<u>Exploring Water Shutoffs in Detroit: Racism, Neoliberalism, and Alternative Paradigms</u>

> *There's a revivalist lullaby being sung about Detroit——one that croons of a city lifting itself up and vanquishing the ghosts of its tortured history simply by looking past them. Yet even as it crescendos, longtime residents seem to have failed, or perhaps refused, to brim with the untrammeled hope the lullaby urges. We needn't labor in the dark as to why: there is no whistling past a history whose boot remains planted on your neck.* (Day 1).

In the spring of 2014, Detroit's Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) shut water off from thousands of homes (Mitchell). Media officials say the water shutoff program occurred in response to a polar vortex storm that hit Detroit in the winter between 2013 and 2014. After the difficult winter keeping people warm most residents of Detroit "faced skyrocketing" electricity and water bills (Filson). Supposedly, DWSD targeted homes that had a sixty-day overdue bill or owed one-hundred and fifty or more dollars in utility bills. In reality, the water shutoffs took place across the city despite overdue bills or not. At the beginning of the project almost 3,000 homes were shut off from running water each week until over 33,000 homes lost access to their water service in 2014 (Filson). Qualitative and quantitative research show that the shutoffs continually affect more than one in five people in Detroit today (Spring 2018) while disproportionately affecting Detroit's black community.

With the help of blues and black feminist geographical epistemologies we understand the water shutoffs as a violent, intentional attack on bodies of color. I utilize the framework of Blues Epistemologies and Black Feminist Geographies from Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods

by placing emphasis on “black histories, bodies, and experiences” in hopes to “disrupt and underwrite” oppressive forms of human geographies (McKittrick 4). Through the logics of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and slavery, and within the historical context of Detroit, I argue that the Detroit water shutoffs are not only a racial project but a manifestation of historical power and continually lived oppression. We may look to blues and black feminist epistemologies to understand that the marginal and abandoned spaces of Detroit also appear as the places in which revival and solutions to the issue of systemic racism manifest.

> *“After all, when the only home you've ever known is synonymous with urban apocalypse, you take a particular message about its prospects. And when revival becomes the talk of the town, evoking a lifeless body knocking at death's door, you take a certain message about the condition of your own”* (Day 1).

Revival, as Eli Day alludes to in his poem, “Detroit and the Obliteration of History” is a semantic device discussed in Andrea Smith’s second logic of white supremacy— settler colonialism (Smith 53). Non-people of color (and people in power) tend to overlook and ignore the histories that create oppressive racial regimes. Day proclaims that the “cult of revival” is “cribbed from an old tradition” which “annihilates the past” in order to comfort the people in power today (Day 1). Feeling comfortable with the past means not changing the present. Revival, as semantic device in regards to Detroit, means continually keeping entire groups of people enslaved. Mainstream consciousness seeks “absolution” from history without deeply investigating the lived impacts (1). In Detroit, for example, the “past atrocities” Day refers to may be the annihilation of indigenous people in what is now the United States and the enslavement of Africans (1). However, comfort for those in power is not the only function of this “willful amnesia” (1). For those in power, overlooking history is a way to stay in power; to

continually gain wealth from the labor of black Americans. The revival rhetoric validates and secures non-people of color's "natural" ownership of potential capital of indigenous lands and colored bodies (Smith 74). Smith explains that settler colonialism "ensures that Native peoples disappear into whiteness" so that non-people of color can inherit all that is indigenous (74). Accordingly, the rhetoric surrounding the water shutoffs in Detroit is not new, it is the same rhetoric used around the colonization of the America's. Making a land "better" by ignoring the people that live there and accordingly conquering it, is a device of settler colonialism.

In their book, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place,* Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods situate the disappearance of peoples due to colonialism as a continuing and violent marginalization and engulfment of people, land, and culture (Woods 4). The colonial regime of central power in the United States recurrently incites this violence. The geographies of black and indigenous people in the U.S. are continually overlooked, unspoken about, or "relegated to the past" (Smith 72). Knowing the history of Detroit is fundamental to understanding the impacts of the water shutoffs today. Before non-people of color committed genocide and conquered what is now Detroit, hundreds of indigenous tribes lived in the Great Lakes area including, but not limited to: the Anishinaabe, Wyandot, Iroquois, Fox, Miami, and Sauk (Herberg 1). According to the U.S. Census, only around thirty-thousand "American Indians" reside in metro Detroit today (1). Detroit's geography is the space of the "colonized, the enslaved, the incarcerated" and accordingly, the "disposable" (Woods 3). By naturalizing indigenous people's enslavement and violent assimilation (or extinction as some think), we assume the normality of the marginalization and enslavement of other groups, such as black Americans today (72). Newer systems, such as the tendency to deny the existence of peoples, keep the conquered and their spaces hidden from the consciousness of those benefiting from oppression.

The dominant social consciousness knows Detroit for its crime, poverty, and abandonment. Headlines such as “America’s Comeback City,” “The Rebirth of Detroit,” and “A Millenial’s Paradise” dangerously ignores the impacts of racism while perpetuating an idea of Detroit as a space open for taking. This rhetoric situates Detroit and the people within it “as objects-in-place” rather than living, breathing humans who are alive and surviving (McKittrick 3). Black geographies disclose how the explicit “demarcations” of spaces are actually created to be “invisible” and often “forgettable” (2). The racialized spaces of Detroit are hidden from the view of the hegominic elite, black communities have been districted into hidden neighborhoods since the 1950’s. The invisibilization of oppressed communities disappears the disportionate exploitation and inequities. Non-people of color can ignore the poverty in areas of majority black people because poverty is intentionally pushed into hidden spaces.

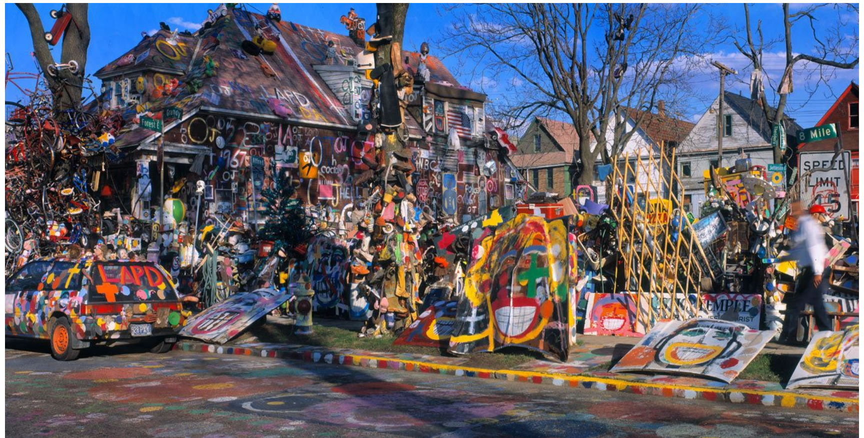
The state and nation abandoned many people and parts of Detroit, those who survived this anomaly are largely still hidden from hegemonic sight. During the first waves of white flight in the 1950s, the large scale movement of non-people of color to the suburbs (and away from their black neighbors) resulted in unequal distribution of resources and opportunity for low income people and people of color. Although, the abandonment rhetoric utilized by mainstream media is problematic. It conflates those who have survived this abandonment—those still living in the city—to the status of empty lots. In her book, *DIY Detroit,* Kimberly Kinder contextualizes the way the geography of poverty is made invisible to those with hegemonic identities. The racial divide in Detroit allows for extreme income, health, and housing disparities. By 2010, the city of Detroit was eighty-one percent black, while the suburbs just outside of the city were more than eighty-five percent white (Kinder 10). As a result, resources went to Detroit’s affluent white suburbs, perpetuating the cycle of poverty for those in the city. Internal class divisions further

marginalize those who are already racially ostracized. Kinder explains that crossing the street from the black neighborhoods of Grandmont Rosedale and Brightmoor marks a shift from affluence to abandonment, from twelve percent to forty-four percent poverty, and eighty-three percent to forty-five percent home ownership (10). Housing discrimination forces people into the margins of society, disappearing them from national attention, so that the land and people themselves can be taken again by non-people of color.

However, marginality does not mean disappearance or extinction. McKittrick explains that "marginality is much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility" (McKittrick 56). The social and geographical margins of Detroit are also spaces of resistance (56). From the landscape of the city, to community organizations, resistance is everywhere. Although one in five lots in Detroit is abandoned, there are more than two-thousand small farms and community gardens scattered throughout the city. Resistance is in entire abandoned blocks dedicated to displays of sculptures and art such as the Heidelberg Project depicted below.

Figure 1. Heidelberg Project art sculptures (Hardin).

Resistance is in the continued survival of more than forty-five percent of the black population living under the poverty line. Resistance is in the rigging of houses by water hoses to provide clean water to entire communities. Resistance is the survival of entire groups of people living in a country where they are not meant to survive. Indeed, the marginal spaces in Detroit are the spaces of unheard stories and possibilities.



In the sole telling of the anguish of Detroit… *"is the regrettable outcome of an untold, cruel sorting of the universe. Often, through some remarkable alchemy, this evolves into delusions of a worldlier genre: that Detroit is the architect of its own implosion, existing in that distant realm of things mutilated by a people's cultural decay. Let's dwell there for a moment, because the consequences of such proud thoughtlessness are vast. There's nothing mysterious at play here–the ghetto is a deliberate creation of public policy. Anyone who suggests otherwise speaks with unearned authority" (Day 1).*

The logic of settler colonialism feeds into Andera Smith's logic of slaveability which ensures that racialized spaces preserve "systems," like slavery, "that image Black peoples as permanent property of the state" (Smith 68). Detroit is not the sole "architect of its own implosion" (Day 1). Racist, neoliberal policies created the bankrupt state of Detroit by dismantling the increasing upward mobility of working-class black people to ensure their continual slaveability. Smith argues that the logic of slavery is the anchor of capitalism which is

inherently racist (68). In capitalism, bodies are valued as commodities, which “one must sell in the labor market while the profits of one’s work are taken by someone else” (68). Before 1910, more than ninety-percent of the African-American population (descendants of the transatlantic slave system of only two generations prior) lived in the American South (Kinder 8). The period of industrial growth in the early 1900s enticed black workers into middle-waged factory jobs of the North. During the Great Migration more than six million “African-Americans” moved out of rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. The expansion of the workforce coincides “with the creation of a strong public municipality,” which led to unprecedented economic, social, and political capacities” for black people in Detroit and other Midwest towns (8). With a growing middle-class of black people with financial stability, Detroit was the fourth-largest city nationwide by the 1920s (9). In his chapter “Sittin’ On Top of the World,” Woods argues that as black Americans started accumulating wealth, non-black Americans constructed ideologies to preserve a slave system for the economic benefits. Capitalism necessitated a continued system of slavery(or create a neo-plantation society) which motivated neoliberal policies and economic restructuring by targeting the accumulating wealth in black communities. The extraction of labour and resources from black Americans is a long standing and systemic reality of the United States. Cutting resources off from the black people of Detroit is an aspect of settler colonialism, for the cutbacks intentionally make entire communities susceptible to exploitation.

Since the 1950s Detroit experienced several waves of divestment in accordance with increasingly popular ideologies of neoliberalism. In the paper “Neoliberalizing Space,” authors Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell outline fundamental aspects of early neoliberal ideologies. They remark that “some of the first creative processes of neoliberalism” were the tendencies “to

license... plundering strategies" through the widening of "social, economic, and spatial inequalities" (386). In Detroit, these racialized policies include the suburbanization of the city, racist representations of black people as criminals to encourage white flight, and vast cuts to social programs in attempt to improve the city's credit rating (Kinder 8).

Blues Epistemology, according to Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick, is a "native" means of resistance composing of geographical, socio-economic, and political critiques similar to those in blues music and hip hop. The blues tradition is the antithesis of the plantation tradition and all of its manifestations. If neoliberalism serves to divide, then blues tradition serves to connect. Paralleling the neoliberal creation of a neo-plantation society, the blues tradition became a form of massive resistance. Woods speaks of the "founding generation of hip-hop," as a recently developed genre of the blues tradition, which "witnessed re-emergence of neo-plantation ideology through neo-liberalism" and "resisted with community centered consciousness surrounding the principles of justice, wisdom, understanding, freedom, equality...and intellectual criticism of systemic oppression" (67).

Blues epistemology also demands attention to "institutionalized spacial impoverishment," recognizing that "plantation and state models" extending beyond slavery in agriculture and sharecropping. The "roll back" policies of the eighties which Peck and Tickell explain as the "shift in the pattern of deregulation and dismantlement," can be seen as part of this institutionalized spacial impoverishment, or as a function of neo-slavery. According to blues epistemologies, the shut offs may be understood as a part of neoliberal policies and practices that historically disenfranchised the established black middle class of Detroit. The shutoffs are in Detroit exemplar of Wood's understanding of a plantation society that extends far beyond agriculture-based slavery (Woods 58).

In Detroit, the roll back policies in the height of implementing neoliberalist policies targeted the bodies of black women (Peck 386). Eli Day, as a resident of Detroit, knows well the intention and impact of sexist, racist policies. He recites that "there is nothing mysterious at play, the ghetto is a deliberate creation of public policy" (Day 1). The attack on black women and non-normative identities is part of the "neoliberal constitution of competitive relations" which serves to separate most people from the hegemonic elite, in order to always have a continual flow of disposable labourers (Peck 386).

The Moynihan Report, created by the Secretary of Labor under the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, is an example of neoliberal policies that violently targeted black women. The report came out as a part of legislative policies for the War on Drugs. Peck and Tickell explain:

> *The Moynihan Report cannibalized the rhetorics of masculinist minority nationalism by decrying the supposed disempowerment of Black men within families and situating the black matriarchy as the cause of Black poverty and criminality. This ideological formation, thus, legitimated the absorption of women of color into the global economy in that era and justified the dismantling of the welfare state* (Peck 1061).

The report stereotyping and criminalizes bodies as a tactic to validate controlling women's bodies. The report is a direct attack on black women; as women were typically the homemakers, it is also an attack on black economic and social power. The "absorption of women into the global economy" is also a tactic of settler-colonialism (1061). The report targeted women's bodies, declaring them as a pathological condition, in order to gain power over entire communities. The racialization of black people, through misleading stereotypes and "research" that depict black people as inferior, is systemic. Roll-back policies such as the water shutoffs and

the dismantlement of the welfare state are direct initiatives to control the bodies of black women. Tawana Petty explains that that the majority of households in Detroit are led predominately by black women today (Petty 1). She argues that "the water shutoffs in Detroit are a form of violence rooted in racism and sexism… as black women are on the receiving end of tens of thousands of water shutoffs, tens of thousands of tax foreclosures, the commodification of our bodies, and the dehumanization of our image by media, movies, television and the music industry" (1). Detroit researcher, Alexander Plum, concludes from research on the health effects of Detroit's water shut offs that "patients who are the most likely to be impacted by water associated illness resulting from the shutoffs are also the most socially vulnerable" (Plum 1). In a racist, sexist society the most socially vulnerable are often black women (and further people with other compounding identities) (1). Plum further declares that living on a block without water resulted in an increased chance of patients having a diagnosis of a "water-associated illness" (1). The value of human life in the system of capitalism and more specifically neoliberalism, becomes "reducible to economic value" (Smith 68). DWSD shut off water from the already vulnerable population without regards to their health or well being.

The shutoffs are a part of the neoliberal economic schema of upward wealth distribution (and distribution towards non-people of color because neoliberalism is the continuation of neo-plantation racist policy). Unfortunately, press surrounding the shutoffs did not touch upon the complex historical, political economic race relations in the city. In alignment with the logics of settler colonialism, instead, the ill effects of the water shut offs were overlooked by the public and under-reported by local media and political power. While people struggled to survive without clean water, the city was able to pay off some of its' long lasting debt.

However marginalized and overseen, the geography of the black body itself cannot be denied. Katherine McKittrick describes in her chapter "The Last Place They Thought Of" that "the landscape of the black body is unforgettable" (McKittrick 52). By focusing on lived experiences, the effects of racism cannot be concealed. If the "public black body documents where erasure and dispossession takes place," then it is also the place to examine to understand the shutoffs (52). Tawana Petty enlightens her audience, like Eli Day, by explaining her experiences with the water shutoffs through poetry. She breathes life into statistics. She recites that no one can be silent…

while Black mothers are forced to hide their children from being taken away, are unable to bathe their children, or properly nourish their children, because they do not have access to clean, affordable water. We cannot be silent while children are ashamed to go to school because they do not have clean clothing or clean bodies, because their water has been shut off. We cannot be silent while entire communities risk the threat of illness, disease and contamination because families are unable to sanitize their homes or take their medications. (Petty 1)

Petty offers that we all "have a responsibility to struggle against the policies and structures that have divided and seek to conquer us" (1). She declares, "Together we will win. Divided we will be spectators and contributors to the genocide of our people" (1). She voices how the community that bears the cost is also cast the blame for the systemic (racist and capitalist) marginalization they endure. Many black women of Detroit may hold similar understandings and wisdom surrounding the shutoffs. Community-based organizers and organizations must be looked to for leadership regarding solution based action.

By illuminating the geographies of the black body, we may see revival having a very different meaning than attached to the neoliberalist narrative of Detroit's comeback. Blues and

black feminist epistemologies transcend many levels of oppression, resist problematic and dominant narratives of African Americans, and stimulate as well as propagate resistance movements (Woods 65). McKittrick explains that the “realization” of the knowledge held by black epistemologies “can transform the world” (McKittrick 6). Her visions are based in traditions that see place as the “location of cooperation, stewardship, and social justice” (6). The land of Detroit must be viewed as such, rather than settler colonialists’ “sites to be dominated, enclosed, commodified, exploited, and segregated” (6). McKittrick knows the importance of black geographies, as, once understood, they have the potential to “play a central role in the reconstruction” of inequity (6). In the case of the water shutoffs, black geographies may be looked to for solutions and transformative possibilities.

“Native Detroiters are correctly skeptical of those who consider themselves bold enough to look beyond this history, but summon enough cowardice to mimic its greatest catastrophes. They know their lot is neither accidental nor the work of mysticism. It is the intended endpoint of an astonishing species of moral cowardice—one that sacrifices other people's flesh at the altar of power. Talks of revival are irrevocably, and correctly, stalked by this history. It serves as a check against those who'd forge a future by obliterating the past and thus cementing the preventable suffering of its victims” (Day 1).

When considering solutions to the state of Detroit today, in alignment with black feminist geographies, we must understand where true solutions can be found. McKittrick explains that black women’s knowledge “reorients existing spatial practices, asking us to think not only about ‘where’ of politics but how the production of space is not a silent process” (McKittrick 61). The process of racialization and oppression has never been silent; the blues tradition and the survival of Black Americans testifies to this. White millennials gentrifying black neighborhoods is not the

solution to revitalizing Detroit, neither is federal or state policy. Solutions are within local knowledges of the people who have been doing the work all along. They are held within the physical experiences of Detroiters—within black feminist epistemologies. Tawana Petty ends her poem by calling all to imagine a new way of living "rooted in the woman's way of knowing, a society that honors and nurtures our humanity and our need for interdependence" (Petty 1). Day concludes his poem with a call to the offenders of the violent racism of the water shutoffs. He explains that if the members of the "cult of revival" do not wake up and actively honor, hear, and support black histories and knowledge, then "they will remain bound to the very system they wish to extinguish " (Day 6). Until we situate Detroit in the process of history, which continually impacts the meaning of oppression today, we cannot begin to imagine an alternative to the oppressive racial state of Detroit (Smith 75). Finally, by ignoring the deeply racist history behind the water shutoffs in Detroit, we fall complicit to the divisiveness of settler colonialism and can ignore our own prejudices and practices that uphold such systems of oppression.

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