

Detroit's Water Wars: Race, Failing Social Reproduction, and Infrastructure

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Volume 22 Issue 2 (June 2020) Article 8**Brian Whitener****"Detroit's Water Wars: Race, Failing Social Reproduction, and Infrastructure"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/8>>

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Abstract: In this essay, I theorize an emergent urban power dynamic of infrastructural resource grabs or the use of state power to transfer infrastructural resources away from marginalized, racialized, and/or precariously documented populations. As a transfer, rather than a set of cuts or privatizations, I argue this dynamic is distinct from those of neoliberal or "shrinking" states and is a direct attack on the social reproduction capacity of communities and individuals. Focusing on the case of Detroit, where predominantly white suburban elites succeeded under the cover of Detroit's 2013-14 bankruptcy proceedings to pry the possession of the water and sewage infrastructure away from the city proper, I demonstrate how primarily African-American residents of the city now subsidize the social reproduction of the predominantly white, wealthier Detroit suburbs and are subject to new conditions of failing or abrogated reproduction. In the second half of the essay, I position contemporary raced and classed infrastructural transfers in longer histories of elite control of the means of social reproduction. In the conclusion, I call for an anti-state, anti-capitalist social reproduction politics that could navigate this terrain defined less by biopolitical forms of welfare state discipline and more by warfare, designed failure, and the cruel denial of self-determination.

Brian WHITENER

Detroit's Water Wars: Race, Failing Social Reproduction, and Infrastructure¹

Urban centers of the rustbelt Midwest, Northeast and parts of the Southeast and West Coast, which were zones of racialized proletarian exclusion during the neoliberal period, have been marked in the decades after the 2008 financial crisis by a sinister new dynamic: the use of the state (in the form of local or regional governments) to transfer infrastructural resources and their control out of or away from marginalized, racialized, and/or precariously documented urban populations. These infrastructures range from health and educational resources to natural and civic resources such as water and sewage systems. One result of this new angle of attack on social reproduction infrastructures has been the emergence of forms of struggle around the infrastructures of education, water, and health. Frequently, these battles around infrastructure have been folded into existing ideas of neoliberalism and read as yet another example of, and response to, the "shrinking state." Such an approach, however, seems unable to grasp how these infrastructural grabs, rather than a consequence of the state shrinking, are in fact a distinct kind of raced and classed resource transfer mobilized and sanctioned by the state.²

There has also been recently a great deal of analysis of the failures of state-run infrastructure—the brutal water crisis in Flint, Michigan being a critical example. However, states have not just let infrastructures fail—that is, doubling down on a politics of premature death instead of raising taxes or addressing structural racism—they have also actively participated in the redistribution of control over and access to key infrastructures of social reproduction. Flint, in fact, was an example of this as well: the switch to the poisonous Flint River (away from the Detroit water system) was part of a long-held agenda of predominantly white conservative political elites in Michigan to attack and appropriate the water infrastructure emanating from Detroit away from the city of Detroit itself. In this essay, my aim is to zero-in on this somewhat less well-known story of racialized water politics and its implications for social reproduction politics. I focus on Detroit, where the predominantly white suburbs succeeded under the cover of Detroit's 2013-14 bankruptcy proceedings, after decades of prior attempts, to pry the possession of the water and sewage infrastructure away from the city proper. As a result, not only have the mostly African-American residents of the city lost control of this infrastructure, they now have to subsidize the social reproduction of the predominantly white, wealthier Detroit suburbs. It is critically important to speak of this history today as—in the aftermath of the city's bankruptcy proceedings—the false notion of a "rebirth" of Detroit, one which completely obscures the transfer of control of this critical piece of social infrastructure, has become a new common sense, and, as result, decades of struggle to preserve local control of the water infrastructure are slowly disappearing into the infinite void of victor's history.

In this essay, I frame these ongoing resource grabs by engaging with recent work that has attempted to theorize infrastructure's connection to modern forms of power. Brian Larkin, perhaps the most prominent theorist of the recent boom in work on infrastructure, has defined infrastructures as "matter that enable[s] the movement of other matter" (329). As such, infrastructures are systems,

¹ This essay, while published here under my name and with substantive changes, was first written as part of a larger collaboration with Zhivka Valiavicharska and published under pseudonyms in the special issue on social reproduction of *Viewpoint Magazine* 5 (2015). This version represents a continuation of that project of thinking social reproduction from an anti-capitalist, anti-state perspective and a continuation, in a different form, of that process of thinking-in-common. Thanks to editors at *Viewpoint* and other friends for comments on a prior version of the article and to the anonymous reviewer for *clcweb* for comments on the present version. Thanks to Josiah Rector for answering email queries and to Daniel Nemser for past and on-going conversations on these topics.

² It is common to hear in Detroit that the creation of a regional water authority—which I discuss in this essay—is a step towards privatizing the system as a whole, which could be read then as a classic example of "shrinking." It is true emergency manager Kevyn Orr floated the idea of privatization during the Detroit bankruptcy and that many other cities have switched to some form of private management of water systems. Nonetheless, this has yet to happen—even though other aspects of the bankruptcy of Detroit were profitable to the private sector, such as the privatization of waste collection and public lighting as well as giving bond holders and insurers property and rights to revenue in return for renegotiating city obligations (Recchie et al. 30). While in other locations, the extraction or transfer of social reproduction infrastructure might tie more *directly* into privatization, the case discussed in this essay is marked by a different set of governance dynamics. See C. S. Ponder's "The Difference a Crisis Makes" which very helpfully positions the struggle over Detroit's water system within a nationwide turn to racialized austerity dynamics and extraction of resources from black urban cores by white suburban elites. My argument is that even where there are classic privatization dynamics a social reproduction focus will often reveal racialized resource transfers.

ones which are frequently hidden from view and considered neutral, one of whose functions is to distribute resources and govern populations: they "comprise an architecture for circulation" (328). Daniel Nemser in his important *Infrastructures of Race* demonstrates how the infrastructures states use to organize bodies are productive of and are produced by racialization, and he traces how they serve "as a condition of possibility for the emergence of groupness as such, engendering social relations and structures of feeling" (17). Part of my aim in this essay is to show how these systems of circulation have been newly politicized and how social-reproductive infrastructure, as a means for the circulation of resources, has become an object of political contestation, a form of coercive racial and class control, and also productive of race and class itself.³

To this end, I use the Detroit water system as a case study for thinking about the connection between the successful social reproduction of predominantly white communities and the exposure of African-American and other minority, poor, and immigrant communities to premature death and failing reproduction. I develop in two ways the connection between social reproduction and race. First, I track the reproduction of predominantly white communities—that is, their provisioning with the resources and infrastructures (water, housing, education, etc.) for reproducing certain conditions of existence and capacitation. Second, I examine how race and racial difference are themselves reproduced through differential access to the means of social reproduction, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore's now well-known definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (*Golden Gulag* 28). The case of Detroit's water system illustrates how urban social infrastructures produce and reproduce race and its geographies, shaping the flows of peoples and bodies and the access to resources. As such this essay develops a vision or version of social reproduction for the contemporary crisis-ridden, deindustrializing present: one of failing reproduction. I use the term "failing reproduction" to mark a moment in which individuals struggle and often fail to maintain a minimal level of subsistence for themselves and their communities. In deploying this concept, I aim at a theorization of social reproduction adequate to the present moment marked so deeply by the unraveling of twentieth century state-forms defined by (coercive) welfare programs and (uneven) labor laws and protections and attentive to tracking the growth of surplus populations, premature death, and the ongoing annihilation of possibilities for self-determined life.⁴

The demographics of the Detroit metro area—the suburbs as a whole are more than 80% white, while the city is 83% black—have shaped to a great degree the form that the struggle over infrastructure has taken in the region. Because of the sharp demographic split between white and black populations across city and suburban lines, battles over infrastructure have been racialized along a black-white/city-suburb boundary and marked by a persistent, long-term anti-blackness localized against the city of Detroit. It is critical to understand how this anti-black racism has determined infrastructural battles and the forms they have taken in the region and also how social infrastructure itself has been used to produce and reproduce the area's radical binary racial divide. This means that the material and social lives of non-black communities of color and immigrants, while subject to

³ The theoretical propositions advanced in this article have emerged from a long series of conversations about how to understand the current water crisis in Detroit and across Michigan, but also other scenarios, particularly in Chicago, such as the public school closings, the elimination of mental health clinics, and most notoriously, the city's refusal to open a trauma center on the south side of Chicago after the University of Chicago closed its trauma center in 1988 (the Michael Reeze Hospital in Bronzeville, which had the only Level 1 center left on the South side, subsequently closed it in 1991). In 2015, south-side organizers, after years of sustained and persistent struggle, won a concession that the University of Chicago, in collaboration with the City of Chicago and Holy Cross Hospital, would open a trauma center. The Level 1 adult trauma center finally opened in May 2018.

⁴ There is a now a large body of work focused on crises in social reproduction, pieces which have been important for my own work, in addition to the ones already cited: Caffentzis, "On the Notion of a Crisis in Social Reproduction"; Curcio and Weeks, "Social Reproduction, Neoliberal Crisis, and the Problem with Work: A Conversation with Kathi Weeks"; Endnotes, "Crisis in the Class Relation"; Federici, "The Restructuring of Social Reproduction in the United States in the 1970s" and *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*; Fraser, "Contradictions of Capitalism and Care"; Freshour, "Ain't no life for a mother!" Racial capitalism and the crisis of social reproduction"; Gonzalez, "The Logic of Gender"; Hester and Srnicek, "The Crisis of Social Reproduction and the End of Work"; Marte-Wood, "Philippine Reproductive Fiction and Crises of Social Reproduction"; Martin, "Historicizing White Nostalgia: Race and American Fordism"; Unity and Struggle, "Morbid Symptoms: The Downward Spiral"; and Zechner and Rübner Hansen "Building Power in a Crisis of Social Reproduction." This essay also engages deeply with the literature on race and social reproduction. Some of that literature is referenced in the notes of this piece. A more in-depth analysis of some parts of it can be found in Katsarova, "Repression and Resistance on the Terrain of Social Reproduction" and Valiavicharska "Social Reproduction in the Making: Recentering the Margins, Expanding the Directions."

different forms of racism and structural discrimination, are often subsumed by the binary racial logic dominating the city's geography, infrastructure, and political discourse. Thus, non-whites as well as poor whites in the suburbs often benefit from the anti-black racism of the predominantly white suburban political elite. Similarly, the possibilities for social reproduction of some white and non-black groups within the city limits have been differentially shaped by the anti-black racism that has marked flows of and access to infrastructure in the city.

While the specifics of the case of Detroit may not be directly generalizable to other urban areas which might have more spatially complicated forms of class and race differentiation and urban/suburb governance, studying Detroit can help us bring out how, across the urban United States, the social-reproductive means of communities of color, immigrants, and the poor are now subject to conditions of intense attack through the existing social infrastructure. Urban studies scholars have shown how welfare infrastructures and the social distribution of resources, while making a vast number of marginalized populations dependent on them, were deployed strategically as a means of social control and social regulation, of racialization, of spatial segregation, and of reproducing social marginality. In the context of the present restructuring, these existing dependencies are being exploited and turned against the marginalized in particularly egregious ways, through the systematic expropriation of access to the resources necessary for basic reproductive needs. These occur through withdrawals, shut-offs and closures, extortion, excessive monetary punishment, and criminalization, keeping those on the margins subordinated to a regime of poverty, debt, and exploitation.

All these infrastructural seizures and transfers have the double effect of expropriation and punishment, of producing marginalization and punishing the marginalized. While they have effectively become new forms of expropriation and dispossession, they also wield new forms of discipline and social control that are specific to the current neoliberal regime and that operate on the terrain of social reproduction. Working differently than the regulatory regimes of the welfare state, these are new forms of coercion, repression, and social control over communities of color, immigrants, and the poor that reproduce the structural conditions of their class. In other words, infrastructure's function is to extract, in addition to resources, compliance and obedience to the work and debt regime and also to ensure that material wealth and class power remain structurally unavailable to these communities.⁵ In the following, I open a window into these contemporary dynamics through the history of how political and economic elites of the predominantly white suburbs of Detroit waged a decades-long juridical and legislative war in order to pry the possession of the water and sewage infrastructure away from the city proper before turning to develop some of the historical and theoretical ramifications that can be derived from this case study and asking after its implications for social reproduction politics in the present.

The "Minority" Partner: The Battle over Detroit's Water Infrastructure

After years of debate and speculation, the largest metropolitan bankruptcy in U.S. history became a reality on July 18, 2013 when the city of Detroit filed in federal court. However, it was not the mayor and city council who came to the decision to file for bankruptcy; rather at this moment the city was under control of a governor-appointed emergency manager. An "emergency manager" is a juridical device, which exists in the state of Michigan, in which the governor, having decided that a municipality is in a state of "financial emergency," can send an official to take control of said municipality.⁶ The official then assumes all powers of, and overrides, the mayor, city council, and other elected governing bodies, gaining the ability to break contracts, outsource work, and reorganize any part of the city's administrative structure in order to return the local government to "financial health." Between 2008-2013, before Detroit's exit from bankruptcy, more than half of Michigan's African-American population had lived under the non-democratic rule of emergency managers (Lee et al. 1).

While a great deal of the coverage of the Detroit bankruptcy focused on which groups (bond holders, retirees, etc.) would be forced to accept haircuts on their obligations from the city coffers, the bankruptcy was also notable both for the inclusion of Detroit Water and Sewerage Department

⁵ Historically the burden of cuts to social reproduction has fallen most heavily on women. This is also the case with respect to the water system in Detroit. Josiah Rector's forthcoming *Toxic Debt* does an admirable job of detailing the raced and gendered consequences of the water shut offs and attacks on the water system in ways that the present piece cannot.

⁶ This version, giving a wider range of powers to the emergency manager, was passed into law in 2011. In 2012, a voter referendum overturned the law, but it was slightly rewritten to shield it from voter challenges and passed again by the Rick Snyder-led government (Doan 4).

(DWSD) debt obligations and for the fact that they were not significantly renegotiated.⁷ The entire bankruptcy was predicated on a false equivalence between a short-term budget shortfall (revenue) and long-term debt obligations (Rector), and many authors and activists have argued that Detroit's total debt obligations were importantly overstated by the emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, in order to force the city into bankruptcy proceedings. The inclusion of \$5.2 billion in debt from the DWSD was the most egregious example of this, because the DWSD served not just the city and thus the debt was not a "direct obligation of the city's budget", rather it was "payable from the fees charged for that service rather than from city resources" (Turbeville cited in Recchie 29). However, even after its spurious inclusion, this portion of debt "owed" by the city was not significantly renegotiated (some of it was refinanced but unlike other city debt, bond holders were not forced to accept reduced payment).

The inclusion and then non-renegotiation were intentional—as will become clear—and the water and the water system were, in critical and significantly underappreciated ways, at the heart of the bankruptcy and its disastrous effects on the city, which was clearly visible in both the run-up to the bankruptcy and after. The decision by the DWSD to begin turning off the water of residents behind on their payments in April of 2014—by sending private contractors to their homes, leaving the elderly and children without access to this essential element of human life—received, and rightly so, a great deal of national media attention. As protests swelled throughout the summer of 2014, the shut offs were even condemned by Special Rapporteurs from the United Nations. The new shutoff policy came during the final months of the negotiation of the Detroit bankruptcy and was a direct result of the decision not to significantly unburden the water system of its debt or to force the suburbs to pay their fair share.⁸ As was widely reported at the time, holders of DWSD bond debt had been demanding that the department demonstrate that it would have a more stable revenue stream in the future—since its debt load had not been significantly lessened. Pursuant of this, city water rates had risen 119 percent in the decade before the shutoff policy was adopted (Wedes) and the department took a draconian approach to water shutoffs, one that has continued into the present—between 2014-2018 more than 100,000 accounts in Detroit—a city of roughly 673,000 people—were disconnected (Horan).⁹

The debt of the water system was not significantly renegotiated because the bankruptcy and the emergency manager would be the means to accomplish a long-desired goal of suburban and state political and economic elites: to seize control of the Detroit water infrastructure.¹⁰ To make visible the pre-history of this struggle we have to be attentive to two dynamics: the first is the historical relation, sketched above, between the social-reproductive resources of middle- and upper-class, mostly white populations and those of black, other minority, immigrant, and poor communities, which have shaped contemporary urban geographies of class and race in Detroit. The second is the suburbs' long-term struggle to pry control of the water and sewage infrastructure from the city, as a means of securing their ability to generate revenue for their own communities and to ensure these communities' successful social reproduction. The bankruptcy of Detroit was a means used to promote the social reproduction of predominantly white communities and the shut-offs were the other side of this coin: instead of robust communities full of vital resources, infrastructure was turned into a means of punishment and yet another vector of pre-mature death. The context for the climax of this struggle was an environment of increasing municipal resource scarcity in the aftermath of the 2007-08

⁷ \$1.67 billion of the DWSD debt was bought back (through a voluntary tender mechanism) and refinanced through new issuances. This newly restructured debt and the remaining debt was transferred to the Great Lakes Water Authority (\$5.2 billion in total, "Will Bondholders").

⁸ Since 1999, the city of Detroit and its customer base have had "to pay for 83 percent of combined sewerage improvements outside of Detroit, leaving the suburban wholesale customers responsible for only 17 percent of services they received" (Recchie et al. 75). As a result, water rates in the city of Detroit skyrocketed after 1999 to the point that it is not unusual for city customers to spend 10% or more of their monthly income on water. Moreover, this exact 83/17 "sharing" agreement continues forward into the new Great Lakes Water Authority agreement (Recchie 12). In short, after Detroit customers subsidized the expansion of the system into the suburbs in the 1950s and 60s, they continue to subsidize the upkeep of the suburban system in the present, even after the bankruptcy.

⁹ Josiah Rector estimates that between 2014-2018 over 200,000 Detroiters were affected by shut offs. Of course, these numbers barely scratch the surface of the social and health costs of these punitive policies and they can only point to the everyday human stories and struggles that lie behind them.

¹⁰ In the moment, the shutoffs and their political framing were often read via critiques of Wall Street and finance capital—which would not be entirely wrong (D. Williams; Sloan) especially because the shutoffs were done, in part, to please rating agencies and financial markets. It is critical however to restore the longer history of racialized struggle over the water infrastructure and place it in a social reproduction framework, without of course losing sight of its imbrication with financialization.

financial crisis and the end of a long wave of financial bubbles and failed accumulation which precipitated the final austerity measure of a bankruptcy in Detroit.¹¹

The Detroit metropolitan region is composed of four primary entities: the city of Detroit and the counties of Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland. The city runs to the border of the counties where the suburbs begin (roughly bounded by 8 Mile Road on the north and Telegraph Road on the far west). Since the 1950s, as a consequence of deindustrialization and white flight, the population of the city has shrunk and the racial composition has changed dramatically (Sugrue 3-5). As Mathieu Desan writes:

Between 1950 and 2010, Detroit's white population fell from 1.5 million to 75,000, with close to half of that loss occurring between 1950 and 1970, before the election of Coleman Young [Detroit's first black mayor]. Meanwhile, Detroit's black population has gone from accounting for 16 percent of the city's total population in 1950 to roughly 83 percent today, standing at 590,000 (US Census Bureau). Detroit today remains one of the most segregated cities in America if one considers the metropolitan area as a whole. Whites respectively make up 81.4 percent and 91.6 percent of the suburban counties of Oakland and Macomb, while Wayne County, if one excludes Detroit, is 83.7 percent white and only 8.3 percent black. (125)

Like many metropolitan areas, the water system of the suburbs was an extension of that of the prior core urban system, in this case, the city of Detroit's system. This has meant that the city of Detroit, at least until the 1970s, controlled most aspects of the system, from price or rate setting to debt issuance to revenue. The suburbs bought their water wholesale from the city, at a price set by the city, and then sold it on to their suburban customers. The revenue from the system was used by the city to maintain the physical infrastructure, but as revenue it could also be used for any other purpose for which the city saw fit.

The water system, and the city's control over it, was a target of suburban politicians since the 1970s. Because the counties had few levers of power over the city proper, their means of expropriation were juridical and legislative and their primary objective was the creation of a new, regional governing body which they would control (their aim has been to shift Detroit to being the "minority" partner—a financial term of art signifying a lesser stakeholder in a business deal but often used in this case with complicated overtones). From 1977 to 2013, the water system was under the oversight of a federal judge due to non-compliance with Environmental Protection Agency regulations. While Judge Feikens (1977-2010), and subsequently Judge Cox (2010-13), declined to create a regional authority *ex nihilo*, the very fact of their oversight was the first bridgehead into the city's authority and their approval and promotion of debt-led and neoliberal solutions weakened the city's power over time and created unsustainable debt loads.¹² In the 1990s, when Republicans controlled the governorship and both houses in the state of Michigan, suburban Detroit legislators made numerous attempts to create a regional authority. They finally succeeded in passing legislation in 2004, but Democrat governor Jennifer Granholm vetoed it. In an action from 2011, then-mayor Dave Bing and local politicians and community leaders protested against the continued attempted takeovers. They highlighted this history of attempted appropriation and noted the importance of the water system for the city. Bing's comments at this event expressed a consensus among black (and other) politicians in the city: "It's ludicrous for Detroit to own the system, to have all the debt but doesn't have control of management of the system."¹³

¹¹ The work of Wyly et al. in "New Racial Meanings of Housing in America" is interesting in this respect. One of their arguments is that the period before the 2008 crisis witnessed the going "mainstream" of predatory lending, out of the urban core and into white (and mixed race) suburban communities. This led to a destabilization of the U.S. racial formation. They argue that after World War Two "the innovations of predatory capital were safely contained by the spatial separations of the city-suburb divide and neighborhood-level processes of class difference and racial and ethnic segregation. But things changed dramatically after 2001, when the appetite for yield required volume—thus necessitating an expansion of predation into the markets of whiteness in American housing" (579-580). I think that this instability in the racial formation and its material supports is part of what is driving the seizure of infrastructural resources—as poverty and crisis move outside their traditional zones of racialized confinement, infrastructural attacks to reinforce and restructure this racial hierarchy have increased.

¹² Moreover, Feikens in particular favored concentrated, non-democratic authority, which had devastating outcomes for the city. He allowed former mayor Kwame Kilpatrick additional authority (the ability to approve contracts without going to city council) and appointed Victor Mercado DWSD director—both of whom were later prosecuted and convicted on corruption charges (Mercado was also a career water privatizer). The DWSD debt that was taken out during their tenure and on Feikens' watch was an important element in the construction of the narrative used to force the bankruptcy of the city.

¹³ Bing's comments were made extemporaneously.

What primarily white suburban leaders couldn't accomplish through juridical or legislative means, the fiat of Detroit's emergency manager could make real. Part of the bankruptcy agreement—hammered out under the authority of emergency manager Kevyn Orr—was the creation of a regional water board, the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). By establishing the board, the suburbs finally accomplished their goal of wresting control of the system from the city.¹⁴ Under this new deal, Detroit retains "ownership" of the system but leases it to the authority for \$50 million a year.¹⁵ As mentioned, the water department debt was not renegotiated during the bankruptcy—which could have simply put the department back on its feet as was supposedly done with the rest of the city. This new regional water board is composed of six representatives, with only two from the city; one each from Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties; and one appointed by the governor.¹⁶ What this means is that the city has lost control over price or rate setting, and it has also lost control over the revenue from the system. Perhaps most importantly, the agreement states that the GLWA can step in to set the city's rate (i.e., the price customers pay), and takeover or outsource their collection process, if certain conditions are not being met (GLWA "Articles").

Thus, both the water shutoffs and the transfer of water system control were consequences of this long struggle by white suburban elites, who in the last decade have been successful in prying other key pieces of infrastructure or infrastructural revenue from the city.¹⁷ In the GLWA suburban authorities have a tool they can use to shield their communities from any future crises with the water system and to socialize those crises onto the residents of the city of Detroit. Given the racist on-record statements of county leaders like Oakland county commissioner L. Brooks Patterson, one should not hope for a lot of fair play in this regard.¹⁸ With the creation of the GLWA the balance of power with respect to control of the water system was almost completely reversed. Once the owner of the system, the city was reduced to less than a customer, as the GLWA retains a de facto oversight of city rate setting and collections. Through this infrastructural vector, Detroit residents now subsidize the reproductive resources of upper- and middle-class, mostly white, suburbs and their own processes of social reproduction are subject to sabotage, abrogation, and interruption.

Race and the Means of Social Reproduction

It is difficult to exaggerate the degree to which the control of reproduction and access to the means of social reproduction are foundational to the history of the United States and its anti-black, settler colonialist and nativist infrastructures of race. Since the inception of whiteness in the United States, white elite groups have tried to control the reproduction of and access to the means of social reproduction of immigrants, the poor, and communities of color, particularly black ones. While it is not possible in this essay to develop a detailed account of these histories, tracing a brief genealogy of some of these dynamics will help bring out the stakes of battles over infrastructural resources and means of social reproduction in the present.

The control of black women's reproductive capacity and of the social reproduction of black communities were foundational to the U.S. slave system, and in the last decade a rich vein of feminist scholarship has shown how this control was essential to the material functioning and ideology of U.S. slavery.¹⁹ For example, Pamela Bridgewater argued that, as the Atlantic slave trade was closed in

¹⁴ Technically, a regional board had existed since 2011 but the GLWA is the first with undisputed control over the infrastructure and rate setting and with the majority of seats held by the counties.

¹⁵ However, Detroit customers will pay for 30% of this \$50 million (GLWA, "Articles"). Moreover, the city is required to spend this \$50 million on system improvements: it is explicitly forbidden to divert any of the lease payments into the city's general fund. As Recchie et al. have demonstrated, this \$50 million figure vastly underestimated the water system's actual market value and a comprehensive valuation of the system was avoided by having it transferred through a leasing agreement instead of as an outright sale (33-34).

¹⁶ In 2017, Flint contracted with the GWLA—in essence switching back to the same water source it was using before the terrible, and still on-going, crisis there. As part of Flint's agreement with the GWLA, the governor's appointed representative will now come from Flint.

¹⁷ Two of the most high-profile cases have been the regional authority, which in 2009 assumed control of the Cobo convention center, and the on-going dismantling of the system of public education in the city of Detroit.

¹⁸ "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn'" (P. Williams).

¹⁹ See for instance Bridgewater, *Breeding a Nation: Reproductive Slavery, the Thirteenth Amendment and the Pursuit of Freedom*; Morgan, *Laboring Women, Reproduction, and Gender in New World Slavery*; Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence and Memory in African American History*; Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*; and Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*. For a wide-ranging take on race and reproduction, see Dorothy Roberts's classic *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the*

1808, the South started "producing" its own slaves, marking a shift towards discourses and practices around "breeding," rewards for having children, and coerced reproduction as a source of profit. As Walter Johnson noted in his *River of Dark Dreams*, slaveholders were very clear that their social reproduction depended on "the biological reproduction of the people they owned" or that the successful reproduction of white communities and families depended on the control, not just of slave labor power, but on the resources for and "raw materials" of black bodies' self-reproduction:

It was not exactly that slaveholders were indifferent to the reproduction of their slaves. Certainly [...], most recognized that their own social reproduction, their own legacy to the future—as a class, as members of families, as fathers—depended on the biological reproduction of the people they owned. As with other forms of property, slaveholders used enslaved people to articulate the connections between white households and generations. As a slaveholders' saying had it, there were three things necessary to beginning a family: a wife, a house, and a slave to work in it. (193)

The active control of reproduction of black and other minority and immigrant populations has been central both to white domination and to the successful reproduction of white communities. Moreover, reproduction of white communities in the United States was never "self-sufficient" as grade-school historical narratives and neoliberal logics would have us believe; rather, it has depended historically on the control of the means of social reproduction of black, other minority, poor, and immigrant communities to secure its flourishing. Both of these aspects are present in the current appropriation and siphoning off of urban infrastructures by majority white communities in the Detroit suburbs.

After the end of formal slavery, the differential channeling and appropriation of resources has passed through three additional phases. One of the critical pieces of the New Deal, the Social Security Act, left out both domestic and agricultural workers who accounted for 90% of the black, as well as most of the Mexican-American and immigrant, labor force in that moment.²⁰ Moreover, as Mary Poole has shown, the exclusion of African Americans was not merely the result of an anachronistic southern racism, but rather enacted nationally by "a shifting web of alliances of white policymakers that crossed regions and political parties" who "shared an interest in protecting the political and economic value of whiteness" (6). The same is the case for the post-war period in which the massive flows of Federal dollars that poured into local communities did so in ways to preferentially support the social reproduction of white communities by promoting white flight and extending segregationist practices into the suburbs. With the rise of surplus populations and the penal or carceral state that Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Loïc Wacquant have described, these institutional arrangements were continued and refashioned through a transfer of resources out of the welfare state and into the warfare state (to use and slightly inflect Gilmore's language).

There has certainly been a shift on the part of states and elites from a pretension to sustain a reserve army of labor at minimal levels of health and education to the abandonment of these often racialized sectors of the population to their fate as surplus populations. However, what I am trying to draw out here is that as historically critical as the shift to surplus population has been, there is another dynamic, one at play in the United States since the dawn of enslavement, wherein elite white groups have struggled to control the means, access to and products of social reproduction of other, and especially black, communities. In Detroit, William Bunge's forgotten classic of Marxist geography, *Fitzgerald*, helps trace the durability of these social reproduction dynamics. Bunge demonstrates how the urban "ghettos" of the 1960s were not (merely) sites of abandonment but rather of the massive transfer of income, via rent, to the suburbs: "The affluent suburbs own Detroit's heart. All told, money is sucked out of the people of Fitzgerald by the affluent white suburbanites in Grosse Pointe like lamprey eels suck the juices out of Michigan Lake trout" (132). In the case of the Detroit water system

Meaning of Liberty. These works trace as well the forms of resistance and alternative forms of intimacy, community and knowledge produced by black women and communities in these difficult circumstances.

²⁰ The immigration legal system is a vast and complex web of differential political, material, and occupational exclusions, which have rarely been accounted for in work on the welfare state. Some of its parts constitute classic forms of expropriation and resource transfer from those with severe legal and economic prohibitions on their lives. Generally, immigrants with a legal "permanent resident" status have a relative range of access to federal and state-funded social programs, although as part of the dismantling of the welfare system in the 1990s, the government further limited access to federal funds for permanent residents and other legally residing immigrants who qualify for some programs. Historically undocumented and precariously-documented immigrants have been excluded from federal welfare and healthcare programs, even though a great majority of them pay Social Security and Medicare taxes. For a recent study on how immigration figured into the formation of the welfare state between 1890-1930, see Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*.

takeover, this historical dynamic takes on new inflections, in particular in how infrastructure has been newly tied into the reproduction of race and economic marginality and anti-black premature death. The withdraw of infrastructure that delivers essential resources, while not entirely "new," is being reconstituted as a mechanism of power within the U.S. system of structural racism as it participates in spatial regimes of class power in a moment of surplus populations.²¹

In these contemporary reconfigurations, the social reproduction of majority white suburban communities, through state mechanisms, is supported by or parasitically feeds upon non-white, poor and immigrant communities and resources. At the same time, infrastructure and its withdrawal are converted into a tool for intensifying class oppression and control of racialized surplus populations. Detroit city residents can now be forced to choose between paying water bills and buying food or school supplies. In addition, spikes in foreclosures in the city can also at least be partially attributed to residents falling behind on mortgage and tax payments due to increasing water bill pressures, the fact that unpaid water bills are added to tax liens (which can lead to foreclosure; Rector), and to the practice of suburban Wayne County of buying up city dweller's tax debt and either collecting it with inflated late-interest fees or allowing the foreclosure of homes to proceed (Ikonomova). All of these are examples of how an infrastructural vector can be used to augment class oppression, re-inscribe racial difference, and abrogate conditions for community self-determination.

If for many decades the carceral state and system have formed a critical piece of control over surplus populations, immigrant and poor communities, and communities of color, these new dynamics of infrastructural resource grabs can be read as part of an emerging recalibration of the carceral system. While conservatives and the far-right are moving towards a politics of limiting some aspects of the carceral state (Gilmore "Worrying"), the seizure of social reproduction infrastructure represents a new vector for reproducing class and racial domination. As certain parts of the carceral system are muted or transformed, infrastructure appears as an emergent means for extracting resources from immigrant, poor, and communities of color and coercing them into compliance. To say this in a slightly different way, the most convincing accounts of neoliberalism, such as those of Loïc Wacquant and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, focus not on the shrinking of the state, but rather on the transfer of resources from the welfare state into the carceral or warfare state. To think the urban present and the terrain of social reproduction, we must add to these accounts the transfer of infrastructure as another mechanism of racialized state craft. While capitalist cities have historically been sites of population control, the state-sanctioned or authorized transfer of resources and capacities for social reproduction in and out of differently raced and classed communities turns the city itself into a site of intensified coercion and repression. Limiting or conditioning access to the infrastructural means of social reproduction thus becomes an effective disciplinary instrument involved not just in the biopolitical governance of "life" (as Foucault defined the liberal and welfare state) but one that successfully mobilizes the specters of death, famine, homelessness, illness, and abandonment to exert coercive control.

Against Designed Failure, Or Anti-State Social Reproduction Politics

Most often, the politics one finds in the 1970s literature on social reproduction blends some form of anti-capitalism with a turn to the state, requests to the state for funding, or an orientation towards the state as a site of struggle (Katsarova). I think that the present moment demands that we begin to address these historical legacies of reliance on or orientation to the state and think differently about the politics of social reproduction. In part, because even though welfare policies were always a means to coercion, the present is marked by new dynamics of the seizure and weaponization of critical infrastructures of daily life which are designed to cause failure and harm and to provoke the shortening of life and the cruel abrogation of self-determination.

If the politics of social reproduction in the 1970s blended anti-capitalism with a turn to the state, what feels different about the present is that much of the state apparatus has been transferred, or is being transferred, from welfare to warfare. It is hard to imagine turning to the state in the present—where there once might have been points of entry for negotiation, cooptation, and mediation, today one more often finds doors leading into the carceral, judicial, and deportation systems or into necropolitical futures. It is well known, of course, that historically the state and the infrastructural apparatus attached to it have always been used to discipline. What is perhaps distinctive in the present is that the welfare justification of these tools of discipline has dropped away or rather the

²¹ Third Coast Conspiracy's "Democracy, Disposability, and the Flint Water Crisis" does an excellent job of discussing the relationship between infrastructure and surplus populations in the context of Flint.

balance between the state's "welfare" and "warfare" functionalities has tipped decisively in the direction of warfare, death, and designed failure and crisis.

These resource and infrastructure seizures in the present generate, almost immediately, acute crises of social reproduction. If you live on a block where the majority of residents have no running water—before there can be a political project of wresting back control of the infrastructure—one is faced with the daily problem of how to source water. At the same time, another particularity of the present is how one community's crisis underpins another's successful reproduction. Where once there was at least a pretense to maintaining a reserve army of labor in conditions in which they could be drawn into the labor force, now, instead of minimal conditions of life, one finds deepening crisis and a widening separation between majority white communities in which social reproduction is possible and those which have been increasingly subordinated by the state and capital to regimes of poverty, debt, exploitation and pre-mature death.

One of the tasks of the present is to find a way through this situation, across a terrain of social reproduction defined more by warfare than welfare, one defined less by biopolitical forms of welfare state discipline and more by forms of the intensification of the disruption of group, familial, and individual processes of social reproduction. Many contemporary struggles around social reproduction have turned to the forging of autonomous forms of governance, networks of mutual care, survival, and wellbeing, and have invited communities to take back the resources and knowledges necessary for caring for each other and reproducing and continuing to survive on a daily basis.²² These emergent autonomous forms of organizing, marked by a turn away from the warfare state or by an explicit anti-state positionality, will certainly be an important part of any political project addressing current crises in social reproduction. At the same time, the great technical, material, and social complexity—and, in the United States, imbrication with histories of anti-blackness, nativism, and indigenous genocide—of the infrastructures of social reproduction which have been seized, sabotaged, or forced into failure strain and present a clear challenge to current forms of mutual aid and autonomy. However, rather than a permanent obstacle to struggle, working through these kinds of challenges and learning how to rise to new levels of complexity within autonomy are necessary if our material practices of social reproduction politics are to be equal to the tasks of the present and able to fight and win on the contemporary terrain of failure, abrogation, and permanent crisis.

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²² For one of many possible examples see Gleeson, "Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics."

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