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## Racial Microbiopolitics: Flint Lead Poisoning, Detroit Water Shut Offs, and The “Matter” of Enfleshment

### **Introduction: Flint, Detroit, and Water Regulation as Racial Microbiopolitics**

In June 2013, the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) cut off Flint’s water supply in response to the city’s proposal to reportedly save money by switching to The Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). In the interim, the city made a contract for water with a private engineering firm. The Houston-based firm, Lockwood, Andrews & Newman, also had offices in Flint and began using the Flint River water instead of Lake Huron and Detroit River water. Meanwhile, in nearby Detroit and in April 2013, the DWSD entered a “contract with Homrich, a demolition company, to carry out 70,000 shutoffs in 730 days...sponsored by Rodney Johnson of Grosse Pointe” (Bellant et al.). The DWSD reportedly initiated this to do damage control over the debt incurred from delinquent water bills. A year later, both Flint and Detroit began experiencing residential push back on the privatized water regulation and shut off processes: in April 2014, residents in Flint began complaining about the water, reporting rashes, and bacteria concerns, while nearby residents in Detroit began a protracted battle over 17,000 residents having their water shut off. Flint issued a boil water advisory to kill e coli and boost chlorine flushing, but did not formally acknowledge the toxicity levels as a danger to residents. By August 2014, both cities’ residents had begun protesting the inability to access clean and affordable water at home.

Both the Detroit and Flint events are useful for analyzing of how racialization happens through regulation of and access to water, especially since the large majority of the population in each city self-identifies as Black or African American<sup>1</sup>. The political battle also put race in the forefront of its protests over clean, affordable water in postindustrial urban spaces. This was heightened by the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement simultaneously receiving increased publicity. Both Flint and Detroit’s “water crises” and subsequent protests demand an examination of

how the privatization and regulation of water participates in making the all-too “material” component of protests that align with “Black Lives Matter” increasingly evident. This materiality in both the cultural (race) and literal (water) sense is especially notable since both cities are also part of a larger narrative of globalization and the privatization of water within the U.S. Citizens went up against corporate and State interests over water politics to stake a claim in the right to life itself, a right only possible with access to clean water.<sup>ii</sup> By articulating together the violence of poisoning or withholding water within two cities near the Great Lakes, a specific history of racialized violence and protest to that violence surfaces. This paper explores this history to ask how water is wielded as both “matter” and “metaphor” to implicitly say that some protected lives “matter” more than those exposed to precarity by privatizing and regulating “matter” itself. Turning to the language of literal and cultural meanings for matter creates a historical, material analysis of how water regulation violently racializes.

Analyzing coverage of water shut offs and poisoning in Flint and Detroit means turning to the language of cultural representation and risk management (unsafe water or debt over water). Such a turn to the representative implications of phrases such as BLM and photographic coverage, as well as finance capital’s language of risk management, is not a question of essential identities, populations made into surplus labor, nor representation divorced from historical, material formations. Instead, examining the representative mediums of language and imagery in both Flint and Detroit as they intersect with the logics of finance capital accounts for how populations are made to seem surplus *as* post-industrial de-labored forces. This paper will argue that in both Detroit and Flint, water is wielded to make some residents seem to bear the significations of social death, risk itself, and contamination. At the same time, this racialization forces the residents to experience the potential violence already inherent to all bodies’ trans-corporeal relationship with the “matter” of life that can be contaminated: water. In other words, life-forming matter in the literal sense is the hyper-surveyed

(debt collection and scientific evidence of pipe erosion) or intentionally unsurveyed vector of potential risk (denial of inadequate billing practices and ignoring residential complaints of toxic water). The selective surveillance of literal matter coincides with the late capitalist imperatives of the city and water department. Such a co-articulation of scientific matter, financial speculation, and risk management demonstrates how a rhetoric of risk and contamination also transforms “infected” bodies into the perceived, virtual manifestations of the future threat of contamination itself. In short, this paper will argue that speculated risk becomes justified as biological while denying the historical particularity of how that risk is culturally constructed, much less at whose expense.

In order to seek out these paradoxes in surveillance and uses of the word “matter,” this paper closely reads some of the disavowed intimacies between the microbial “matter” and the cultural “what matters” in photographs of Flint protests. In turning toward coverage of resistance to this “mattering,” the analysis might surface and attest to both the violences of the subtle logic in both cities’ crises, as well as the promising deviances in visual and linguistic protests. The particular photographs examined also take up literal “matter” and lead poisoning as primary vectors for making explicit the cultural justifications that transform some bodies into appearing to be the risks themselves. In other words, sex, disability, race, and microbiopolitics are portrayed in linguistic and visual representative movements, but they have not been articulated together, yet, through the undeniably material and historical sites of two particular water crises. What happens when they are, and what does failing to do so simultaneously erase and disavow? In beginning to explore such questions, this paper begins by covering the two-year trajectory of the crises in both cities. This history contextualizes existing relationships between capital’s flow through businesses, racialized populations, and the rhetoric of contamination and risk management. The stories of both cities’ water crises undergird what protests called attention to, which is the contrast between treatment of residents and businesses in both the shut offs and responses to reports of lead levels. Such a

contrast between residents and businesses sets up the relationship between neoliberal capital and the management of life through its foundational matter, such as water, and the portrayal of events as “crises.” Working against this violence, the media photographed protests from Flint co-articulate Black feminism and microbiopolitics to call out this historical violence and respond with usefully disruptive politics of deviance and resistance.

### **Detroit and Flint’s Water “Crises” as Making Populations Surplus in Postindustrial, Neoliberal Urban Landscapes**

Throughout both Detroit and Flint’s narratives, protesters’ complaints brought to the forefront what was previously an undercurrent: the value proscribed to industrial and postindustrial buildings, businesses, and manufactured objects compared to actual residents.<sup>iii</sup> In response to rising tensions over who and what might still receive water in Detroit, the State gave one million dollars to DWSD in what was called the Detroit Residential Assistance Program. In the program, residents could apply for up to \$1,500 toward delinquent bills, but this was only a dent for those who were contesting balances as high as \$5,700 (Winchester). For many, the program was even more problematic since it did not respond to how “high dollar commercial and municipal accounts” (Bellant et al.), or more colloquially, city and business accounts, were responsible for a third of the DWSD debt. The shut offs were against the advisement of water rights activists, who began publically calling out the DWSD for prioritizing business and city accounts over Detroit residents themselves. Those activists proposed that the DWSD first hold business accounts responsible and even require a deposit for service from them. This proposal would generate revenue more quickly than shutting off water from already indebted residents. The proposal called attention to the conflict between the justification for shutting off the water – lack of funds – and actions that would most efficiently pull the DWSD out of debt.

At the same time as this shift in Detroit, Flint’s protests began calling similar attention to the different opportunities for clean water between residents and businesses. In October 2014, General

Motors (GM) refused to use the city's approved water source when they spotted corrosion on their machine parts, and by December 2014, GM had switched to nearby Flint Township for cleaner water. Yet, it was not until January 2015 and a series of advisories against the water that the city formally acknowledged lead's toxic levels in the water. Even then, the admission came at the behest not of residents, but of University of Michigan students who had decided to test the water themselves. Although the DWSD responded to the University's findings of lead by offering to reconnect to Flint free of charge and at a lower rate, the city refused and continued to use the private company and local river as a water source. This move prioritized businesses and capital over residents themselves, even hyper-surveying the water source to protect machine parts while refusing to survey how that same source made residents sick. By the end of January 2015, media attention was turning toward Flint and away from Detroit, where the 2015 round of shut offs resumed. Despite the increased money, aid, and media attention to Flint, much less GM's refusal to use the water, the city did not declare a public health emergency until October 2015.

The city of Flint did switch back to the DWSD and declare a crisis in October 2015, in December 2015 calling it a "state of emergency," but by then, the city had found that lead corrosion was in most of the residential pipes. The declaration illuminated some of the problems with articulating the event as a single crisis in yet another highly racialized, post-industrial urban landscape. In this case, it was also next to the largest source of fresh water in the world, The Great Lakes, as well as a high poverty, postindustrial major city, Detroit. Notably, as 2016 approached, Detroit residents began using protests to highlight that commercial and municipal properties owed \$41 million of the debt to DWSD compared to \$26 million of resident-incurred debt. Yet, businesses and government-owned properties did not have their water shut off at the same rate as residents (Kurth). Similarly, in 2016, Flint shifted out of the media spotlight, but continued to struggle through the "red tape" (All Things Considered) of funding for and proposed changes to

corroded pipes, and at the time of this paper, Flint water remains unsafe without adequate filters. The continuously roving lens of media attention marks how these “crises” are embedded within a larger cultural war over the biological necessity of water and how its privatization and regulation racializes a variety of landscapes in unique, violent ways that extend beyond a moment of crisis or temporary emergency.

Both Detroit and Flint’s accounts of water exhibit a clear connection to one another through an all too historically material and concretely matter-forming violence against racialized bodies; however, more than this, molecular discourses of water and contamination interact with, or even co-constitute, the discourses of cultural resistance. This resistance puts pressure on media coverage of events *as* punctuated crises divorced from a history of racial violence. Cities’ and business’ justification of shut offs or lack of clean water through a rhetoric of uncontrollable contagion and/or unworthy debtors makes some lives culturally “matter” more than others by cutting off or making poisonous the literal matter necessary for those lives to continue. Such a denial regulates literal matter (shut offs) or codes it as unpredictable (lead poisoning), which merges violence at the biological level with a historically material process of producing and expanding capital in postindustrial, neoliberal landscapes. This process happens through policies that allow corporate businesses to remain in that landscape by eliding their own water debt while making it impossible for residents themselves to access life-sustaining water if they stay. Using water regulation to remove Detroit or Flint residents while providing water to businesses so that they stay and grow requires that residential populations become culturally signified as what Christina Hong terms “existential surplus.” More colloquially, it makes some residents not “matter” enough to be granted the literal “matter” of water, making them valuable to capital precisely because they cannot pay the water bill, and in having their water shut off, will be forced to move or have their health imperiled. Residents thus become signified as the collateral of postindustrial waste to make room for gentrification and

business expansion. In this circumstance, racialization in the era of finance capital happens in part through the privatization of water and its ability to value different populations in capital precisely because they can be made valueless.

Water becomes a crucial nexus for thinking about how matter forms and informs accounts of agency and violence in this process of emptying a city for corporate and gentrification interests. Those who wield control over water, including corporations such as GM, are given the status of transparent, white, patriarchal subjecthood as a cultural construct of the ideal “Human.” This status presumes access to clean water, whereas those who are subject to poisoning or not in a place to control water are articulated as less than this ideal of self-possessed, property-owning, and financially (re)productive “Human.” This paper argues that such use of water to humanize or dehumanize through a specific, capitalist lens of what counts as “Human” is a biopolitical process at the molecular level. The process makes some appear unworthy of access to clean water through a lack of neoliberal subjectivity. Paradoxically, that right to clean, affordable water is contingent on having inalienable access to it in the first place. That worthiness, or “mattering,” is tied to how the residents are historically portrayed as lacking self-ownership and regulation (cannot work enough independently to afford water bills and/or are subject to local factory outsourcing). In a similar logic of self and property, they are blamed for outdated property ownership (corroded residential pipes or foreclosures). As a result, the already racialized residents are made to bear the risk even as they become the representations of it. This paradox happens in part because of the cultural significations of water that forget its fundamental function at the molecular level for making and sustaining life. Such a shift in attention is the micro component of an otherwise straightforward, biopolitical violence. An analysis of both the contrasting access to water between companies and residents, as well as that of photographic protests, needs to account for the “microbiopolitical” articulation of

social death and racial capital. It is this articulation that produces restrictive, violent conditions for making certain lives culturally and materially seem to matter or not.

A particular aspect of microbiopolitical theory crucial to this mattering is the history of the sciences and their turn toward the “molecularization of life.” Bruce Braun explains this as also a cultural and political turn to how, in the 1930’s, “biology came to visualize life phenomena at the submicroscopic region” (13–14). This molecularization of life frames living matter as inherently unpredictable and visible only through mechanical assistance.<sup>iv</sup> According to Braun, with this shift in the life sciences, ideas of the human as a species that depend on “[understanding] the body in terms of genetic inheritance” (6) and its external visual appearance were thrown into crisis. The life sciences made a new question its focal point, which can be articulated with the social and political turn to finance capital and risk management: when “risk becomes individualized...and ethical practices ‘increasingly take the body as a key site for work on the self’” (11), who is read as “[possessing] a body” that they can narrate as discrete and self-regulating? This question opens to how realizations and subsequent surveillance of the molecular life of bodily and geographic boundaries can challenge ideas of discretely boundaried bodies and nation states that undergird heteropatriarchal property transfer.

It is here that Hortense Spillers’ critiques of the ontologically “whole” and “possessed” body bring forward the problems of racial capital, and articulating Braun and Spillers together opens more directly onto the sites of racialized violence in Detroit and Flint’s water crises. According to Spillers, the violated flesh of the captive, Black female slave body becomes the site foundational to the property relations built into possessing a legible, discrete body of patrilineal kinship. Spillers marks in this site a hieroglyphics of the flesh, which bears the narrative and grammar of the otherwise disavowed violence and suffering integral to the make-up of a present tense’s narrative and grammar for White, heteropatriarchal history (75–76). It is thus the grammar of the hieroglyphics that also

promises deviations from the grammar of the norms committing their racializing violences against the flesh. When a hieroglyphics of the flesh is put within the context of the life sciences' post-racial slavery rhetoric of capitalist and biological risk management at the molecular unit of life, deviations proliferate in this space to resist that violence. The use of "deviant," here, builds on Spillers' promise of what alternative grammar might be found in the hieroglyphics, and it refers to Lisa Cacho's take on the promising "politics of deviance":

A politics of deviance makes sense of *deviations from the norm* differently rather than defensively. Such a politics would neither pathologize deviance nor focus most of its energies on trying to rationalize why people choose deviant practice over proper behavior. Rather than repudiating nonnormative behavior and ways of being, we would read nonnormative activities and attitudes as *forms of "definitional power" that have the potential to help us rethink how value is defined, parceled out, and withheld.* (Cacho 167, emphasis added)

By adding in the term "deviant life" to both the molecularization of life and a hieroglyphics of the flesh, methods for protesting the violences of racial microbiopolitics arise that insist on the mattering of lives at the level of the flesh's relationship *to* life and its molecular registers. Such protests can use Lowe's concept of "deviant life" to refuse to recuperate normative values of the discretely bounded, propertied, White, heteropatriarchal body. As a result, they provide deviations that also reveal the otherwise disavowed intimacies between finance capital's logic of risk management and life sciences' attention to the molecular level of life mattering.

The water crises in Flint and Detroit are sites where protests attest to such a deviant mattering in part by making the molecular level undeniably visible through photography. Both sites also mark a discourse of bodies understood less "in terms of their intrinsic genetic essence...and more in terms of a global economy of exchange and circulation, where the body is thrown into a

chaotic and unpredictable molecular world filled with emergent yet unspecified risks” (Braun 7). In other words, they mark sites of resistance to understanding the body through a cultural lens for race that disavows how molecular levels of life are wielded against those bodies in rhetorics of risk management and contagion. From this co-articulation of the molecular with neoliberalism (self-contained individuals who can own clean water through their labor value) and postindustrialism (that labor becoming unavailable through factory outsourcing while companies purchase their own water reserves), self-possessive individualism coincides with surveillance and security in the name of free trade for economic growth (GM’s water purchase). The postindustrial, capitalistic, neoliberal framework marks the residents as undeserving of clean water, merging cultural and literal meanings of “matter” through a disavowal of governance’s molecular levels. In accounts such as Flint and Detroit, the merging implicates the violent justifications used for who gets to have management over water or be exposed to ecological “slow violence” (Nixon 2-3) from post-industrialization.

In the literal sense, the companies exposed to lead or behind on water bills were able to obtain clean water for themselves by making residents bear the violence of corroded pipes or the shut-offs from delinquent bills. They justified this shift of responsibility from themselves to residents through the financial ability to pay for the element of life itself. Such a rhetorical move relegates the bearers of shut off or toxic water to a proscribed role of simultaneously not mattering and not being able to petition to matter. Those without clean, affordable water are paradoxically made to first obtain the very condition itself for staking a claim *to* the right to water: cultural legibility as self-possessed individuals from the molecular level of water to that of financial resources. Erasing the paradoxical conditions for obtaining water disavows the historical criminalization of communities of color in both Flint and Detroit, urban areas where communities of color are “believed to be subjected to their natural and man-made environments.” The erasure also disavows how “people of color are represented as products of environments that are identified

as the cause, rationale, and evidence not only for a population's inability to access political and economic equality but also for its vulnerability to state-sanctioned violence" (Cacho 73). In the case of water, the process of criminalization and its after effects is reduced to the necessary biological substance of life itself. Turning to the unit of life itself creates the ruse of separating the violence against communities of color from its historical moorings. This ruse is predicated on merging a scientific understanding of molecular life management with a cultural material practice of racialized life management.

### **Microbiopolitical Surveillance: Intimacies that Make the Poisoning of a Hand into the Hand of Poison**

As a concrete example of the cruel, paradoxical conditions for obtaining clean water, General Motors' ability to quickly change water sources when its machine parts became corroded both underscores and contrasts the corrosion of Flint residents' literal flesh. Residents for whom new pipes and water sources were not procured exhibit a microbiopolitical account of Spillers' description of enfleshment. Spillers' account of the flesh claims that racializing apparatuses of property and kinship are made possible by the "undecipherable markings on the captive body [that] render a kind of hieroglyphics of *the flesh*, whose severe disjunctures come to be *hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color*" (67, emphasis added). The moment that machine corrosion grants a company access to clean water contrasts how flesh corrosion goes unseen due to a cultural process of justifying the conditions for the violence. This opens to the first site of analysis and deviation from the norms imposing those conditions: a Detroit News image of a lead-poisoned hand from a Flint resident in contrast to an array of portraits of children's faces looking "at" the viewer. As a closer analysis of the two photographs protesting the Flint crisis will argue, the self-portrait of the hand, in contrast to the photographic campaign of families, renders present and visible a molecular hieroglyphics of flesh that is otherwise culturally unseen via racialization. As a result, the differences between the two types of photographs raise questions about historical racialization through the

regulation of clean, affordable water. The differences between the photographs also elucidate a discourse of disability within microbiopolitical racialization. The photographs throw into relief a historical process of valuing the bodies of the residents through normative standards of “ability” that are co-articulated with race.

Examining the protests from this lens requires accounting for the role of disability in perceiving bodies as normative enough for protection or not. The historical relationship between rhetorics of disability and race differentially values bodies according to how they are articulated as nonnormative. When a body is perceived as nonnormative, it is labeled “disabled,” and “disability is the language of devaluation, contagion, and control” (Cacho 69). This language returns us to the site of water poison or regulation as well as the violence of its racialization. In looking toward sites of presenting enfleshment as effective protest that contradicts normative body and reproductive life valuing, the photographs also surface how the right to clean water access is regulated by coding some populations as vestibules for contagion and risk. Such coding happens in part because of their exposure to the risky mater itself. How, then, is the self-positioned image of the infected flesh from lead poisoning an intentional affront to a gaze that would otherwise seek out a “[recuperation] of social value [which] requires rejecting the other Other” (Cacho 17)? The photograph implicates the disavowed conditions for mattering enough to request water in the first place, and it does this partly by does putting in the foreground the process of enfleshment and molecularized violence. Reading the photograph this way insists upon the historical violence as it is perpetuated in the present. Finally, then, how does the self-portrait refuse to be a vestibule for reassuring whiteness of its violent norms, and in the process, refuse to be fetishized to recuperate the very norms that create the conditions for such violence?

In the first image, a Flint resident, Carolyn Doshie, holds her palm to the camera lens so that the shot’s focus is on the lesions growing from her repeated contact with lead (see Figure 1).

Ironically, the article in which this image appears is entitled, “Flint Faces: she says lesion started after water switch.” The title emphasizes an imperative to classically humanize through an insistence on recognizable face and capacity for legible speech. Carolyn, however, puts her hand in front of her face, closes her eyes, and then “speaks” of the affective and physical suffering in a quote: “I never had no skin issues. . . . It hurts. It’s cracked open and everything.” In both her body’s position for the camera and her quotes for the interview, she insistently foregrounds the material reality of her enfleshment and its pain and suffering. She refuses recourse to humanistic reinstatements of holistic embodiment, facial recognizability, or appeals to innocence and reproductivity, reminding the viewer that the pain itself should matter. She presents the material hieroglyphics of her flesh and speaks to her lived experience in the pain of its rupture as what should matter enough. The image does not assuage an audience of complicity, nor does it reinstate a desire for white, propertied, patriarchal norms so much as for less pain. Such a request, as her hand insists, should not require recourse to the heteropatriarchal legibility of futurity, innocence, and reproduction. This refusal is reinforced by the choice to blur the background so that the present suffering is foregrounded – a present that also insistently signifies an otherwise disavowed historical process that produces the suffering of the moment.

The visual, material, and virtual elements of Doshie’s quoted phrase, “and everything” after the “it hurts,” differ notably from the portraits created by suburban Rochester, MI photographers, Andrew Krupp and Pamela Bratton-Wallace Krupp, entitled: “Voices Seen, Voice Heard - The Children of Flint.” Krupp and Bratton-Wallace Krupp’s photographs of Flint children’s faces appeal

Figure 1:



The caption from the Detroit Free Press online news article, retrieved from <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/01/23/flint-faces-she-says-lesion-started-after-water-switch/79232516/> on 12 Mar 2016, says, “Carolyn Doshie, 46, shows off the sore on her right hand that she says started showing up in July after washing her hands in the tap water in her Flint home. She picked up bottled water at a Flint fire station on Sat., Jan. 23, 2016.” (Photo: Eric Seals Detroit Free Press)

to a culturally available similitude of innocence and normative family structures, as well as foreground reassuring happiness in place of suffering (see Figure 2). This reinstates a culturally dominant conception of the “human” face of the tragedy: the reproductive moral of children as the only innocent bearers of contamination. It also makes the material violence and its historical lineage invisible in favor of a reassuring portrait of visible race. In contrast, Carolyn’s hand insists on the flesh itself as materially violated and violently transformed through suffering. The suffering hand attests to the material violence against racialized bodies. It also implicates the viewer by returning to the site of Spiller’s work on the black female slave body as a vestibule for personhood and

Figure 2:



The Detroit Free Press online news article, retrieved from <http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/mike-thompson/2016/03/06/protesters-aim-keep-spotlight-flint-kids/81417392/>, on 13 March 2016, says, “Demonstrators outside the Democratic debate in Flint hold photos of Flint children affected by the Flint water crisis.” (Photo: Mike Thompson/Detroit Free Press)

reproductive respectability. Carolyn’s image refuses to recuperate the “fantasy sentiment, and desire in literature and popular culture [to] produce the contours of intimacy that mediate the individual’s inhabiting of everyday life in social relations” (Lowe 21). That is, she refuses to replicate the media portrayal of normative accounts of intimacy as the standard for being a protected life. She also refuses to make invisible or fetishize the physical suffering of those who are violently affected. In doing so, the photograph argues against a molecularization of “the human” as being discretely bounded and reproducing normative values for happiness. Instead, it deconstructs the racist premises of such visuals as necessary for protection from violence. This also means that the photograph refuses the fantasy desire for normative accounts of intimacy. More normative accounts,

such as the photographic campaign of smiling families, would disavow the violence of less narrativized and legible intimacies, such as water contaminating homes and publics across territorialized (post)industrialization, as well as the porousness of residents and viewers of the event alike.

This is also in contrast to Krupp and Bratton-Wallace Krupp's "Voices Seen, Voices Heard," where the title calls on speech and faces to garner sympathy. This photographic and aural move depends upon the recognizability and legibility of the faces to do the performative, sonic work of translating the Flint emergency into one of human reproductive value. The dependence on visual and aural legibility in the photography campaign is in stark contrast to the refusal to participate in normative legibility and its counter-insistence of attesting to enmeshment itself. The legibility implied by the emphasis on hearing and seeing a coherent message depends upon its co-production of the potential, "proper" intimacy of the family units that the photographs recuperate. The photographs' reassuring happiness through smiling faces and their heteroreproductive futurity through patriarchal family units attempt to belie any of the "risk" that contamination would imply in part through racialization. The intimacy of the portraits, in other words, sustains itself and the cultural structures that created the Flint water poisoning by erasing the potential violence of cross-material intimacies. It also elides how that violence disproportionately and materially impacts those not recuperated within a heteropatriarchal, propertied logic of deciding who "matters." Those same logics also code some differing forms and modes of protest as "legible" or "illegible."

Disciplinary power in the Foucauldian sense produces the illegible. As Cacho frames it, "because...different disciplinary apparatuses connect and converge with one another but not completely..., disciplinary power will always produce 'something like a residue. ... There is always something like 'the unclassifiable'" (68), which Cacho also calls the illegible. The apparatuses of kinship (the phallogocentric symbolic order of transferring property) and property relations (the

right to privatize the water or regulate it because of that symbolic order) converge as a legible grammar, such as in the photography campaign. This legibility derives its meaning from what is coded as illegible, which in Spillers' analysis of the Black female slave's body is the hieroglyphics of the flesh. Enfleshment becomes both the condition for cultural legibility and a counter-site of illegibility, or hieroglyphics. This analytic framework comes forward in Carolyn's attestation to enfleshment and her insistence that this should be enough to evoke an ethical response. Carolyn's hieroglyphics are an effective protest of matter's violence when poisoned or privatized precisely because they are "indecipherable." They are the by-products of the molecular level of life being instrumentalized for or against populations that culturally "matter" or not. Yet, the lesions insist on the historical violence itself and who it targets. While they are coded partially as indecipherable under the life sciences' logics, which coincide with biopolitical cultural values, the lesions themselves are used to make hyper visible the historical "materials" being used to racialize and expose certain people to precarity.

The photography campaign, in contrast, makes that violence "hidden to cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers 67) as it recuperates the phallogocentric symbolic order and its legibility. Recuperation in these photographs happens through a focus on lives being valuable if they represent normative property and kinship ideals, as well as keeping the molecular violence invisible through the smiling faces of participants. Disavowing the molecularization of life's impact on the process of racializing and exposing to violence is also a way of falsely separating the cultural idea of race from the scientific material violence of racializing. This is in part seeing by skin color because it claims that the mattering of the racialized bodies is dependent on normative recuperations. The disavowal implies that Flint's violence is strictly racial in the "skin color" sense by appealing to their otherwise normatively comprised family, kinship, and happiness structures. In other words, the photographs imply that viewers should care in order to perpetuate colorblind ethics that erase the historically

foundational role of racial violence to creating and protecting the property and kinship norms that enacted the violence in the first place. At the same time, Carolyn's attestation to the flesh itself presents a challenge to the narratives of normative progress in linear, historical time. Her attestation thus confronts the self-contained, self-improving narrative of the neoliberal individual deemed worthy of clean water and divorced from a history of racial violence. Her witnessing to the violence without recuperating or instrumentalizing her own body for exchangeable property or confirmation of that order's logic insists upon the historical materialism – racial slavery – that partially constructs this moment of violence. It is in opposition to the culturally iconographic bodies that reinstate exclusionary ideals of human and personhood to decide who “deserves” clean and affordable water. The attestation to this history also confronts the “crisis” narrative of Flint that would elide the historical violence being perpetuated through the event. Erasing this history is an attempt to narrate the event as punctuation within the line of a larger narrative of improvement, that improvement requiring a disavowal of present capital and racial microbiopolitical foundations in racial slavery. In other words, Carolyn's attestation to the violence against her flesh is also an insistence on how racial violence has functioned to converge with a present “matter,” privatized water and therefore regulation of life itself.

Water traverses the “imperial notions of privacy and publicity” (Lowe 30) and attests to enfleshment when that traversal is for privileging racist and criminalizing goals. It also reveals the intimacies that regulate those spaces, as well as the violence that a capitalist regulation of water produces. These molecular sites operate also on a cultural level, akin to Lowe's analysis of how the category of human becomes prematurely limited:

“...as modern liberalism defined the ‘human’ and universalized its attributes to European man, it simultaneously differentiated populations in the colonies as less than human...*in the very claim to define humanity, as a species or as a condition, its gestures of*

*definition divide the human and the nonhuman, to classify the normative and pathologize deviance.”*

(6, emphasis added)

Water especially can belie the cultural construction of “racial differences and distinctions [that] designate the boundaries of the human and endure as remainders attesting to the violence of liberal universality” (Lowe 7). It can instead point to the possibilities of attesting to the violence of disavowed intimacies across materials and species, as well as the imminent, unknowable possibilities of deploying such intimacies. These unknowable possibilities are present in Carolyn’s presentation of her hand and its hieroglyphics, and they signal genres of the human that historicize the categories of normative universalization instead of memorializing that history as the past. Mourning an action as secured in the past permits a speculation of virtual, universalizable futures that the close-up, lesioned hand and closed-eyes face in the background refuse. In the United States, American-ness depends precisely upon the imagined contradiction of a population lacking access to clean drinking water and health care inter-territorially to sustain its production of surplus existence as one of that population’s own choices (a narrative Carolyn’s hand to camera refuses, whereas the privileging of childhood, innocent victims’ faces reproduces).

The question of management over space is one also about the water that seeps into the home or domestic space. Flint enfleshment hosts questions about who should have management over their bodies’ molecular modification and the manifestations of sometimes illegible physical suffering. Privatized water operates discursively at the site of the individual who makes “choices” about their wellbeing and takes responsibility for it within the home. This site is co-constituted by seeming to be the opposite of a corporation as “someone” who can purchase that safety for their objects/machines or state-sanctioned public spaces. Both, though, depend on the same structures of property ownership and transferal to be granted life-sustaining matter. However, what is disavowed in the narrative of liberal humanist individualism is how such choices operate within a set of

conditions, two of which Carolyn's hand as opposed to the photography campaign reveal. One is the traversal between public and private as formally upholding the boundaries for white, heteropatriarchal notions of human-making individualism. This individualism is secured by seeming to possess control over a discrete body and genetic inheritance that can anticipate future risk and "invest" in boundaries against the contamination of water and nonhuman-borne illness. The condition manifests in footage of Flint homes as outdated hosts of lead poisoning due to its inhabitants not being normatively productive enough to purchase updated homes. It also manifests in children's "pure" faces as the only "innocent" bearers of the violence and proper inheritors of the heteropatriarchal ideal and its protections.

The second condition is a disavowal of the historical violence against the flesh that renders it as contaminant itself when born on water (the middle passage) to be commodified as less than human. Such a disavowal of violence against material flesh also bears the genealogy of the "other" to undergird who does get to ascribe to self-possessed, humanist, holistically bodied individualism. These conditions both depend upon slavery and "kinship" as a "property relation" (Spillers 74), which intersects with cultural and literal notions of access to life-sustaining matter as opposed to withholding, drowning in, or poisoning matter. Race and racism haunt these conditions, and a resistance refuses to see the ongoing social and literal death as an ending that will pave the way for gentrification and businesses. Instead, protests insist on how death can begin a "haunting" that resists that violence and negates neoliberal improvement narratives by conversing (Hong loc 629) with the present via the all too material inscriptions of flesh. These hieroglyphics are the microbiopolitical accounts of transcorporeal relations with water and naturalized, but nonetheless cultural narratives of contagion and poison. These accounts attest to what would otherwise be read as invisible. In addition to this haunting, water and its poisoning produces the enfleshment of

capital's risks themselves. This enfleshment insists on de-naturalizing and revealing the cultural and material dimensions of normative contagion and poison narratives.

### **Racial Microbiopolitics and Genres of the Human in Postindustrial Landscapes**

Deviations from the norms that enact this violence cannot be to make a case for genres of the human that obtain recognizable human status under a logic that reinscribes cultural ideals of what counts as human enough for legal protection and rights. Such a reinscription returns the analytic framework to one of property relations and by extension racial slavery. However, “the Human” as the privileged category, as well as its counterpart of “no humans,” are not the only options for living matter that “matters.” Alternatives do not necessarily need to draw recourse to legibility as personhood or wholesale rejection of personhood. Other options include Alexander Weheliye’s concept of “genres of the human” that refuse to add up to and reinforce the violence that declares one category of human biologically protectable while disavowing its cultural formations and exposing other humans to pre-mature precarity. Local, self-fashioned news images, such as the close-up of Carolyn’s hand, insist that particular lives “matter” through an attestation to living matter and porousness itself – even at units comprising the flesh. It insists that the attempt to dehumanize in fact only points to the never-ending multiplicity of humanity that does not always culturally re-inscribe the normative boundaries around the category. Carolyn’s hand provides a theory that is undeniably grounded in the material. Her statement points out that a “mind over matter” approach to transcendental, property-derived human relations is another way of erasing how physical violence against the “matter” of many humans is indicative of how those humans’ lives do not culturally “matter.”

A universalizing mode of microbiopolitics that focuses exclusively on either the science of molecular sciences or the geopolitical, financial implications for those sciences also disavows the violence of the particular, historical conditions for qualifying as a worthwhile life. In contrast, the

molecular site of a hieroglyphics of the flesh brings the past crashing into the present to insist upon those life-giving stakes. Racial microbiopolitics effectively merges racial biopolitics with a more precise analysis of how power functions at the smallest units: the molecular levels of the life science's articulation of water and toxicity in relation to the capitalist, cultural justifications for unequally exposing populations to precarity. Even a historical materialist account of biopower that stops short at a cultural analysis of the individual and its co-extensive, whole body's enfleshment reinscribes a priority of the self-possessed individual or non-self-possessed individual, as well as discretely bounded bodies. In biopolitics, self-contained, self-possessed bodies become the privileged mode of understanding and making epistemic a configuration of "the" human. Such a privileging negates the role of microbiopolitical knowledge within the life sciences, eliding the justifications of slow violence and risk management that permit or even create crises. It also narrates those crises as episodic instead of participatory in a historical process. Ignoring the molecular level of violence recreates the cultural "non-seeing" of that violence and perpetuates the whole-bodied, dominant conception of "the Human" to be received as a naturalized entity.<sup>v</sup> This naturalization of "the Human" partially creates the micro levels of violence that racialize and gender via the flesh. In contrast, resistances to that violence and the insistent attestments to its material, historically grounded realities offer alternative modes for valuing humanity.

A biopolitics that stops at the flesh of a body, then, also erases some of the material and historical violences that shape such a knowledge of what counts as a "proper" body. Biopolitical power co-articulated with race and disability (Cacho 69, Kafer 2)<sup>vi</sup> reveals the violence of such knowledge when it also accounts for "the molecularization of life" (Braun 6). Thinking at the molecular level can challenge dominant theories of biopower and reveal how using the individual's body and even its flesh as the smallest scale privileges a particular, visual construct of bodies. Accounting for the molecular can challenge traditional sites of resistance while also attesting to

disavowed and, to use Lisa Cacho's framework, deviant modes of alternatively valuing life. Carolyn's hand attests to the racial microbiopolitics that can be used as a framework to account for the violence of water regulation and privatization in both Flint and Detroit. This can at once account for the neoliberal pseudo-scientific logic that justifies the violence while also getting closer to the productive deviations from those logics.

If molecularization is a mode of geneticizing inheritance through the biological sciences, then it is also a deployment of power to racialize bodies and make surplus populations through a rhetoric that biologizes and naturalizes race once more via property and kinship relations. This shift in how knowledges of the life sciences moves forward becomes culturally constructed and then also justified through apparatuses such as hyper-surveillance and an anticipation of possibilities at the molecular and microbial levels considered "invisible to the naked eye": the molecular and microbial levels as they correspond to the era of finance capital and risk management. This is not a new turn – Melinda Cooper points out in her work on biotechnology and capitalism in the neoliberal era that Foucault has already argued how, "the development of the modern life sciences and classical political economy should be understood as parallel and mutually constitutive events" (Cooper 5). The shift to this knowledge is not epochal, nor in line with a linear account of history and biopolitics, nor even with the era of finance capital. Foucault, again, has already provided in-depth analysis of "strategies invented by the state...as a means of organizing the temporal processes of reproduction, disease, and mortality," and he argues that such strategies "are inseparable from the development of the mathematics of risk and statistical normalization" (Cooper 7). Attending to the material sites of this violence, such as Detroit and Flint, and more specifically, the residents themselves, marks how the bodies are foreclosed as "mattering" by being transformed *into* the threat against the GM plant's auto parts corrosion and urban business expansion and gentrification. This fear of contagion, then, is also a way of justifying the deployment of toxins or contagions against

those bodies, and has been since at least the racial slavery accounted for in Spillers' hieroglyphics of the flesh.

### **Conclusion**

Braun attends to how microbiology is used to construct populations through anxiety around vector-borne global contagions. To add onto Braun, such anxiety reveals how populations are biologized and made valuable precisely in, as Grace Hong would put it, their valuelessness.<sup>vii</sup> This valuelessness is the capacity to expose some populations to the ecological "slow violence" of failing to provide clean, affordable ecological resources, such as the lead in Flint water or the water being withheld entirely in nearby Detroit. The relationship between surplus populations and molecular environmental violence complicates microbiopolitics' apparent dismissal of racialization and reproductive value as central to the "biopower" component of the micro. Deconstructing this dismissal requires a reconsideration of how scientific knowledges apprehend the molecular level of life as inherently unpredictable and insistently cross-boundaried, while simultaneously trying to culturally construct certain bodies and spaces as closed off from this transgression via an anticipation of their future, risky attempts to cross those boundaries. The consequences include a naturalization at the molecular level of normative geo and body boundary perceptions, from discrete individual up to territorial states. In turn, that naturalization depends upon the disavowal and violent erasure of material existences that do and should matter – and that already do in more deviant proliferations of lives and knowledge.

The molecularization of life is also a focus on living matter itself now formally understood as inherently unpredictable. Yet, it is predictable enough in the pending postindustrial ecological disasters for the risks to be foreclosed for certain entities, such as suburban, predominantly white households, much less larger businesses. The molecular violence is portrayed as a geopolitically unpredictable contagion, as played out by Flint's refusal to test the water and acknowledge its

toxicity levels, but also in Detroit's refusal to examine the sociocultural, historical causes of water bill delinquencies and the water debt. Attestments to this history and violence by particular residents also bring up the questions about what might be or always is being produced that disrupts normative values of bodies or disavows of physical violence. The always anticipated risk is brought into the present through a political-scientific management: "risk becomes individualized...and ethical practices 'increasingly take the body as a key site for work on the self'" (Braun 11). Yet, who gets to "possess a body," and how does the molecularization of that body get taken up to determine and naturalize how it will matter? Within the hieroglyphics of the flesh, another, even more foundational unit of deviant life surfaces to use the scientifically articulated molecularization of life against cultural narratives that justify violent racializations. These hieroglyphics speak against racial microbiopolitics' and finance capital's ruthless logics for selecting which living matter gets to matter enough. Instead, they attest to the material reality of the violence while insisting on alternative models for valuing life.

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<sup>i</sup> As of the 2010 census, 82.7% of the Detroit population identifies as Black or African American, 10.6% as White, and 6.8% as Hispanic or Latino. 56.6% of the Flint population identifies as Black or African American, 37.4% as White, and 3.9% as Hispanic or Latino. While the exact numbers may have changed, and hopefully future census data will more accurately reflect the greater differentiations within these categories, such as Latina/x, that information is not publicly available at the time of this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> While the right to water as life is brought up in other variously urbanized or rural locations, such as in Standing Rock, this paper focuses on the two accounts of Detroit and Flint to avoid erasing the historical particularities of their specific events through over-generalized analogies.

<sup>iii</sup> In June 2014, the Detroit City Council had approved an 8.7% rate increase even as those who called themselves the “Defenders” spotted thousands of delinquent bills (Bartkowiak). Three United Nations representatives visited Detroit to weigh in on the shut offs and declared them a violation of human rights (Abbey-Lambertz). In July 2014, many residents experiencing water shut offs heard water was “gushing” from a nearby abandoned building and expressed outraged at the potentially poor use of available water.

<sup>iv</sup> Braun expands outward from this transition in the life sciences to discuss the geopolitical implications for realizing unpredictable contagions can escape immediate visual surveillance. Part of this attention is the sudden recognition of how life at the microbial level is unlimited in its capacity for evolving and crossing the bodily and geological boundaries (6).

<sup>v</sup> If “the legal protection of whiteness as a property interest worked to undermine hard-won civil rights” (Cacho 25), whiteness is partially created through property of water and molecular modes of life-making to determine what life is viable. This viability is based on racializing those who cannot “own” water itself as a necessary part of a livable life. This is whiteness as a property owner of water, which is owner of life itself at even the molecular level, so that utility bills – “earning” the right to “pay” for clean water and electricity – are naturalized as a matter of financial and livable choices. It is the narrowing of health as a “matter of individual rather than state responsibility [wherein] citizens are asked to take responsibility for securing their own wellbeing, through...private health insurance...genetic counseling...the intersection of the molecularization of life with the individualization of risk” (Braun 11). Such an individualization of risk and health management allows

those at risk to be seen as the risk. The privatization of the molecular – owning water and directing some clean and some contaminated into different homes – is coded as natural property rights, or survival of the best self-possessed, even as it disavows how race itself is still culturally coded as biological in the U.S. at the level of these basic units of life. It is an attempt through property relations to limit the possibilities, again, culturally coded as biological, of what life is produced spontaneously and continuously through the basic, always unharnessable components of life itself, including water. Elements such as water exceed such management, creating a useful failure. The failures are the spaces of emergence that are partially productive in their capacity to reveal the myth of a body itself as “properly” possessed and privatized, which is a molecularized possessive individualism undergirding normative accounts of the proper “human,” or legal person that can be protected.

<sup>vi</sup> “Disease and disability figure centrally whenever there is the need to represent state-sanctioned violence as necessary for national survival. Disability is the language of devaluation, contagion, and control. Metaphors of disease and infection are scattered throughout the 1997 Senate Hearing on Interstate Street Gangs, constructing gang members as physical threats to the health and well-being of the national body. Gang activity was represented as a ‘social disease of crime,’ 39 young people could become ‘infected with gang violence,’ 40 and the federal government needed to get ‘this epidemic under control.’ 41 Gang membership registered as dangerously viral, remaking victims of poverty into pathogens targeted for eradication. Because they were evolutionary markers of disability or incapacity, race, culture, and world region were central to the scientific production of bodily difference as a signifier for legitimate discrimination.” (Cacho 69)

<sup>vii</sup> “In the contemporary moment organized around speculation as well as production, populations are divided into valued and devalued, those whose lives are protectable and those whose lives are not. To be ‘surplus’ in this moment is to be valueless, unprotectable, and vulnerable. This is not to say that they are unusable to capital; rather, their value to capital is exactly in their lack of value as labor. That is, while in the earlier period, racial necropolitics existed in order to extract surplus value from labor, in this era, racial necropolitics is created for itself; it is itself a source of value. James Ferguson quotes Larry Sommers, who observes that ‘the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable,’ and notes that under neoliberalism, certain populations (such as those whose most valuable function in the global economy is to be worthless enough to live among nuclear waste) are most valuable because they are worthless.” (Hong loc 1366-1373)