over the next several decades, abandoned major cities for suburbs (Sugrue, 2005). Oakland County welcomed whites fleeing from Detroit, while Genesee County welcomed scores more from Flint. Residents of both counties were concerned that their water supply had been left in the hands of a majority black city with a steadfast leader. Young famously warned Detroiters not to give up control of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD); meanwhile, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson had been attempting to wrest control of DWSD for decades (Cramer, 2015).

State intervention into the affairs of fiscally troubled municipalities would eventually provide a convenient means of seizure. Over the past 30 or so years, the State of Michigan has adopted a series of statutes for preventing and dealing with municipal fiscal distress. In 1986, when the Wayne County Circuit Court placed the City of Ecorse in receivership, the state legislature passed Public Act (PA) 101, which officially created the 'financial emergency' status and the 'Emergency Financial Manager' (EFM) position and outlined a process through which the Treasury could appoint an EFM to take control of a municipality's finances. Governor James Blanchard of the Democratic Party signed PA 101 into law in 1988. In 1990 it was amended as PA 72, the 'Local Government Fiscal Responsibility Act,' which broadened the powers of an EFM to cover all municipal financial affairs and included public school districts under the same legal framework.

Governor Rick Snyder of the Republican Party took office in January 2011. In March 2011, the Republican-controlled state legislature passed PA 4, the 'Local Government and School District Fiscal Accountability Act,' in a lame-duck session, replacing Emergency Financial Managers (EFMs) with Emergency Managers (EMs) and extending the scope of the EM's powers. PA 4 not only allows an EM to assume the responsibilities of all local elected officials, but it also gives an EM 'quasi-judicial powers related to breaking contracts' (Scorsone, 2014: 39). Specifically, the law grants an EM the power to modify or terminate existing collective bargaining agreements and to negotiate or ban entry into new ones; to contract out public services and sell off public assets, including buildings and infrastructure; and to dismiss public officials, set aside minimum staffing requirements, and consolidate or dissolve local departments. Without providing financial aid to struggling municipalities or so much as soliciting the consent of the governed, PA 4 enables the suspension of a city's charter and strips all elected officials of their powers, 'imposing the authority of the state through an appointee of the governor' who is accountable to no one else, and effectively stripping city residents of local citizenship rights (Anderson, 2011: 581).

As numerous activists and scholars have noted, such political disenfranchisement has disproportionately impacted working-class communities of color, particularly African Americans. Between 2007 and 2013, '51.7% of black Michigan residents had been subjected to emergency intervention, while only 2.7% of their white counterparts were similarly affected' (Kirkpatrick and Breznau, 2016). When Orr was appointed as Detroit's EM in 2013, a total of more than 720,000 black Michiganders, or roughly 57% of the state's African American population, were living without political representation in either their municipality or public school district. As David Fasenfest and Theodore Pride point out, through the imposition of EMs, 'Michigan has become the proving ground for neoliberal expansion and the taking of critically important social resources for private gain' (Fasenfest and Pride, 2016: 331). As residents of Flint, and then Detroit, found themselves under the control of unelected technocrats, forces that had long been stymied surfaced to accomplish mutually reinforcing goals. For Flint, Emergency Management became a vehicle for ending the half-century connection to DWSD amidst plans to shift the water supply to the emerging Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). For Detroit, Emergency Management facilitated the establishment of a second regional authority, placing control of Detroit's water system in the hands of

the suburban-dominated Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). Central to both decisions were the racist perceptions of predominantly white suburban officials, who consistently cast city residents as incapable of governing and standing in the way of ‘progress’ (Cramer, 2015; Third Coast Conspiracy, 2016).

Flint has a long experience with EMs. Beginning in 2002–4, and then again in 2011, the city was governed by a series of state-appointed administrators whose sole obligation it is to balance the budget (Hammer, 2016a, 2016b). This task was (temporarily) achieved through drastic cuts in services, the privatization of public assets, and ever-increasing water rates. As it became clear to Detroiters that they would soon be facing a similar situation, activists called a statewide meeting of people living in cities under Emergency Management, including Benton Harbor, Flint, Pontiac and Detroit. Flint brought the most experience and organization to the table. Flint organizers were excited about the possibility of forging a statewide coalition and encouraged others to consider holding a People’s Grand Jury denouncing Snyder and the latest Emergency Manager law.

## Flint Healing Stories

Against the background of denigrating portrayals of city residents as incompetent, corrupt, and incapable of self-governance – portrayals which, as Peck astutely observes, conform to a neoliberal logic that seeks to ‘endogenize and localize’ both the supposedly underlying causes of municipal fiscal distress and ‘the scope for politically acceptable remedies’ (Peck, 2014) – sharing personal stories became a central part of the struggle to draw attention to the crises unfolding in Flint, and later Detroit. This practice was central to efforts to build and expand networks of solidarity, identify and process shared trauma, forge a sense of collective identity, and work collaboratively toward political transformation. Long before the poisoning of Flint’s water supply became a national scandal, Flint and Detroit organizers met regularly to discuss shared concerns over the deprivation of local citizenship rights (Howell, 2015c; Howell and Stephens, 2015; Guzmán, 2016). A few weeks after the switch to the Flint River, about 40 activists from Flint, Detroit, Highland Park, and Muskegon gathered as part of a statewide network to strategize. The meeting was hosted by Citizens for Highland Park Public Schools (CHPPS) and Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) (Unpublished Minutes, 2014; Ketchum, 2015).

While the discussion focused on the dismantling of local democracy, concerns over the connection between EMs and water also began to emerge. In her report from Highland Park, Marian Kramer of the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition (HPHRC) characterized outrageously high water bills as a tool to drive people out of their homes and enable the privatization of local water systems. As Kramer pointed out, the state legislature had placed water rates and billing policies under the control of EMs. Attorney Alice Jennings of the National Conference for Black Lawyers (NCBL) emphasized the ability of the state to attach outstanding water bills to property taxes, thus contributing to the tens of thousands of tax foreclosures already decimating communities throughout the region. Nayyirah Shariff and Claire McClinton of the Flint Democracy Defense League (FDDL) reported on a press conference where residents appeared with tape over their mouths, as they had been limited to just 3 minutes each at the end of City Council meetings. Democracy, not water, was their primary concern, though they were fully aware of rising water rates and efforts to cut Flint’s ties with DWSD.

Flint residents started noticing a change in water quality immediately following the switch to the Flint River. In response to growing concerns over water-related rashes and illness, the FDDL formed a Water Task Force and, with the help of activists from We the People of Detroit (WTP) and Melissa Mays of Flint’s Water You Fighting For? (WYFF), began distributing bottled water in Flint neighborhoods (Kakia, 2016). Over the next few months, while distributing water together in both

Detroit and Flint, activists heard dozens of stories of shutoffs, hardships in obtaining drinkable water, as well as diseases and rashes linked to the foul, discolored water flowing from the taps.

As government officials refused to acknowledge Flint residents' complaints, the emerging coalition accelerated their organizing efforts. In January 2015, they announced a series of public meetings in Flint to develop community-wide strategies. While introducing a series of church-based gatherings, Shariff reported that communities were facing 'plummeting water quality, soaring water rates and the use of police to make arrests for water theft.' 'I've attended a series of meetings where the discussion was what was wrong with the water,' she added. 'We've never really got to (discussing the) solutions.' The people of Flint had been receiving boil-water advisories for months, alongside warnings that those in poor health or with compromised immune systems should not consume city water. Chemical treatments were said to be out of balance, yet Flint's EM claimed the water was safe to drink (Fonger, 2015).

Public meetings provided the background for a larger strategy of sharing personal stories to raise public awareness and counter the dehumanizing logic of neoliberalism, which casts non-experts as lacking the credibility to speak truthfully about the quality of the water flowing from their taps, let alone about the state of their own health and well-being. This strategy was supported by the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (MRDI), who organized statewide 'Healing Stories' to address race and class-based disparities in the region. Debra Taylor, a Flint native and Detroit activist with WTP, was the main organizer for the first event. Taylor predicted that water would be a major issue. 'Many people that I know personally there seem to all have at least a \$200 water bill per month,' she said. 'So you've got these extremely high water [bills], and then you're afraid to drink the water' (WCMU, 2015).

Over 100 people attended the event, dubbed the Flint Strong Stones Community Coalition. Detroiters and Flint community leaders served as designated listeners for storytellers hailing from Flint, who worked with Taylor to develop a dramatic way of presenting their experiences: before each person spoke, the others on stage would say in unison, 'You have the right to remain silent.' The storyteller would then respond, 'I waive that right' (Ketchum, 2015). Shea Howell, a designated 'listener,' captured some stories in *The Michigan Citizen*:

The first woman to step forward said that even her cat won't drink the water out of her tap. She had been taken to the hospital after drinking some soup made for her with tap water. She explained that she had gotten a bill for over \$900. 'So now I am paying for something I don't drink and paying \$150 for bottled water a month. I take a shower and I itch. I was dehydrated from soup. But I am not about to lose my home. I have to choose between property tax and water. I'm 72 years old and getting tired, and my cat only has three or four more lives left.' (Howell, 2015a)

Another listener, Councilman Eric Mays, moved the next week to have Flint returned to DWSD. His efforts were immediately rejected by EM Gerald Ambrose, who said: 'It is 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.' Ambrose claimed that, 'Flint water is safe' (Howell, 2015a).

Taylor continued as the main organizer of 'Healing Stories' efforts while Monica Lewis-Patrick, also of WTP, served as host. They held a second event in July focusing primarily on water, where people were invited to share stories of the illnesses they were developing from consuming contaminated liquids. Reflecting on the importance of this process, McClinton emphasized that, 'They were able to tell their stories in a community setting, not alone or in isolation' (Guzmán, 2016). The connections established through public storytelling supported ongoing efforts to build relationships and capacities for self-organization among city residents across Southeast Michigan. While

delivering thousands of gallons of bottled water door-to-door in Detroit and Flint, Lewis-Patrick observed: ‘Flint [activists] came down to not only support us and encourage us but also to share their stories of contaminated water.’ At a meeting in July 2014, McClinton and Shariff arrived in Detroit with water samples. As Taylor pointed out, ‘It looked like ice tea. They told us it came from their taps. I said, “Come on, really? This is from your tap?”’ (Guzmán, 2016). These jugs of poison became symbols of the depth of the disregard for public health and safety embodied in the practice of Emergency Management.

It would be months before the details of lead poisoning in Flint began to emerge. But as local and national media attention focused on Detroit, Flint and Detroit activists continued to weave together stories from across the region. The sharing of these stories from city to city functioned in part as consciousness-raising, helping to prevent and overcome the internalization of dominant narratives of victim-blaming (i.e. ‘it’s your own fault if you can’t afford to pay for water’) and gaslighting (i.e. ‘there’s nothing wrong with the Flint water – residents’ perceptions cannot be trusted’). Those sharing their own stories with one another were well positioned to chart the connections between shutting off water altogether and delivering liquid poison. Both resulted from the decisions of EMs, which were made possible by broader statewide efforts to undermine democracy, wrest power from city-dwellers, and escalate the extraction of wealth from low-income, predominantly African American communities.

## United Nations Visit and Town Hall

As statewide organizing intensified, one important string of successes stemmed from arranging for a visit from two United Nations (UN) experts: Catarina de Albuquerque, Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, and Leilani Farha, Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing. Their involvement was made possible through a relationship Detroit organizers built with Maude Barlow, a Canadian water rights activist and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project (BPP). On her visit to Detroit in May 2014, Barlow collaborated with members of MWRO and PWB to draft a report to the UN requesting support (BPP, 2014: 7).<sup>2</sup> In response, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a press release stating that Detroit’s water rates were relatively high and that widespread poverty made these bills ‘unaffordable for a significant portion of the population’ (OHCHR, 2014). ‘Disconnections due to non-payment are only permissible if it can be shown that the resident is able to pay but is not paying,’ said de Albuquerque. ‘In other words, when there is genuine inability to pay, human rights simply forbids disconnections.’ Farha raised concerns about children being removed from their families by social services because their homes lacked access to water. ‘If these water disconnections disproportionately affect African Americans they may be discriminatory, in violation of treaties the US has ratified,’ she added (OHCHR, 2014). The press release drew the attention of mainstream media outlets, who increasingly turned to Detroit-based activists for interviews and pressured Mayor Mike Duggan for answers to questions amplified by the UN (WXYZ-TV, 2014).

The UN report was based primarily on testimonial evidence gathered at a Town Hall Meeting held at Wayne County Community College on 19 October 2014 – a much broader platform for the grassroots storytelling efforts begun months before (MWRO and PWB, 2014; Carmody, 2014; Lewis-Patrick and Cabbil, 2014). Nearly 800 people joined Congressman John Conyers and the UN representatives to hear the stories of people experiencing shutoffs, giving the people of Detroit an opportunity to directly shape the UN report. Ann Rall of the PWB opened with the following remarks, which helped to orient the discussion: ‘This is not a crisis, this is a long-term struggle many years in the making,’ she said. ‘Those in power are systematically depriving us of our human rights,’ and yet ‘we are getting more and more organized.’ Rall continued: ‘we have a right to

affordable water; water needs to be clean; no corporation or private interests have the right to privatize water; water must be held in a public trust' (D-REM, 2014).

The testimonies of people experiencing shutoffs were at the heart of the gathering. Detroit native Gregory Price offered the following:

I live in zip code 48204; my block was hit by foreclosures ... 2 or 3 people have lost their house for not paying water tax – they have children; they are not receiving any services/benefits; when they receive 'help' it's a bill too high to pay – that's the payment plan! It's a lose-lose situation; I want to make sure I and my community are heard; if you can do something about it we need your help.

Nichole Hill, also of Detroit, recounted:

The water was cutoff for 8 weeks in 2014; they were steadily cutting off the whole neighborhood so there was nobody to ask for water; the whole block except 3 or 4 homes were cutoff. I have asked to dispute my bill or for a hearing; I was told I could get a hearing time in 2015 possibly; they continue to bill me; they billed me when the water was cut off; it was cutoff again in October despite supposedly being in a payment plan; the bill is over \$6,000; they can't explain it; I've paid \$3,000 in the last few years. (D-REM, 2014)

## International Social Movements Gathering

Efforts to share analyses and strategies linking the work of local, national, and international activists were emboldened by the UN visit and Town Hall Meeting. On 29–31 May 2015, Detroit hosted The International Social Movements Gathering for Affordable Water and Housing (International Social Movements Gathering, 2015). The event was organized by a coalition of organizations and spearheaded by Attorney Jennings of NCBL and Maureen Taylor of MWRO. In attendance were 350 people from 47 states and 10 countries: residents of Detroit, Highland Park, Flint, and Benton Harbor met with activists from across North, Central and South America, Europe, and First Nations. In addition to film screenings, collective meals, and a water ceremony, conversations focused on sharing experiences from neighborhoods where access to water was threatened, along with stories of collective resilience and resistance, proposals for citizen-led policy initiatives ensuring access to water and transparency in rate structures, community-based research projects, and organizing and mobilizing in the streets (Howell, 2015b; UUSC, 2015).

It was a powerful gathering. Public storytelling was made central once again, this time as part of broader efforts to forge links of solidarity between locally-based activists and those visiting from elsewhere. Conversations concerning threats to water access in Michigan quickly expanded and deepened as connections were established between water-insecure communities across the United States and around the globe: people enduring droughts in California; families in Appalachia struggling with heavily contaminated water sources; residents of Mexico resisting a 22-year effort to privatize local water systems; and communities in Italy resisting attempts by multinational corporations to undermine a referendum that recognized water as a common good. The sheer number of people in attendance worked to counter senses of isolation in communities facing a lack of access to clean, safe, affordable water. Meanwhile, the sharing of stories worked to draw people together as experiences began to resonate, analyses overlapped, and strategies could be shared across multiple locales and arenas of struggle.

In addition to expanding and strengthening networks of solidarity, the gathering also galvanized ongoing resistance in Michigan. The connections between Detroit and Flint were further clarified and emphasized as new relationships were built between organizers from both cities. Melissa Mays stood up in a packed room, held up bottles of brown water and reported:

We were switched by our Emergency Manager from Detroit water to the Flint River which is disgusting and contaminated ... We have been forced to drink, bathe and cook with contaminated water. As a response ... [w]e are being poisoned. I am sick. I have copper poisoning and lupus, all developed since October. All of my children have been to the doctor for rashes, hair loss, and muscle and bone pain. We are fighting a huge health crisis in Flint ... We have no rights. They don't want us here. (People's Tribune, 2015)

Much of the gathering's success stemmed from efforts to consolidate, clarify, and amplify what many activists already knew, breaking through to wider public acknowledgement. Against the background of government officials in denial – promising insufficient assistance with payments without addressing the core problem of unaffordability, and 'guaranteeing' the safety of water that was obviously toxic – participants spoke countervailing truths in clear, plain language. Contrary to the claims of city and state officials, so-called 'assistance' plans were failing miserably. A much better way of ensuring access to water was to implement the 2005 Water Affordability Plan (WAP), which would allow families to pay their bills and continue contributing revenue to the local system (Colton, 2005). Contrary to dominant narratives, it was not that residents were simply opting not to pay, or asking for free water. The costs of water were plainly far more than most residents could afford. And contrary to the claims of Flint city officials, the city's water supply was not safe for consumption. Highly toxic Flint River water was continually corroding pipes. Flint needed to be returned to DWSD immediately, its water infrastructure needed to be replaced, and residents needed to be given appropriate healthcare and social services for the harms inflicted upon them by the state. By fortifying resistance efforts across Southeast Michigan, and situating them in the global context of seizures of water and public infrastructures from low-income communities, the Social Movements Gathering positioned activists well to work as a unified front against attacks on community water security throughout the region.

## **Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey**

Growing out of conversations initiated at the Social Movements Gathering, activists organized a 70-mile, eight-day walk from Detroit to Flint, dubbed the Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey for Clean and Affordable Water. Sponsored by the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR), PWB, MWRO, and others, the group walked 10 miles per day from 3 to 10 July 2015, stopping in several towns along the way to hold public gatherings, rallies, and conversations (Grevatt, 2015; MCHR, 2015a, 2015b; Laflamme, 2015). The walk began with a spiritual ritual led by indigenous water walkers and convened at the Underground Railroad monument on the Detroit riverfront. From there, the main walkers carried a mixture of water with samples drawn from the Great Lakes and donated by our indigenous comrades. Following a send-off rally at the Spirit of Detroit Statue, the first stop was for a Cultural Celebration at Nandi's Knowledge Café in Highland Park, MI, with live drumming, spoken word poetry, a community speak-out, and art-making for people of all ages. Children painted flags with images depicting the significance of water in sustaining all life forms, which were then sewn into a banner to be displayed throughout the walk. Walkers then attended a Town-Hall Meeting and Rally at St. Luke's A.M.E. Church, where people from Highland Park described how they were facing multiple years of not receiving water bills at all, only to finally receive impossibly high ones, have their water shut off, and face the removal of their children by social services.

Concluding the first day, the Detroit Light Brigade organized an action at dusk in Ferndale, MI, where the message 'Clean, Affordable Water Now!' was displayed in lights for all passersby at Woodward Avenue and 9 Mile Road to see. Over the following days, the walkers proceeded up Woodward towards Flint, stopping to participate in a service at Birmingham United Church in

Bloomfield Hills, MI, a Cross-County Speak-Out at the Baldwin Center in Pontiac, MI, and then on to the cities of Clarkston, Holly, Grand Blanc, and finally Flint (Kruth, 2015). Their journey concluded on 10 July 2015 with a huge rally at Flint City Hall, after which two busses full of people departed for the state capitol in Lansing to deliver a petition demanding safe, affordable water for all.

One of the major successes of the Water Justice Journey was the way it allowed for conversations among people directly experiencing water shutoffs and exposure to toxic water, who could share how their daily lives had been affected and discuss the state of their own health and well-being, while also speaking to their tremendous capacities to provide care and be cared for by family and neighbors. One woman attended the Flint rally with a jug of brown water drawn from her tap and a fistful of hair that had fallen out after weeks of ingesting the water (Azikiwe, 2015). The walk further developed solidarity between Detroit and Flint activists as we built new networks of social-justice oriented churches, organizations, and groups along the way. Throughout, activists helped deepen understandings of the many connections among people's difficulties accessing clean, safe, affordable water. Relationships and solidarity were strengthened in large part during the lead up to the walk, through the dedicated organizing work of people from Detroit, Flint, and several places in between. Planning and preparation took place during June 2015 through the collaborative work of several organizations. Representatives from community groups, churches, and families attended meetings in Detroit to collectively plan events, write press releases, develop information packets, organize housing, food, and support vehicles, craft banners and artwork, and publicize actions. It was an impressive enactment of solidarity forged between organizations and people – many of whom had never before worked together – with an eye to building coalitions for the long haul.

One major goal of the walk was to counter widespread perceptions of Detroit and Flint as disconnected and alone in facing water-related problems. The information packet distributed throughout the walk linked together three major problems: mass water shutoffs, unaffordable water and sewage services, and toxic, unhealthy, dangerous water (Samartino, 2015). It also highlighted two corresponding demands: (1) implement the 2005 WAP ('Assistance is not Affordability'); and (2) provide clean, healthy water relief to the people of Flint (Samartino, 2015; see also MWRO et al., 2015; PWB, 2015). The organizers insisted that water unaffordability and deprivation in Detroit and water contamination in Flint must be understood in relation to each other and rectified together, connected as they are to the same underlying problems: sacrificing the basic needs of people in the name of profit and privatization, prioritizing corporate interests over the people's good, and seizing control of land and resources maintained by predominantly African American communities.

One of the clearest outcomes of the Water Justice Journey was renewed resistance to the dehumanization inherent in dominant narratives of the water crises. Much attention in movement-generated media at the time was given to resisting narratives of 'lazy,' irresponsible Detroiters, who were portrayed as refusing to pay their bills, and of 'unscientific,' overreacting Flint residents, who were cast as childishly refusing to be comforted by the city's assurances. Behind both narratives lay a stark reality: by denying the basic necessity of water to communities of color in Detroit and Flint, it was clear that, to the State, their lives and deaths simply *did not matter*. Much of what the Water Justice Journey did – by prioritizing face-to-face conversations, collectively occupying public spaces, and creating venues where everyone's voices and experiences could be heard – was forcefully insist that those lives *did* matter, building relationships and strengthening existing ones to prevent those lives from being discarded. As Detroitier Valerie Jean Blakely said during the first day of the walk: 'Everything we do, we are planting seeds for people to feel ready to stand together to ignite something in their heart to say, "Hey, I love my neighbors enough to make sure they have water"' (Jones, 2015).

## Grassroots Journalism and Filmmaking

In the face of false, dehumanizing narratives advanced by city and state officials, developing and documenting the story of the impact of mass water shutoffs on the lives of Detroiters became the job of activists, independent filmmakers, and community-based journalists. Community news and radical publications told the story of the shutoffs. Tweets and articles were shared on social media. #WageLove became the preferred hashtag, in memory of beloved Detroit community leader and water rights activist Charity Hicks – widely known as the ‘Rosa Parks of the Detroit Water Struggle’ (Wiley-Kellermann, 2014).

Kate Levy, a Detroit activist and videographer, began documenting everyday efforts to organize and resist water shutoffs. Combining interviews with people who had been disconnected, along with city officials and activists, Levy started weaving together a powerful visual narrative of shutoffs and their impacts, as well as direct actions and other forms of resistance. Activists staged viewings of her work throughout the city and suburbs to share the stories of fellow Detroiters. Short clips were shared on social media and eventually found their way into mainstream newscasts (Levy, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; The Raiz Up, 2015).

Over the next few months, Levy’s filmmaking skills were joined with the investigative reporting efforts of Curt Guyette. A long-time Detroit reporter covering grassroots politics, Guyette was hired by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to provide a critical perspective on the bankruptcy process. By the time the UN convened the Town Hall Meeting, Levy and Guyette had compiled a wide array of visual and narrative evidence demonstrating that water shutoffs were happening with complete disregard for the health and well-being of Detroiters and were often conducted in a haphazard, patently disrespectful and irresponsible manner (Levy and Guyette, 2015c). Levy and Guyette also revealed the city administration’s inability to grapple seriously with the underlying problems of poverty, municipal debt, and the financialization of urban governance. They documented the inadequacy of ‘emergency’ assistance and payment plans, showing that, of the nearly 3000 people enrolled, only 300 were able to meet scheduled payments and remain enrolled for a year (Guyette, 2015a, 2015b; Levy and Guyette, 2015c).

Levy and Guyette also gave voice to people experiencing and resisting shutoffs. Through their work we met young people defending their neighbors from disconnections by standing on shutoff valves, refusing to move (The Raiz Up, 2015); elders being forced to return to the water department multiple times with forms to prove their medical needs for water, or gathering rainwater in barrels for cooking and bathing; and mothers organizing entire days around securing bottled water for children (Levy, 2015a). These images started to chip away at the legitimacy of EMs, Mayor Duggan, DWS, and all who defended Detroit’s shutoff policy.

Flint community leaders Claire McClinton, Nayyirah Shariff, Melissa Mays, and Leeann Walters played pivotal roles in bringing the Flint water crisis to light (Shariff, 2015; Guyette, 2016a; Move to Amend, 2016; Guzmán, 2016). It was their work, combined with that of Levy and Guyette, that was largely responsible for drawing national attention to the unfolding catastrophe and its connections with Detroit (Guyette, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e; Levy and Guyette, 2015a, 2015b, 2015d, 2016; Lengel, 2016). Both the ACLU of Michigan website and Levy’s site, [www.detroit-mindsdyng.org](http://www.detroit-mindsdyng.org) (Levy, 2015a), were widely circulated, providing up-to-date news and images to citizens and progressive journalists. Videos produced by Levy and Guyette were also regularly incorporated into reports by independent news outlets such as Democracy Now! (Democracy Now!, 2015a, 2015a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) and picked up by mainstream media pundits such as MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow.

## Press Conference, Teach-In, People's Tribunal

As the region moved closer to launching the GLWA and KWA, a coalition of Detroit and Flint-based organizations orchestrated a series of actions designed to challenge the narratives and policies advanced by state officials, underscore the relationship between the two cities, and further strengthen regional solidarity. The first step was a press conference held at the ACLU offices in Detroit on 15 January 2016 (Levy, 2016a). The discussion focused on undermining the idea advanced by Mayor Duggan, DWSD Director Gary Brown and other officials that it was 'illegal' to implement water rates adjusted to household income. By convening legal experts from a variety of organizations, the coalition attempted to shift the idea of 'criminality' away from those who could not afford to pay for water, or who were turning water back on to meet basic needs, and on to those being paid to turn water off. Attorneys Mark Fancher of NCBL, Julie Hurwitz of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), Thomas Stephens of D-REM, and Peter Hammer of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights presented a series of briefs supporting the legality of an income-based water program. As the legal briefs made clear, not only is an income-based rate structure legal in Michigan, but it would likely generate more revenue for DWSD while addressing public health and safety concerns raised by mass water shutoffs. Moreover, the adoption of the 2005 WAP would be consistent with DWSD's past practice of adjusting water rates in response to declining revenues. 'The water affordability plan is not only legal, it is the only right thing to do,' said Hurwitz. 'It is in the public interest to ensure that not only affordable water but safe water be provided to our community' (Guillen, 2016; see also Levy, 2016a). News accounts of the conference revealed glaring weaknesses in the dominant narrative and nervous shifting on the part of state officials.

The press conference was followed the next day with a teach-in emphasizing connections between Detroit and Flint (D-REM, 2016a, 2016b, 2016d). Both cities were framed as struggling against EMs whose job it is to balance budgets at the expense of public health and welfare. In Detroit, EM Orr shut off water to thousands of children, while EMs in Flint poisoned thousands more with water shot through with lead and other contaminants. The people of both cities were now engaged in a protracted struggle for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right. The Teach-In on Detroit and Flint Water Crises was convened at the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University on 16 January 2016. A packed house welcomed Flint activists Melissa Mays, Nayyirah Shariff, and Laura Sullivan as they shared news and analysis of the unnatural disaster back home, reminding everyone in the room that the I-75 runs both ways, 'from Flint to Detroit and back again.' Members of the Homrich 9 invited attendees to consider what it means to engage in civil disobedience under Emergency Management. As Rev. Bill Wiley-Kellermann of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Detroit reminded us, 'civil disobedience involves breaking an unjust law,' such as Jim Crow laws in the South. However, 'in a situation where the unjust law is an Emergency Manager law, which takes over the entire structure of governance, the act of civil disobedience needs to be *to become ungovernable*.'

The teach-in provided a forum for sharing the work of community-based researchers and modeling the creation of citizen-led policy initiatives (D-REM, 2016b, 2016d). Everyone received a reader filled with stories of collective resistance, in-depth analyses of laws and policies, and independent journalism produced by Flint and Detroit activists. After learning about the 2005 Water Affordability Plan from Maureen Taylor and Sylvia Orduño of MWRO, participants were also among the first to learn of the groundbreaking research conducted by the We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective (WTPCRC). Monica Lewis-Patrick, Emily Kutil, and Gloria House facilitated a discussion of an ongoing research project the collective had taken on, known at the time as, simply, 'The Mapping Project.' Several months later, in August 2016, the results of the project's first phase were unveiled in the same space with the launch of a collaboratively-crafted

manuscript, *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit: Volume One* (WTPCRC, 2016). The statistical evidence gathered throughout the project helped set the stage for the unveiling of the Water is a Human Right Bill Package, which, as State Representative Stephanie Chang explained in her teach-in presentation, was a product of decades of dedicated work by a broad-based coalition hailing from Detroit and Flint (Chang and Garrett, 2016; D-REM, 2016d).

The teach-in was followed the next week by a People's Tribunal, held in the sanctuary at the Cass Corridor Commons on 23 January 2016 (D-REM, 2016c, 2016e). Both events attracted hundreds of people invested in the ongoing water struggles. The People's Tribunal for Violations of the Human Right to Water was a social justice theater project developed by activists to inform the general public concerning the crises that have been created by mass water shutoffs in Detroit, and the criminal negligence that led to the poisoning of Flint's water supply (Black Bottom Archives, 2016). In this trial, the people of Detroit indicted Mayor Duggan (played by Michael Doan), Governor Snyder (Fred Vitale), and EMs Kevin Orr and Darnell Early (who were said to be in their cells) for violations of the human right to clean, safe, affordable water. The indictments were drafted by lawyers for the people, with the role of prosecutor enacted by Attorney William Goodman of the NLG. The witnesses for the people were Detroit's Valerie Jean Blakeley and Debra Taylor, followed by Melissa Mays and Nayyirah Shariff of Flint. The jury was comprised of well-respected community leaders hailing from both cities, including Claire McClinton, William M. Davis, Elena Herrada, William Copeland, Teresa Kelly, and Rudy Simons.

The trial proceedings were orchestrated as a moral drama featuring testimony from people who had faced shutoffs and exposure to contaminated water. In the end, the jury found the plaintiffs guilty of the following crimes:

- Crimes Against Democracy through Lawless Emergency Management
- Poisoning the Water Supply of Flint and its People
- Mass Water Shutoffs in Detroit
- False Claims that Flint's Water is Safe
- False Claims that Making Water Affordable is Illegal
- Breach of Public Trust in Water
- Theft of the Commons
- Ignoring the Will of the Voters and the Health and General Welfare of the People, as required by the constitution

As the judge (Wiley-Kellermann) pointed out in his opening statement, 'Emergency Management is a key instrument in a number of these crimes (and indeed a crime in and of itself) – it must be observed that PA 4 was repealed by a majority of voters, only to have it repassed as PA 436 – necessitating a People's Tribunal' (D-REM, 2016e). The judge went on to argue that *all* levels of government, including the official courts, had either failed us or been rendered powerless under Emergency Management, thus 'necessitating a People's Tribunal.' Drawing a sharp contrast with the judicial system's inability to act on behalf of the people, he offered pointed instructions to the jury: 'Ordinarily, judges instruct jurors in a way that actually minimizes, constricts, and constrains their awareness of their own power. I will not do so. Juries are inherently a powerful and authoritative form of direct democracy. I will not hide that fact from you' (D-REM, 2016e). Finally, the judge offered these words in his closing statement:

Mr.'s Snyder, Duggan, (Early, and Orr), you are hereby stripped of your authority to lead or rule the people of Detroit and Michigan. The people are no longer bound to honor you in office. Moreover, you are to be

lead in an ignominious spectacle of your failures before the people of Michigan, the people of the nation, and the people of the world. Go. You are no longer over us. Let it be so ordered. [Taps gavel] (D-REM, 2016e)

The press conference, teach-in, and tribunal were all held as Governor Snyder's failure to respond to the poisoning of Flint's water began to make national headlines. As people across Michigan were increasingly waking up to the pivotal role played by EMs in creating the water crises in Flint and Detroit, and to the dangers of a political system stripped of democratic checks and balances, the tribunal helped inspire the creation of an 'unwanted poster' featuring a mug shot of Snyder, put together by the Beehive Design Collective in collaboration with local activists (Beehive Design Collective, 2016; D-REM, 2016f). Within days the poster could be seen hanging on public buildings from Ann Arbor to Lansing, and from Flint to Detroit.

It was also proudly displayed on stage at a reprise of the tribunal, held at Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History on 16 February 2016 (Black Bottom Archives, 2016). A week prior, Mark Fancher of NCBL had published an article entitled, 'Flint Water Crisis Shows Modern Colonialism in Black Cities.' Referring to state officials and EMs, Fancher offered the following observations:

With the mentality of colonizers, they created and wielded the mighty weapon of Michigan's emergency manager law, and they set out to dominate and exploit predominantly black cities with breathtaking indifference to the rights and the welfare of those who live there. (Fancher, 2016)

Fancher joined Monica Lewis-Patrick and several other activists on a panel at the reprise. Promotional materials helped set the stage: 'The issues of race and class are clear,' read the flyers, 'as no one can imagine affluent, mostly white communities being forced to use contaminated, rash-inducing, lead-poisoned water as is the case in Flint. Likewise, it is no coincidence that massive water shutoffs have been used against an overwhelmingly African American city in the case of Detroit' (Black Bottom Archives, 2016). Speaking to a reporter from *The Detroit News*, Lewis-Patrick emphasized that, 'It's just as much a danger here [in Detroit] not to have water as having poisoned water.' Gloria House clarified the intent of the gathering as follows: 'We hope that more and more of us will be mobilized to stand against this' (Hicks, 2016).

## Conclusion

The experiences of the Flint-Detroit drive to restore local citizenship rights provided a framework for resisting state-imposed control of decisions concerning access to water. Over the course of three years, community organizers and activists persistently eroded the legitimacy of government authorities by generating and disseminating a powerful counter-narrative stressing water as a commons and a human right to be held in public trust. Central to the power of this narrative was the role of storytelling as a way for people to articulate their experiences in their own voices. The public sharing of stories played a pivotal role in broader efforts to forge solidarities across the region as well as nationally and internationally, while also galvanizing ongoing resistance in Michigan.

These stories also provided a way for the people of Flint and Detroit to overcome pervasive senses of isolation and denial. Insofar as they aided in shaping shared realities and in developing common values pertaining to basic human rights, while also serving as the basis of citizen-led policy initiatives and various forms of direct action, we find it helpful to think of these stories as constituting the 'collective action frames' of the statewide water struggle (Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Snow, 2000). The concepts of framing processes and collective action frames

are particularly useful here because of the way they help to unite the diverse events and media discussed above, illuminating these, in part, as so many contributions to a dynamic and still-evolving collective effort to discover, amplify, and work together on the basis of common experiences and understandings. These concepts also help us to understand the political significance and strategic relevance of sharing stories about water in public.

While the perspectives of people from Flint and Detroit were repeatedly denigrated or attacked by state and local officials, the shared sense of representing larger principles embedded in personal experiences encouraged activists to continue creating new forms of organization and struggle. As ordinary democratic channels were blocked under Emergency Management, grassroots organizations and communities found ways to intervene directly, creating new channels for their voices and actions. With public gatherings and storytelling, independent journalism and social media, press conferences, teach-ins, and tribunals, Detroit and Flint activists created a united, sophisticated, and nuanced understanding of what it means to live under Emergency Management and collectively resist this dehumanizing structure. By building new relationships and strengthening already long-standing ones, activists contributed to delegitimizing Governor Snyder, EMs, and the ideologies and laws responsible for creating and empowering them. They also succeeded in bringing the twin concerns of democracy and water as human rights to the forefront of national conversations concerning our shared futures.

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### **Notes**

1. Once touted as a presidential candidate, Governor Snyder could no longer dine out in his home town of Ann Arbor without having his meals disrupted by indignant guests (Stanton, 2016). When the University of Michigan Law School invited Snyder, Orr, and former US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes to participate in a panel reflecting on the Detroit bankruptcy a year out, the hosts ended up needing to postpone the event indefinitely out of fear of further such disruptions (Ferretti, 2015; Reedy and Basha, 2016).

2. The report made six recommendations: (1) for the State of Michigan and the US government to respect the human right to water and sanitation; (2) for the City of Detroit to restore services to households that have been cut off immediately; (3) for the City to abandon its plan for further cut-offs; (4) for federal and state governments to work with the City to ensure a sustainable public financing plan and rate structure that would prevent a transfer of the utility's financial burden onto residents who are currently paying exorbitant rates for their water services; (5) for fair water rates for the residents of Detroit; and finally (6) for the City to implement the 2005 Water Affordability Program (WAP) (BPP, 2014: 7). From 2004–5, MWRO collaborated with Colton and Michigan Legal Services in crafting an income-based water rate structure, which showed how DWSD could create a system in which low-income households would pay no more than 2.5% of their income for water. The WAP was approved by the Detroit City Council in 2006, due in part to the support of Councilwoman JoAnn Watson. Nevertheless, it was never implemented by DWSD. After DWSD claimed to have the funds to implement it, these funds suddenly vanished from the budget and the WAP was replaced by the Detroit Water Residential Assistance Plan (DWRAP). DWRAP provides limited assistance to financially struggling households, and only after the fact, rather than structuring rates proactively to prevent shutoffs from occurring in the first place (Colton, 2005; MWRO et al., 2015).

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