

UCLA
limn

Title

Are We All Flint?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5b17t3vj>

Journal

limn, 1(7)

Author

Fennell, Catherine

Publication Date

2016-07-08

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>



ARE WE ALL FLINT?

Why is lead-contaminated water a matter of public concern but contaminated housing is not? **Catherine Fennell** explores infrastructure and the politics of solidarity.

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, Flint, Michigan, has staggered under waves of deindustrialization, disinvestment, and abandonment that have left the city depopulated, its built environment in shambles, and its remaining residents reeling from high unemployment and crime rates, a decimated tax base, and dwindling municipal services. While grim, Flint's decline is by no means unique in a region whose cities have become synonymous with the booms and busts of twentieth century American manufacturing. Nor is the degree of its decay unusual. Aficionados of ruin will find crumbling infrastructures arresting and aplenty in most any "Rust Belt" city. What is singular, however, is the attention that Flint's contaminated water has received in recent months, an attention that is now amplifying ongoing debates concerning America's ailing and aging infrastructures. That amplification is especially apparent in variations of a phrase that has recently echoed through local, regional, and national media and activist circles: "We are all Flint."

With every disclosed email, alleged wrongdoing, and denial of responsibility, the course of Flint's contamination grows as murky and foul as the water that began flowing from its taps in 2014. In April of that year, the city switched its water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. The switch unfolded amid a climate of intense fiscal austerity in which state-appointed emergency managers pushed Michigan's most financially beleaguered cities to cut costs. In Flint, part of this push included a proposal to bypass Detroit's Water and Sewerage Department as the city's water supplier, and to instead source cheaper water through a newly constructed pipeline into Lake Huron. Yet until that pipeline came on line in 2016, the city would draw directly from its river. Decades of heavy industry, pollution, and salted roads meant that more than water rolled through that river. Bacteria, chloride, and chlorine-based disinfectants transformed Flint's treated river water into a highly corrosive soup that ate into aging copper, iron, and lead pipes. Heavy metals then leached from the service lines that connected individual homes, schools, businesses, and factories to Flint's broader water infrastructure.

Flint's residents complained almost immediately about the rank, rust-colored water that tasted strange and sickened them. Local water workers and state environmental monitors, however, repeatedly brushed off these complaints, even as they failed to combat pipe corrosion. According to recent criminal charges, some even went so far as to tamper with tests and readings that would have confirmed the heavy amounts of lead in Flint's water system (State of Michigan Attorney General 2016). Pressure mounted throughout 2015 as residents clamored for action, and as researchers and medical professionals documented high lead levels in Flint's water alongside a spike in cases of

children with elevated levels of this potent neurotoxin in their blood.

"Flint's Katrina," as some activists and politicians have taken to calling the contamination, might seem an isolated event born of the catastrophic convergence of emergency management, shifting water chemistry, aging pipes, and failed governmental oversight. After all, what makes an event a disaster is its ability to rupture everyday life, expectations, and routines. Yet "We are all Flint's" traction in local, regional, and national media suggests something else. Doctors, journalists, and activists have all invoked the phrase when pointing to the ongoing presence of lead in Americans' everyday lives, especially within the water systems of older cities. If "We are all Flint" is a rallying cry, exactly who and for what does it rally?

In the face such a question, it's tempting to argue that there is something universalizing about water because it is a substance that *all* humans depend on. Consider comments made by Erin Brockovich, an environmental activist known for her legal advocacy. In Brockovich's recent article "We Are All Flint" (2016), the city emerges as just one entry in a list of municipalities afflicted by a common denominator: tainted water. Water is "the one thing that sustains us all," Brockovich writes, and for that reason, contaminated water doesn't "see any boundaries of rich or poor, black or white, Republican or Democrat" (Brockovich 2016). Flint is unusual only because it is "the perfect storm" of pollution and government inaction that might just cause "everybody else to wake up" to the presence of toxins in all our lives and bodies (Brockovich 2016). Here, our biological dependence upon water collapses social boundaries, drawing us into a universal political body with a shared stake in clean water.

In the face of such universalisms, it's also tempting to underscore that not every American navigates tainted water in the same way. After all, it is not just any city being poisoned through its degraded and neglected infrastructures, but an impoverished Black city. Take a recent column by *New York Times* journalist Nick Kristoff titled "America Is Flint." "Today the continuing poisoning of half a million American children is tolerated," Kristoff writes, "partly because the victims often are low-income children of color" (Kristoff 2016). Kristoff's column does not back away from the sentiments undergirding "We are all Flint." It merely qualifies them by pointing out the ubiquity of lead in Americans' lives alongside the uneven distribution of its risks. A more pointed critique might suggest that were "we" to foreground that that unevenness, we might be forced to recognize that if "America is Flint," it is not because of the ubiquity of lead in our water infrastructures. It is because like Flint, America is a place built on profound, longstanding, and enduring racial and

Like Flint, America is a place built on profound, longstanding, and enduring racial and economic inequalities that continue to waste some but not all of its citizens' bodies and communities.

economic inequalities that continue to waste some but not all of its citizens' bodies and communities. From this perspective, the sentiments that undergird "We are all Flint" bear more than a passing resemblance to those associated with "All Lives Matter." They gesture to enduring inequalities at the same time they blunt any serious criticism of those inequalities by diluting them in a wash of misdirected solidarity. Here, "We are all Flint" isn't just hogwash: it's whitewash.

While American society's enduring inequalities are troubling, they are not exactly news. News commentary surrounding Flint in fact dwells on how racial animus directed against residents of this "majority minority" city might have driven the neglect and disregard that ushered in its contamination. "We are all Flint's" power then rests not on the phrase's affirmation or denial of social inequalities, but on its capacity to summon a "we," an expansive group comprising countless Americans concerned with "our" aging municipal water infrastructures. In the process, a down-at-the-heels, Black city in a down-at-the-heels state has become emblematic of the dangers that infrastructural degradation poses to *all* Americans.

The question that "We are all Flint's" traction raises then is not whether this "we" actually includes those Americans most at risk from lead poisoning. It is rather about the kinds of risks that a far-flung group of citizens can recognize as shared, and thus

worthy of collective concern and action, and those that will, despite their ubiquity, seem isolated events that will never break the surface of widespread attention. Scholars of mass media in liberal democratic societies have a term for such groups: *publics*.

Publics form when strangers consume media forms, like newspapers, newscasts, and novels. As they respond to these forms, and imagine countless others throughout their cities, states, or nations doing the same, they constitute themselves as a political whole (Calhoun 1998; Habermas 1991; Warner 2002). Members of publics come to imagine themselves as part of much larger wholes capable of voicing collective interests and making collective demands upon entities tasked with protecting those interests. Publics emerge through speaking, listening, and reading. As such, they are discursive formations. Yet those formations are never divorced from a material world. Brockovich's readers have no trouble imagining a "we" indignant at tainted water precisely because they have spent lifetimes opening and closing their own taps, lifetimes filling glasses, tubs, and pots with the water

that comes gushing out, and lifetimes expecting that water to be clean. And they have spent lifetimes expecting that their taxes supported the care that fellow citizens took with protecting important collective goods such as water. Yet it's not every infrastructure that raises a public able to make demands about the soundness of the collective goods it delivers. Consider, for instance, the relative silence that surrounds lead's presence within another major infrastructure: housing.

Housing does not often show up in conversations about infrastructure, but it should. When understood as a thing that draws other entities into relation, an infrastructure need not be limited to the pipes, wires, or roads that so often come to mind whenever we utter the term (Larkin 2013). We can also understand it as a thing that facilitates flows, standardizes distributions, and extends political projects (Anand 2017; Chu 2014; Collier 2011; Joyce 2003; von Schnitzler 2016). Beginning in the 1930s, subsidized housing in both its public and private guises became a premier infrastructure of the American welfare state. On the one hand, public housing, at least in its earliest years, delivered sound

shelter to working- and middle-class Americans shut out of housing markets on account of their limited means or the color of their skin. On the other hand, federally guaranteed mortgages allowed many Americans in the middle class—and those who aspired to join its ranks—to stabilize their housing

costs by spreading them over several decades. They obtained, on extremely favorable terms, a major asset that they could then leverage to finance things a household's members might need, or just want: educations, retirements, second homes, business ventures, enough accrued wealth to pass onto children. The trappings of middle-class security became bound up in the mortgaged home and the orientations to time, place, saving, and spending that it disciplined among mortgage holders. But as much as this welfare infrastructure facilitated the expansion and distribution of financial and economic wellbeing, it was also a thing in its own right. And in the course of older American cities, that thing became thoroughly leaded.

By the early twentieth century, lead was common in the pipes that snaked through growing industrial cities and in the soils of areas that surrounded smelters and foundries. When lead became a common additive in gasoline in the 1920s, lead particles in the air and soil became even denser (Shea 2007). Yet it was lead's presence in house paint that threw—and continues to throw—American children most directly into its



path. Consumer tastes for colorful domestic interiors grew in the 1920s. The electrification of cities meant that consumers no longer needed their house paint to cover soot from coal- and gas-burning lamps, and thus dark, oil-based paints fell out of fashion. Lead paint made the surfaces it covered bright, durable, and easy to clean, adding to consumers' conceptions that it was the most hygienic way to treat surfaces (Markowitz and Rosner 2002; Warren 2000). As lead paint was more expensive than other paints, consumers tended to save it for surfaces that would see more wear and tear, such as baseboards, windowsills, doors, and stairs. And so the very surfaces small children gravitate toward for ballast as they learn to stand up and walk around became covered in a thin, metallic layer. Without regular maintenance, those surfaces could break down and release leaded dusts. Small children easily ingested these dusts because they explore their worlds as much with their mouths as they do with their hands. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, doctors and researchers gradually tied such ingestion to a host of ailments, including lifelong cognitive impairments, behavioral problems, stunted growth, and in severe cases, death (Markowitz and Rosner 2013). More recently, researchers have suggested that lead-poisoned children afflicted with behavioral problems can age into erratic, aggressive, even criminal behavior (Nevin 2007).

By the 1950s, physicians understood that deteriorating paint had ushered in a lead poisoning epidemic among children, especially among impoverished children living in the dilapidated housing stocks of aging industrial cities. They clamored for regulations, and two strategies emerged. The first called for eliminating lead from American life, and a total ban on its circulation. The second, considered far more cost effective, focused on limiting individual instances of exposure (Markowitz and Rosner 2013). Federal regulations finally emerged in the late 1970s that prohibited the use of lead in paint destined for residential uses. Even so, many leaded homes would remain leaded: to this day, health professionals advise homeowners and landlords that aging lead paint poses little risk when neatly sealed with a layer of clean paint, tile, dry-wall, or wallpaper, and when dust is contained during renovation. The main public health intervention is to direct those who own homes built before 1980 to make sure that lead paint is properly contained, that renovations are properly conducted, and that children avoid suspect surfaces. In short, lead paint still lingers in all manner of homes financed and delivered through governmental subsidies and programs. Yet in a society that takes homeownership aspirations for granted, and treats the responsible mortgage holder as an exemplar of citizenly virtue, it is difficult to parse the lead layered in one's walls and windowsills as a collective matter that warrants widespread attention

and concern. There is no "we" here; there are only individual homeowners and landlords who act more and less responsibly when grappling with the residues of bygone building practices, homeowners and landlords who are more or less able to safeguard the health of both their investments and the people who live within them. This ethos of individual responsibility is in fact so strong that it has come to govern even obsolete housing infrastructures and their disposal.

Consider here the serious effort that another financially beleaguered Michigan city has recently undertaken to mitigate the hazards posed by the vacant houses that litter its landscape. In 2014, Detroit embarked on an ambitious, federally funded plan to take down 40,000 derelict structures. Those coordinating the demolitions put in place measures to suppress the spread of demolition dust, which typically comprises a range of heavy metals, including copper, manganese, iron, and lead. Coordinators have concerned themselves especially with lead. Like many cities in the region, Detroit has struggled with high childhood lead poisoning rates: although rates have fallen in the past decade, they are still nearly twice the national average (Bienkowski 2013). Adopted measures included requiring contractors to forgo the wrecking ball in favor of equipment and procedures that release less dust, to wet down houses and the resulting debris piles as they demolish houses and cart them off to the dump, and to distribute materials to neighbors that offer tips for avoiding dust. While federal regulators have lauded these steps as a "best practice," they have not required Detroit to undertake any of them. Were this "best practice" to fall by the wayside under mounting criticisms about rising demolition costs and dwindling federal funds to cover them, nothing apart from personal vigilance would stand between a resident and her exposure to potentially hazardous dusts.

Now compare this situation with that of Flint. Federal regulations phased out lead pipes, paint, and gasoline around roughly the same time. And like leaded housing, many leaded water infrastructures have remained leaded because remediation strategies have likewise centered on containment instead of removal. This is where the similarity ends. Federal regulations in place since the early 1990s require water utilities to take standard corrosion control measures (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] 1991). Adding phosphates to water during the treatment process coats pipes in ways that inhibit lead and copper from leaching into water from a utilities' own aging and outmoded piping, but also from consumers' aging and outmoded piping. This second point is crucial: regulations exist governing the disposal of leaded paint in occupied buildings, but they target the actions and inactions of *individual* property owners. The responsibility for lead mitigation within water infrastructures is neither localized nor localizable.

Lead paint made the surfaces it covered bright, durable, and easy to clean, adding to consumers' conceptions that it was the most hygienic way to treat surfaces

Instead, the service provider must assume responsibility for the health of water distributed throughout the entire network. As such, it must mitigate leaching risks in the houses of private homeowners by making sure that the water it sends into those houses will not cause aging pipes and fixtures to leach lead. This is the step that water workers failed to take in Flint, and the step that state and federal regulators failed to enforce. In the process, they set off a public health emergency that has captured national attention. Federal and state governments are heavily involved in providing and regulating the goods of shelter and water. Yet in contrast to water, Americans do not generally consider shelter to be a collective good, as evinced by that fact that its provision, maintenance, and regulation is in most instances not centrally administered. Publics raised through water infrastructures can make demands of public entities that publics raised through housing infrastructures generally cannot. This means that heads can and will roll for toxic water in a way that they have not and cannot roll for physically and financially toxic housing.

Once airborne, demolition dusts can circulate beyond the point of their origin. In this respect, they resemble the expansive reach of flowing water.

Yet even though dust generated by the demolition of homes poses public health hazards in cities across the United States, we are not all Detroit. Just as we are not all Baltimore, Chicago, or Milwaukee, all cities that have, courtesy of leaded house paint, struggled with epidemic lead poisoning rates. Flint is an entirely different matter because Americans have come to conceive of water and its delivery in an entirely different fashion. Water infrastructures may send water flowing through an individual home, but they are not ultimately of that home. They tap deep into investments in a good whose care seems utterly beyond the reach of any single individual. And these investments float the stuff not just of collective imagination and identification, but also of collective administration and related demands for collective protection. So while “we” might all be at risk for ingesting toxins, some of us can spit back the lead soup that leaches from “our” pipes, even as others must swallow the lead dust that flakes off “our” walls. ■

CATHERINE FENNEL is an anthropologist at Columbia University whose work examines the social and material legacies of housing in the urban Midwest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anand, Nikhil. 2017. *The Hydraulic City*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bienkowski, Brian. 2013. “Good News for Detroit: Lead Poisoning of Kids Drops 70 Percent since 2004.” *Environmental Health News*, February 28. <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/2013/detroit-lead-poisoning>
- Brockovich, Erin. 2016. “We are all Flint: How America’s Moms are Leading the Battle for Clean Drinking Water.” *Huffington Post*, March 18, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erin-brockovich/we-are-all-flint_b_9498736.html
- Calhoun, Craig. 1998. “Community with Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere.” *Sociological Inquiry* 68(3):373–397.
- Chu, Julie. 2014. “When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China.” *American Ethnologist* 41(2):351–367.
- Collier, Stephen. 2011. *Post Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Joyce, Patrick. 2003. *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*. New York: Verso.
- Kristoff, Nicholas. 2016. “America is Flint.” *New York Times*, February 6. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/opinion/sunday/america-is-flint.html?_r=0
- Larkin, Brian. 2013. “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42(1):327–343.
- Markowitz Gerald, and David Rosner. 2002. *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2013. *Lead Wars: The politics of Science and the Fate of America’s Children*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nevin, Rick. 2007. “Understanding International Crime Trends: The Legacy of Preschool Lead Exposure.” *Environmental Research* 104:315–336.
- Shea, Edward. 2007. *Lead Regulation Handbook*. Lanham, MD: Government Institutes.
- State of Michigan Attorney General. 2016. “Schuette Charges Three with Multiple Felonies in First Stage of Flint Water Crisis Investigation” [press release], April 20, http://www.michigan.gov/ag/0,4534,7-164-46849_47203-382827--,00.html
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). 1991. *Lead and Copper Rule*. Washington, DC: EPA, Office of Water.
- von Schnitzler, Antina. 2016. *Democracy’s Infrastructure: Techno-politics and Protest after Apartheid*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Warren, Christopher. 2000. *Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.