



# The Flint Water Crisis and the Perpetuation of Environmental Racism in Flint, Michigan (2014–2018)

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## Abstract

The nexus between environmental racism and racial capitalism has been well documented. However, the government is often blamed for the perpetuation of some forms of environmental racism. Nonetheless, blaming the government for environmental racism without documenting some actions and policy implementation by the government to mitigate or prevent the re-occurrence of environmental racism tends to be a one-sided view. Consequently, this study examines how the American government plays some roles in the occurrence of environmental racism, that is, the Flint Water Crisis (FWC) in Michigan. Racial capitalism theory is used as a theoretical lens in this study. Racial capitalism, historical residential housing policies, anti-blackness or devaluation of Black bodies, the appointment of Emergency Financial Managers, environmental racism, neoliberalism, laissez-faire, and color-blind racism were the mechanisms driving the occurrence of the FWC. The different actions and policies that were taken by the American government to mitigate or prevent the re-emergence of FWC were also documented. Although, these actions were taken after the occurrence of the FWC. The materials-based method (secondary data) was not only adopted to provide answers to the research question that this study answered but was also used to explain the global dynamic and operation of racial capitalism.

**Keywords** Environmental racism · Flint · Neoliberalism · Anti-blackness · Racial capitalism

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## Introduction

The various forms of environmental racism that people of color are exposed to in contemporary American society have a direct link with the institutional, systemic, and structural racism that was practiced during colonialism (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 98–107). People of color are not often valued in the way their White counterparts are held in high esteem in the American racial hierarchy (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Hence, anti-blackness, that is, the devaluation of the body of people of color often contributes to the experience of environmental racism they often suffer from in American society (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Environmental racism is broader, and its broadness often makes its conceptualization contestable by some scholars. Nonetheless, environmental racism is conceptualized as environmental policies, practices, or initiatives that disproportionately affect communities owing to their color (Takahashi, Ellis and Jack, 2020). Also, environmental racism is institutional policies and practices that affect the health outcomes and living conditions of people and communities differentially owing to their race and color (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 361). Consequently, the two factors responsible for the occurrence of environmental racism are color and race. For instance, commercial hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities that were sited between 1955 and 1966 in the USA were located disproportionately in communities that were poor and non-white (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 361).

On the other hand, racial capitalism occurs when historical, political, social, and economic forces work together to produce a crisis that largely affects poor people and minority populations (Takahashi et al., 2020). Also, it is imperative to note that the emergence and development of racial capitalism are connected to racism/racial inequality and capitalism (Go, 2021). In other words, racial capitalism emerges owing to the capital accumulation that dwells on the usage of free labor (especially Black bodies) for the development of modern American society. Importantly, capital accumulation cannot work without the expropriation and exploitation of human labor. For example, the free labor from the Blacks was explicitly expropriated and exploited for capital accumulation basically by the White slave owners during colonialism and slavery in North America (Burden-Stelly, 2020; Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 18–25).

Moreover, scholars have documented the connection between environmental racism and racial capitalism in modern American society (Burden-Stelly, 2020; Pulido, 2016). In other words, the occurrence of environmental racism in modern American society can sometimes be linked to the practices of racial capitalism. For instance, the approval of Marathon Oil company to expand its production capacity by the City of Detroit despite the outcry from the residents of Boynton community, Michigan reinforces the interplay of environmental racism and racial capitalism (Benz, 2019). The majority of people living in Boynton are Black people. The overall Black population in Boynton is 92–94%. The residents of Boynton often complain of the high rate of pollution and resultant illnesses. The approval of the expansion of Marathon Oil company does not only show how Black people are often devalued in American society but also depicts how the

interests of a corporation override the interests and health of the Black people in Boynton, USA (Benz, 2019).

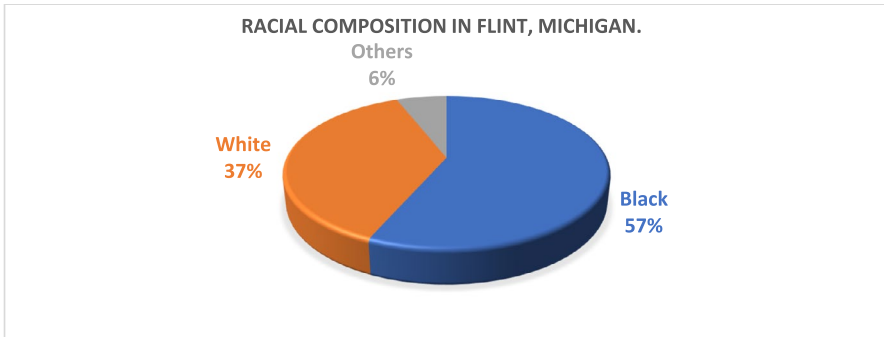
Existing studies that have examined how racial capitalism facilitates the emergence of environmental racism argue that the government, especially the neoliberal government plays some role in the perpetuation of environmental racism owing to the formulation and implementation of some obnoxious decisions and policies (Bullard, 1999; Pulido, 2016). Similarly, some scholars affirm that the American government is responsible for the creation of racial inequality through the formulation and enactment of some policies that tend to produce racial projects. Racial projects are the interpretation, representation, and explanation of racial identities and meanings, and the distribution of socio-economic resources along ethnic lines (Omi and Winant, 2015, p. 125). For instance, the location of a hazardous waste landfill in a predominantly Black community in 1982 (Sterba, 2001). However, blaming the American government solely for the perpetuation of environmental racism without examining the positive roles that the government plays in mitigating environmental racism tends to be a one-sided view. Consequently, this study will document the roles of the American state in perpetuating and mitigating environmental racism in the USA. Also, racial capitalism theory will be applied as a theoretical framework, and the Flint Water Crisis (FWC) that occurred in Michigan is used as a case study. This paper aims to answer this research question: How did the American state perpetuate or mitigate environmental racism in FWC, Michigan? The study utilizes a materials-based method, that is, secondary data from reputable journal articles, newspaper articles, government reports, and findings on the FWC to provide answers to the aforementioned research question.

### **Historical Background of Flint Water Crisis, Michigan (2014–2018)**

Flint, a city in Michigan, USA, was formerly called Ojibwe land, and it was initially settled by the White people in the nineteenth century (Pulido, 2016). After the settlement of Flint City by the White people, the city started engaging in the production of carriages. The engagement in the production of carriage led to the development of the automobile industry in the early twentieth century, and this was pioneered by General Motors (GM). Also, the development of GM coincided with the emergence of vibrant labor unions in the automobile industry. Flint is a majorly Black city, and it has the highest poverty rates in Michigan (Benz, 2019). The median household income of Flint is \$24,679, and a national poverty rate of 41.6%. This poverty rate is 167% higher than the national average poverty rate in the USA.

Figure 1 shows the racial composition of Flint residents as of the year 2010, that is, some years preceding the occurrence of the FWC. The population of Flint as of 2010 was 102,434 people. From this population and Fig. 1, the composition of Blacks (African American) was 57%, White was 37%, and other racial groups that comprised of Latino and mixed race was 6% (Pulido, 2016).

It is argued that there is no single decision that is responsible for the contamination of Flint water and the emergence of the FWC (Mohai, 2018). Hence, the contamination and the occurrence of the FWC were caused by a myriad of catastrophic



**Fig. 1** Racial composition of the Flint residents, 2010 (Source: Pulido, 2016)

decisions that were made mostly by state officials, the Emergency Manager Laws, and the suspension of local democracy by Public Act 436 (Mohai, 2018).

Public Act 436 allows the Governor to appoint Emergency Financial Managers (EFM) who make absolute decisions without the incorporation of decisions or opinions from the Mayor, the City Council, and the School Board (Mohai, 2018). The EFMs are not elected by the Flint residents but rather appointed by the Governor, and they are only accountable to the Governor.

The critical decision that led to the FWC occurred in April 2013 when an EFM approved the switching of Flint's water supply from the Detroit water system to a new pipeline being constructed and managed by Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). The switching from the Detroit water system to KWA was done to avoid monetary or financial costs. Initially, Flint City had a plan to switch off from the Detroit water system once KWA pipelines were completed. Unfortunately, the KWA pipeline was not completed, and it would take several years for its completion. Consequently, the EFM in June 2013 approved that Flint should switch its water supply to the Flint River temporarily. However, switching to the Flint River required the usage of the Flint Water Treatment Plant. Unfortunately, the Flint Water Advisory Task Force reported that the plant did not possess the capability to treat the Flint River water, and the plant was never upgraded with sufficient capacity to engage in the treatment of Flint River water. To compound the existing problem of untreated Flint River water, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) failed to request the optimized corrosion control used in the treatment of the Flint River water. It is argued that the failure of MDEQ in requesting for the optimized corrosion control led to the corrosion of water service lines, and interior lead-based plumbing (solder, fixtures, and faucets) in Flint. Hence, resulting in the leaching of lead, and other contaminants in residents' water.

Furthermore, when the switch was made to the Flint River in 2014, the residents of Flint noticed a change in the quality of the water because it was discolored, and had an offensive odor. Also, the residents started complaining about the skin rashes and the hair loss that they suspected were linked to the water. Later on, the concern from the residents as regards the lead poisoning surfaced. Unfortunately, this was not made public until 2016. Besides, concerns about Legionnaire's disease that was

linked with the water emerged, and this was discussed internally among some public agencies in 2014 and 2015 (Mohai, 2018).

Despite the outcry from the Flint residents, media members, and activists on the poor state of water from the Flint River, the local and state government officials continued to source the city's water from the contaminated and toxic Flint River (Benz, 2019). Additionally, the denial and the refusal of the state officials to listen to people's outcry (Flint residents) and demand as regards the usage of the toxic Flint River as a water source continued despite accumulated evidence from GM and water quality expert, Dr. Marc Edward at Virginia Tech University (Mohai, 2018). For example, Dr. Marc Edward in his research on the Flint River discovered high evidence of lead contamination in Flint resident water in March 2015 (Mohai, 2018). Also, when Flint switched its water to the Flint River, GM did the same thing because GM used the same water source that the city of Flint used (Pulido, 2016). However, GM complained that the water from the Flint River was not only corrosive but also caused the engine parts the company used in production to rust. GM asked the city officials to switch from the Flint River to the Detroit River, and this was approved while the Flint residents were not allowed to switch their water source from the Flint River (ibid). Besides, when the Flint City Council voted 7–1 to return to the Detroit water system, the newly appointed EFM refused, and he cited financial issues as a major reason why Flint residents should keep sourcing their water from the Flint River (Mohai, 2018).

However, in January 2015, the state began to install coolers with purified water in the state office building in the city and provided bottled water to its employees and visitors (Mohai, 2018; Pauli, 2020). It is imperative to note that the distribution of bottled water began before and continued after the state officials acknowledged Flint's water contamination crisis in October 2015 (Mohai, 2018). Also, the FWC was not disclosed to the public by the government until the state government released emails in January 2016 on the issue. In the same January 2016, the Genesee County Health Department declared a public health emergency on the FWC, and subsequently, Flint Mayor (Karen Weaver), the County Commission, and the State Governor declared a state of emergency in Flint. Consequently, the state started distributing bottled water and filters to its residents. However, this distribution ended in April 2018. In 2017, the Michigan State Attorney General indicted 15 government officials (12 were state government officials and 3 city officials) for their contributory roles in the FWC. The charges ranged from willful neglect of duty, misconduct in office, and involuntary manslaughter owing to the deaths of some Flint residents caused by *Legionella* (Moahi, 2018). For instance, the Emory research team confirmed that the state death toll included 12 people who were diagnosed with Legionnaire's disease. Also, 20 people who survived the initial diagnosis in that period died later after some months and years (PBS, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework: Racial Capitalism Theory**

Racial capitalism has gained prominence in social science discourse (Go, 2021). It is imperative to note that the emergence and the development of racial capitalism as a

concept are intrinsically linked to the writings of the Marxist intellectuals and activists during the Apartheid policy in South Africa, in 1970. However, it is recently that Cedric Robinson popularized its meaning and usage in his “Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition” (Burden-Stelly, 2020; Go, 2021). Numerous scholars have argued that racial capitalism is the mutual dependence of racism and capitalism (Kundnani, 2020). Also, racial capitalism is seen as the mechanism by which a capitalist society develops and expands (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Importantly, racial capitalism is a process in which capital accumulation is structured and intertwined with racial oppression, exploitation of labor, and material or non-material dispossession (Takahashi et al., 2020). The emergence of racial capitalism can be linked to the historical development of capitalism during slavery and colonization (Go, 2021). In other words, racial capitalism entails how racism and capitalism work together in the exploitation of labor for re-current production of capital or profit (Melamed, 2015). For instance, the Black people who were colonized and taken from Africa to colonial America were used as slaves to work in plantations that were owned by the Whites. Also, there was an unequal socio-economic relationship between these enslaved Blacks and their White owners. These Black slaves were used to build wealth for their respective White owners (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 18–19). Hence, racism is a logical constituent of capitalism (Pulido, 2016).

There are various core tenets of racial capitalism. First, racial capitalism operates on the principle of primitive accumulation (Melamed, 2015). The primitive accumulation principle argues that capital (profit, money, tangible and intangible resources) is often accumulated or possessed under racial capitalism through the usage of war, land grabbing, dispossession of people of their properties, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. It is imperative to note that primitive accumulation does not always come with ease. It entails the confrontation between two opposing people with divergent views, ideas, and aims. Also, primitive accumulation can result in bloodshed, and create unequal socio-economic relationships among people in the society. However, capital accumulation involves the expropriation of land, labor, and resources. Moreover, capital is only capital when it builds up, that is, accumulates. Moreover, capital can only accumulate when its production creates severe and unequal relations between the haves and the have-nots, e.g., the slave owners and the slaves, the dispossessors and the people that are dispossessed, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Melamed, 2015). For instance, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 not only enabled the administration of President Andrew Jackson to use military might to displace nearly 70,000 Native Americans in colonial America, but also used this same military might to kill tens of thousands of Native Americans (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 25).

Second, racial capitalism often works with ideologies (Melamed, 2015). Exploitation of people under racial capitalism does not always come effortlessly and undogmatically, rather it comes with the deployment of ideologies that are often racist. The deployment of these racial ideologies often leads to the emergence of unequal socio-economic relationship that is embedded in racial capitalism. Sometimes, this unequal socio-economic relationship is seen as being normal, that is, acceptable and welcoming (Melamed, 2015). These ideologies often lie in the principles of neoliberalism that argue for individual freedom, democracy, and free choice in a

market economy, and capitalist societies. This kind of racist ideology is also known as *laissez-faire racism* (Bobo, Kluegel and Ryan 1997, p. 16). Historically, there has been the usage of racist ideologies for the exploitation of human labor especially the labor from people of color (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 27–31). There was a deployment of scientific racism and eugenics during colonial America. Scientific racism is the use of science or pseudoscience to justify racial inequalities or exploitation of human labor. Also, scientific racism entails intelligence testing that uses the administration of test scores, and brain size measurement to assess the intellectual capability of slaves in colonial America. All these were done not to only show the acclaimed White superiority that was not true but to also justify the exploitation of the free labor of people of color. For instance, it is argued that Native Americans were decimated owing to their natural inferiority. Importantly, it is needful to note that the result of this exploitation especially during colonial America was for capital accumulation by the Whites (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 27–31).

Lastly, racial capitalism especially in contemporary American society is anti-blackness and antiradicalism (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Anti-blackness entails the devaluation of Black people and bodies through the usage of controlling images. Controlling images are raced, controlled, and media depictions of what African Americans are, and what they are not (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 149). The use of controlling images often tries to compare Blackness with whiteness. In other words, if the Black body is depicted as physical, the White body will be depicted as intelligent (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 149). Hence, controlling images are prejudicial, stereotypical, and derogatory portrayals of people of color especially the Black people (Burden-Stelly, 2020). For example, African American women are often portrayed as “Mammy,” that is, the stereotypical image of a Black maid. Also, historically, Native Americans were often portrayed as savages (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 133–142). Besides, racial capitalism is always in opposition to antiradicalism. In other words, it does not give room for the protest against the unequal socio-economic relationships and exploitation in the society (Burden-Stelly, 2020).

Figure 2 below is the conceptual framework that shows the interconnection and interplay of some key factors and concepts. The interplay of these concepts and factors led to the occurrence of the FWC.

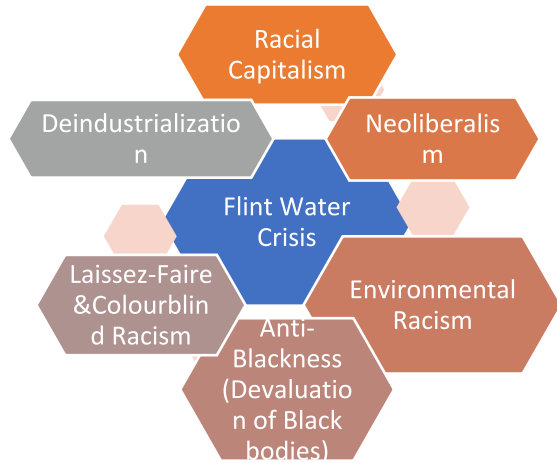
## **How Did the American State Perpetuate Environmental Racism in FWC?**

### **Historical Housing Segregation Policies and Deindustrialization**

The environmental racism that occurred in Flint had a historical connection with the federal and local housing development policies (Pulido, 2016; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Omi and Winant (1994) in Golash-Boza (2017, p. 110) argued that the national government or the state can reproduce or alleviate racial inequalities through its policies and institutions. Historically, the population of Flint did not only soar between 1910 and 1920 but there was also the influx of job-seeking migrants from the American South. To separate the African American population from the



**Fig. 2** A conceptual framework of the Flint Water Crisis (2014–2018)



White population in the neighborhood, there was an adoption of overt/explicit racist housing practices (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016).

It is imperative to note that some of these racial housing segregation practices were rooted in public policy by the government (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). For example, there was a federal housing subsidy for the Whites. The implementation of these segregated public housing policies led to the relegation of the Black population to the overcrowded, polluted, and dilapidated neighborhood near GM. Also, the case of racial housing segregation between the Black and the White was made worse when GM constructed 3000 newly White-only housing units between 1919 and 1933 on the west side of Flint. The implication of this is the imbalance in the creation of suburban or urban neighborhoods with poorly developed infrastructure for the Blacks, and good infrastructural facilities for the Whites. However, there were some poor Whites in Flint during this period, and this group of White people settled outside of the city in politically weak suburban townships where land was cheap and the neighborhood was all White. Although, modern amenities such as sewers, running water, and electricity were mostly absent in places where there were poor Whites. The racial housing practices were banned in 1968 following the enactment of the Fair Housing Ordinance. However, banning racial housing practices does not mean that the act is no longer in practice during this period and in contemporary America. It is still in practice, but it is often done in covert ways (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016).

Scholars argue that the dismantling of racial segregation in Flint coincided with the decline in manufacturing jobs and deindustrialization in the 1980s (Pulido, 2016). Deindustrialization is a process of decline in industrial activities in a region or economy owing to the closing down of some companies (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 332). The shutdown of some manufacturing companies in Flint facilitated the mass movement of the White population from Flint to the surrounding suburbs. Similarly, the deindustrialization and the White flight not only inhibited the Flint community from expanding and developing, but it also affected Flint's financial stability and



shrank its tax base. The shrinking of Flint's tax base made it difficult for Flint to maintain basic services, in which water was inclusive (Pauli, 2020).

The historical residential segregation in Flint can be explained from two theoretical perspectives. Drawing insight from the spatial assimilation model, it is argued that the differences in socio-economic status (income, education, prestige) of Flint residents contribute to the residential segregation in Flint. In contrast, the place stratification model argues that the racial prejudice and discrimination that the Black people in Flint are exposed to contribute to the residential housing segregation (Charles, 2003). For instance, GM in Flint did not only create employment barriers for the Blacks but also ensured that the least desirable jobs were only reserved for the Blacks (Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 2017, p. 27–28). Also, downtown Flint retailers refused to employ Black workers. The job discrimination by the GM and the Flint retailers might have in turn contributed to the engagement of Blacks in menial jobs with lower wages and income. Consequently, this might have led to the inability of the Black people to afford good quality houses as their White counterparts. Moreover, the non-white populations were discriminated against in the ownership of properties in Flint, e.g., the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) has a code of ethics that prohibits the sale of properties in the White segregated neighborhoods to non-whites. Apart from the job-related discrimination that the Blacks were exposed to, they also suffered other forms of racial discrimination. For example, White-owned barbershops, restaurants, bars, and hotels often refused to serve Black customers (Michigan Civil Rights Commission, 2017, p. 27–28).

### **Anti-Blackness and Appointment of Emergency Financial Manager (EFM)**

As discussed, anti-blackness is one of the key tenets of racial capitalism. Anti-blackness is often manifested in how the bodies of people of color especially Black people are devalued. The anti-blackness also tends to depict the Black population as worthless when compared to the White population (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Some scholars posit that the appointment of EFMs in Flint was necessitated by the incapability of the Flint local officials to curb the problem of depopulation and financial incapacitation or challenges (Pauli, 2020). Contrastingly, it can be argued that the appointment of EFMs in Flint was necessitated mainly by the devaluation of Black people by the American government (Pauli, 2020). Importantly, there were White cities that were facing the same issue of financial incapacitation that Flint City faced, unfortunately, these cities were not given EFM as Flint was given (Benz, 2019). Besides, the appointment of these EFMs was not democratic because they were not elected or appointed by the Flint residents. The EFMs only had a 5-year experience that was not in connection with Flint City nor governance, but finance and business. They were only accountable to the Governor who appointed them.

Table 1 above shows the public officials during the Flint Water Crisis (2014–2018).

This shows how the Michigan government racialized and perceived the Black population in Flint as being worthless, and this cannot be done in a city that is majorly dominated by the White population (Benz, 2019). Furthermore, it is argued

**Table 1** Public figure during the Flint Water Crisis

Key public figure	Public status	Role description
Darnell Earley	State Official: Emergency Financial Manager (EFM)	EFM who decided to use the Flint River as a water source in Flint
Governor Rick Snyder	State Official	Michigan State Governor. He appointed EFMs
Miguel Del Toral	Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	EPA officer who discovered the contamination of Flint water and how local and state officials covered up this issue
Marc Edwards	Scientist and Activist	Professor at Virginia Tech who confirmed the presence of poisonous lead in Flint residents' water after conducting some tests

(Source: Mohai, 2018; Pulido, 2016)

that there were White people in Flint who were also affected by the FWC (Pulido, 2016). However, it is imperative to note that the majority of people living in Flint were Black, and the usage of contaminated Flint River as a water source would not have taken place assuming Flint was inhabited majorly by the Whites (Pulido, 2016).

It is not only Flint that had EFMs, other cities in Michigan where Black people had a major population were given EFMs as well (Pulido, 2016). Table 2 below shows that 7 of the identified 12 cities in Michigan have more than above average (50%) Black population, while only 2 cities have less than 6% of the Black population. Besides, African Americans constituted 14% of the Michigan population, but the percentage of African Americans who were placed under EFMs was 49% (Pulido, 2016).

The devaluation of Black also manifested in the way one of the EFMs, Jerry Ambrose overruled the decision of the city council when the city council voted to return to the Detroit River. After several complaints from the Flint residents and the myriads of evidence especially Dr. Edward's experiment that confirmed the contamination of the Flint water with lead, the Flint officials still denied this and tagged the residents and protesters liars (Mohai, 2018; Pulido, 2016). Additionally, the devaluation of the people of color can be seen in the way Flint was abandoned

**Table 2** Michigan cities under emergency financial managers, 2009–2016 (Source: Pulido, 2016)

Names	Date	(%) of Black people	Names	Dates	% of Black people
Allen Park	2012	2.1	Hamtramck	2013	19.3
Benton Harbor	2010	89.2	Highland Park	2013	93.5
Detroit	2013	82.7	Inkster	2012	73.2
Ecorse	2009	46.4	Lincoln Park	2013	5.9
Flint	2011	56.6	Pontiac	2009	52.1
Wayne County	2015	40.5	Royal Oak Township	2013	95.3

after witnessing de-industrialization (Pulido, 2016). Flint was abandoned by the local, state, and federal governments. The abandonment of Flint can be seen in its shrinking and outdated infrastructural facilities and undemocratic processes (Pulido, 2016). For instance, the Flint Water Advisory Task Force (FWATF) reported that it could not treat the Flint River water. Unfortunately, the FWATF was neither equipped nor upgraded to be able to perform this task (Mohai, 2018). Consequently, the abandonment of Flint has led to a reduction in its population from over 200,000 to nearly 80,000 people (Pulido, 2016; US Census Bureau, 2023). However, the devaluation and the worthlessness of the Black people in Flint can be attributed to the scientific and biological racism that the people of color have been exposed to since colonial America. Both scientific and biological racism often treat Black people as inferior and less intelligent (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 28–43; Sussman, 2014). Scholars have argued that the end goal of the devaluation of Black bodies is capital accumulation. In other words, Black people or bodies are devalued for profit maximization and increase in wealth, assets, and property possession (Pulido, 2016). For instance, when Flint switched its source of water to the Flint River, the GM did the same thing because both Flint and the GM used the same source of water. After switching, GM discovered that the water from the Flint River was not only corrosive, but the water was also making the engine and spare parts that the company was using for manufacturing rust. The GM complained, and the company was granted an opportunity to switch to the Detroit River as a source of water. Meanwhile, the Flint residents complained about how bad the Flint River water was but were not granted permission to switch water source. Hence, GM was given priority over the health and the bodies of the residents of Flint. This shows the primacy being accorded capital accumulation in a racial capitalist society (Pulido, 2016).

### **Neoliberalism, Laissez-Faire and Color-Blind Racism**

Neoliberalism is an economic ideology that is based on privatization, trade liberalization, and the adoption of an open market system. Neoliberalism argues that the sole role of government in an economy is the protection of property rights, free trade, and free markets, and everything in the society is to be operated on the market forces of demand and supply (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 331). Similarly, laissez-faire and color-blind racism share some attributes with neoliberalism. Laissez-faire and color-blind racism argue that American society is free of racism, and everything that happens to each individual in the competitive market is the person's responsibility (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Neoliberalism and laissez-faire affirm that the role of government in a capitalist society is a watchdog that will provide the enabling environment for the successful operation of capitalism owing to equal chances of people to succeed (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 331). Hence, the neoliberal state is not expected to engage in the provision of social services to its citizens, but their needs are to be determined by market forces. The inability of the government to provide social services to its people often leads to protests and agitation by the masses for a better improvement in their social condition. The growth in peoples' protest and agitation for better condition often leads to an increase in the coercive arms of control

that is used by the government to suppress people's protest and agitation. These coercive arms are the police and the military. Importantly, a neoliberal state often ensures that the middle class and the poor do not pose a threat to the interests of the rich and corporations (Pulido, 2016; Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 331).

Racial capitalism connects people across the globe through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 17–23). During colonialism, people from the global south, that is, the developing countries were taken to the global north, developed countries in North America for primitive capital accumulation. Similarly, the modern form of capital accumulation is neoliberalism, and it operates beyond the nation-state. In other words, it cuts across states and continents through globalization (Kundnani, 2020). The globalization of capital contributed to the financial crises that later led to the FWC (Pulido, 2016). As the Michigan government started to cut spending on social services, the manufacturing companies started outsourcing and moved their operation overseas where labor was deemed to be cheaper. This led to a loss of jobs for some Americans, especially the Blacks. For instance, GM's workers reduced from 70,000 to 10,000 (Pulido, 2016). Also, the loss of industries led to the reduction in revenue coming from the State of Michigan to Flint. It was only the state of Michigan out of the remaining states in the USA that experienced a reduction in its revenue sharing with cities (Hughes, 2021). Although Flint lost \$60 million of state funding through revenue sharing, it is imperative to note that there was an increment in the volume of sales tax during this period (Benz, 2019).

As discussed, the main role of a neoliberal state is the creation of an enabling environment for the operation of market forces. Hence, the government is expected to withdraw its spending on social services for its citizens. This is manifested in FWC. Governor Snyder and the EFMs he appointed switched Flint's water source to Flint River to save money and reduce government spending on social services which water was inclusive. Importantly, the state of Michigan pushed for the austerity measure during this period to be able to balance its budget and provide contaminated water for the Flint residents (Benz, 2019). For instance, Darnell Earley (one of Flint's EFMs) argued that Flint would save \$5 million yearly by switching to Flint River, and saved \$19 million in the next 9 years (Internationalist Group, 2016). Hence, Flint's water source was switched not only for austerity measures but also for potential capital/money (\$19 million) that would be accumulated and saved. Unfortunately, this saving did not have any effect on Flint's budget deficit because the estimated money was to be given only to the people who paid water bills according to the law, and not to finance Flint's budget deficit (Ficano, 2016).

Moreover, color-blind racism argues that racism is no longer in existence and everybody is equal in the American racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Contrastingly, this is not the case. Drawing a comparison between Burton which happens to be a neighboring city to Flint, the application of austerity measures to Burton and Flint is not the same (Trounstine, 2016). Burton's population is 86% White with a median household income of \$44,000 per year. The median household income in Flint was under \$25,000. Between 2007 and 2012, many cities saw a reduction in government expenditure owing to the effect of economic recession on municipal budgets. In Flint, budget spending declined by \$225 per resident, while budget

spending increased by \$1 per capita in Burton. Also, Flint residents pay the highest water and sewer fees in the metropolitan areas in Genesee County. For instance, in 2014, the average water bill in Flint was \$140, while Burton had \$58 (Trounstine, 2016). Hence, the implementation of neoliberal austerity measures was to exploit and short-change the Black residents in Flint while compensating the White residents in Burton.

### **The Mitigation of Environmental Racism by the American Government in Flint**

The occurrence of the FWC represents the perpetuation of environmental injustice and racism in Flint (Mohai, 2018). However, some measures and actions were taken by the government to reduce the effect of the FWC on Flint residents. However, the implementation of these measures and actions was enacted after several agitations and protests by Flint residents and activists. Also, some of these measures and actions were implemented after the occurrence of the FWC (Pauli, 2020).

### **Water Monitoring and Lead Control**

To prevent the future occurrence of environmental racism such as the water crisis in Flint, the federal government led by the US Department of Health and Human Services and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) started the monitoring process of water in Flint. Also, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention helped with the blood monitoring of Flint's residents, epidemiological investigation, and public health assessment of people (Pauli, 2020). The Flint water crisis inspired a new interest in the strict scrutiny of the state and federal laws on water regulations and quality, especially EPA's Lead and Copper Rule (LCR). In 1991, the Safe Drinking Water Act and LCR established a lead contamination threshold or level at which water utilities were expected and required to notify the public of contamination.

However, there were loopholes in these acts, and these loopholes allowed some households to still have significant levels of lead in their water in Flint. In response to this, the State of Michigan went beyond the existing federal laws in implementing the strictest lead-in-water standard in the country. The Michigan state also pledges to drop its lead action level to 12 parts per billion by 2025. Additionally, Michigan State now requires municipalities to replace all of their lead service lines within 20 years at the rate of 5% every year, irrespective of how much lead is present in their water. There was an introduction of the Water is a Human Rights Bill by the state representatives in Michigan in 2016. The bill aims to eliminate any monitoring practices seeking to encourage water contamination, create a water affordability program, place restrictions on water shut-offs, and timely issuance of notice to the public when there is an issue with water quality (Pauli, 2020).

### **Distribution of Relief Materials**

The Michigan state helped in the distribution of bottled water and faucet filters to Flint's residents free of charge. There was also a provision of financial aid (millions

of dollars) from the state government. This money was given to Flint to replace its lead and galvanized steel service lines. Other funds were given toward the execution of nutritional programs that aimed to mitigate the effect of lead on the affected body of Flint's residents (Pauli, 2020).

### **The Globalization of Racial Capitalism and Perpetuation of Environmental Racism**

Racial capitalism not only works within North American space, but it operates across the globe. Its operation is facilitated by colonialism, slavery, and global capitalism (Edwards, 2021). Scholars posit that capitalism would not have been in existence today without imperialism, colonialism, slavery, super-exploitation, and expropriation. Globally, through colonialism and slavery, there is a creation of two types of economy, the global north (core) and the global south (periphery). Historically, the creation of these types of economies also coincided with the emergence of unequal socio-economic relationships between countries that fall under these types of economies. This unequal socio-economic relationship is still in existence today, e.g., the global south continues to be a major producer of raw materials, while the global north engages in the manufacturing sector that turns these raw materials into valuable goods with a high profit margin (Edwards, 2021). For instance, most cocoa from West Africa is exported to Europe for the production of chocolate (Fold, 2001). Importantly, there is a divergence in the profit margin that countries get if they specialize in the production of raw materials only and the production of manufactured and finished products. Similarly, in the global value chain, there is a high profit margin on the production of manufactured goods when compared to primary products (Chang et al., 2016, p. 32–34; Kaplinsky, 2000). These conditions not only maintain the status quo of unequal global socio-economic relationship between the global north and south, it also facilitates the accumulation of more capital by the countries in the global north (Edwards, 2001).

Furthermore, global racial capitalism not only facilitates the mass migration of migrant workers from the global south but also encourages the usage of the bodies of these migrant workers who are often people of color for continuous capital accumulation. For instance, in June 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the American government under its seasonal work program allowed 116 migrant workers from Jamaica to work in Gebbers Farm in Washington as apple reapers. Similarly, at the height of the COVID-19 crisis, many Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, South Africans, and other migrant workers from the formerly colonized territories in the global south were working on farms in North America and Europe to ensure the production and availability of food in grocery stores. These set of people often lived in unsanitary, congested, and filthy living conditions. Importantly, they were not provided with adequate personal protective equipment, and this exposed them to the contraction of COVID-19, hence, leading to the widespread of the disease, e.g., in Canada, 600 migrant farm workers contracted COVID-19 after arriving in Canada, and two Mexicans among this 600 later died. These migrant workers were racialized and seen as essential to the functioning of the capitalist economy because they were expected to report at work despite the sit-at-home order during the pandemic. Contrastingly,

they were at the same time treated unfairly and worthlessly because they were not paid sick leave nor had access to health care or insurance. They even faced the problem of deportation especially those who were undocumented among them (Edwards, 2021).

The movement of capital in the pursuance of more capital accumulation by the global north has not only created the operation of some multinational companies owned by the countries in the global north in the global south but has facilitated the emergence of environmental degradation and challenges in the global south especially in the extractive industries (Eweje, 2006; Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 332; Pulido, 2016). Nigeria is an African state with purely Black people. Also, it is one of the major crude oil producers in the world and has some Multinational Oil Companies (MOC) that engage in oil exploration. These MOCs include Texaco, Eni/Agip, Shell, Mobil, and Chevron (Eweje, 2006). Oil exploration is done in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and the oil exploration has not contributed to the development of this region. In contrast, oil exploration has led to gas flaring, coastal water contamination, low crop yield, and loss of fish owing to oil spillage, damage to house roofs, house vibration, and cracks (Eweje, 2006; Idemudia, 2010). Globally, Nigeria has the highest rate of gas flaring. Nigeria flares 75% of its total gas production and this flaring is associated with crude oil production. Importantly, gas flaring is one of the major causes of greenhouse gas emissions (Eweje, 2006). Although there is an implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) schemes by some MOCs, this implementation has not contributed to the betterment of people in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Scholars posit that the failure of CSR in Nigeria can be attributed to the inefficient institutional and technical capacity of Nigerian regulatory bodies and agencies to ensure efficient monitoring and compliance by MOCs to oil industry statutes (Idemudia, 2010). Additionally, the profit-seeking ethos or nature of corporations hinders CSR in facilitating Niger Delta development (Aaron, 2011).

## Conclusion

This study adopted a Materials-Based Method (MBM) to provide answers to the research question in this study. The factors that led to the occurrence of FWC were documented. These include racial capitalism, environmental racism, historical housing segregation policies, anti-blackness, neoliberalism, laissez-faire, and color-blind racism. Importantly, how blackness/black bodies were exploited and expropriated in the creation of accumulated capital was documented. In other words, how potable water (suitable for drinking and consumption) from the Detroit River was taken away from Flint's residents and replaced with contaminated water sources from the Flint River for capital accumulation/money making by the Michigan State Officials to balance Flint's budget deficit was examined. Besides, other actions of the government to inhibit the future occurrence of environmental racism such as FWC are documented. This study shows that there should be checks and balances in the power/authority of government officials



when implementing decisions and policies because some decisions if not vetted may lead to catastrophic and environmental racism like FWC.

However, scholars posit that researchers using MBMs often miss important meanings of the social phenomena they are studying because they are not part of the data-gathering process. The unavailability of researchers during the data-gathering process makes the detection of errors in the secondary data impossible and may contribute to the misuse of data. The data from the MBMs may not relate to the research question of researchers adopting MBMs because the data may be created for another purpose entirely different from the user's interest (Carr et al., 2017, p. 418). The data this study adopted was not only scrutinized, but an effort was also made to ensure that the sources from which the data was obtained were reputable such as peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers, and government reports on the issue. Importantly, a comparison was made between independent and government reports. There is enough literature and data on the roles of government in the perpetuation of the FWC. Contrastingly, there is still scanty data on how the government mitigates the FWC after the occurrence of the crisis. However, an effort was made to use and present the limited data on the roles of government in mitigating the FWC in this study.

This study only examines water pollution as an area within the broad field of environmental racism, but there are other research areas within environmental racism (Bullard, 1999). There is a need for the application of racial capitalism theory to study other forms of environmental racism. Using racial capitalism theory will enable us to understand how local and global political economy creates racial inequalities and unequal socio-economic relationships among countries (Edwards, 2021). Scholars posit that some states have increased their relationship with multinational corporations owing to the protection of a market by the government and the attraction of foreign direct investment (Golash-Boza, 2017, p. 331; Walzenbach, 2016). Doing this may facilitate the occurrence of environmental racism, e.g., the Flint residents sued JP Morgan Chase, Wells Fargo Stifel, and Nicolaus & Company in 2014 because it was alleged that they sponsored the sale of bonds that financed and ensured the participation of Flint in the KWA project. This was the project that made the Flint residents switch their water source to Flint River water which caused the FWC (Henderson & Alcorn, 2020).

**Author Contribution** It is solely written by Olugbenga Opeyemi Okunade.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** Not applicable.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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