

BREAKING THE SILENCE AND RESTORING DEMOCRACY IN FLINT, MICHIGAN

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BIOGRAPHY

Samantha Olson is a dual degree student in social work and urban planning at the University of Michigan. Samantha previously studied at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI and received her Bachelor's degree in social work. She then took two years off to work as an AmeriCorps VISTA in North Carolina and Indiana before returning to school. Having worked in homelessness and affordable housing efforts throughout the past 5 years, Samantha is dedicated to use skills and knowledge from the two fields in social work and urban planning through incorporating social justice and equity in her work, whether that be in social policy, program development, city planning, and/or affordable housing advocacy. Most recently, Samantha has been working with a professor at the University of Michigan in Flint on a study on real estate professional's perception of the local housing market after nationwide coverage of the water crisis. This work inspired Samantha to focus this paper on environmental justice.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the problematic events in Flint, Michigan regarding the water crisis. In 2014, elected officials decided to switch Flint's drinking water source from the Detroit water system to the Flint River, knowing that the water from the river and the water infrastructure was of low quality. This paper looks into environmental justice and policies addressing such events, which had failed the residents of Flint. Using references from current events and approved policies, this paper also looks at how environmental injustice is repetitive and perpetuates racism and classism. It also claims that Flint, Michigan is in need of restoring its democracy as residents experienced trauma and distrust. While there have been national coverage and other approaches to mitigate the impact of the crisis, it isn't until the residents are able to break their silence and work towards restoring democracy in which peace and recovery may begin.

TEXTUAL PLAN AND OUTLINE

The Problem: The Flint Water Crisis

The Need: Environmental Justice and Transparent Democracy

Supporting Audiences

- Primary audience: policy makers, urban planners, social workers and activists, public health professionals, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Environmental Justice, Michigan Civil Rights Commission
- Secondary audience: professionals in education and early age development, as well as families and communities involved
- Tertiary audience: general public, rustbelt cities with aged infrastructure and their local municipalities

Opposing Audience

- Primary audience: local and state government, emergency managers, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), Treasury, and KWA
- Secondary audience: federal government and other governmental agencies (with conservative agendas)
- Tertiary audience: communities not impacted and unaware of the historical and deepening repercussions of environmental injustice

Objectives

1. While quality water is a facet of environmental justice, environmental injustice repeats itself
2. Environmental injustice is much more repetitive in communities of people of color and of low-income
3. Democracy is at risk while silencing and disempowerment is perpetuated

The Power of Silencing, Sharing Narrative, and Restoring Democracy

- Including course themes:
 - o Narrative (Humanizing History)
 - o Everyday Violence
 - o Trauma
 - o Silencing
 - o Politics of Voice

INTRODUCTION

The Flint Water Crisis has reached national news, headlining the disturbing process of decision-making, the detrimental effects on residents, including families with young children, and the overarching issue of rustbelt cities with a declined population and limited resources. This paper highlights the need of environmental justice in order to protect residents from hazardous toxins in the environment, as well as the need for restorative democracy. The water crisis is an example of environmental injustice, structural racism and classism, and a fragmented form of democracy. The water crisis exemplifies the potential repercussions in which can occur if people who are most vulnerable and impacted are absent from the decision-making process.

While this document includes the three objectives - quality water is a facet of environmental justice, environmental injustice is repetitive in vulnerable communities, and democracy is at risk - it also weaves together themes of political violence, narrative and rediscovering history, trauma, silencing and the power of voice.

QUALITY WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

(1) While quality water is a facet of environmental justice, environmental injustice repeats itself. First, it is crucial to understand the history and motive of environmental justice. Beginning with the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the United States federal government took it upon themselves to prohibit funding that discriminated based on race and ethnicity.¹ Specifically to the topic of quality water, the Safe Drinking Water Act was created in 1974; its goal was to protect and maintain safe, quality drinking water throughout the country, disregarding whether the drinking water was from above- or underground sources, by prohibiting use of lead in the piping infrastructure.²³

Additionally, President Bill Clinton brought environmental justice into the spotlight by issuing the Executive Order 12898 in 1994, addressing the need for environmental

¹ The Department of the Environment

² US Environmental Protection Agency, Summary of the Safe Drinking Water Act

³ *Ibid*, Section 1417 of the Safe Drinking Water Act

justice among populations of people of color and low-income.⁴ This Executive Order aimed to tackle environmental hazards and stressors that were predominantly affecting communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. For its 20th anniversary, President Barack Obama revisited Clinton's Executive Order in a presidential proclamation, reigniting the flame to address the need and stressors vulnerable communities face due to environmental injustice.⁵

Throughout the years, environmental justice has become a two-folded concept. One, environmental justice is a functional movement, meaning it works towards justice with the belief that people have the rights to enjoy clean and a healthy environment. Two, environmental justice is procedural, emphasizing the involvement and inclusion of affected populations during decision making processes of environmental policies.⁶

The focus of this paper was ignited by the current events in Flint, Michigan. It is crucial to understand that in the last few decades, the City of Flint has experienced immense population loss in which residents and local government officials face economic struggles on a daily basis. Due to budget shortages, Darnell Early, former emergency manager, headed the switch from the Detroit water system to a water system using the Flint River water in April 2014.⁷ Although there were studies showing that the river water was 19 times more corrosive than Lake Huron, city officials decided to opt-out of anti-corrosive treatment, saving up to \$100 a day.⁸ The combination of toxic water and old pipes led the crisis of lead-leached water in families' homes. While experts report that the crisis was preventable, the ongoing concern includes the impact of high lead levels in children's blood as studies show that even low levels of lead in children's blood system has shown to affect cognitive development.⁹

Flint is not the only city who is grappling with a declining tax base and local economy as well as an aging water infrastructure. Rustbelt cities around the country are facing

⁴ *ibid*, Summary of Executive Order 12898

⁵ The White House

⁶ College of the Law

⁷ Department of Treasury, page 2

⁸ Ganim & Tran, 2016

⁹ Central for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016

similar consequences while families face the reality of lead-intense water in their homes,¹⁰ schools and day care centers.¹¹ This forces one to wonder how effective environmental policies are with protecting families from toxic water and environments.

Flint often settles in the shadows of the City of Detroit. So, when the Flint water crisis made ripples in national news late 2015 and early 2016, Flint residents had the opportunity to speak up and demand change. Unfortunately, the nature of media moved on to other stories. Now, it seems surprising when Flint does take the stage on mainstream media, if only for a few moments, just one year later of national breaking news.

REPETITIVE INJUSTICE IN TARGETED COMMUNITIES

(2) Environmental injustice repetitively occurs in communities of color and of low-income.

Thinking of the impact of environmental justice policy, there are surely advances that decision-makers and communities have experienced. Recognizing and reducing air pollutants by prohibiting toxic plants from nearby neighborhoods and promoting brownfield developments are ways in which environmental justice policies positively impact families and children. However, there is no surprise when a crisis, like in Flint, occurs and the affected demographic is predominantly people of color and low-income. Census data analysis reveals the trend of poverty and race;¹² for example, Flint had the highest unemployment rate in the State of Michigan in 2013 with 40% of residents living under the poverty level (compared to 31% in 1990).¹³ The City of Flint has become an isolated scene while the surrounding communities within Genesee County find themselves better off and improving.

In addition, the City of Flint is also predominately African-American, compared to the predominantly white populations in surrounding Genesee County communities. Flint has experienced historical racism while the automotive industry tanked, city population declined, and now, water quality tainted. As mentioned in a report addressed to the

¹⁰ Mantha, 2016

¹¹ Ungar, 2016

¹² Henderson and Tanner, 2016

¹³ Scorone and Bateson, 2011

Michigan Civil Rights Commission regarding the Karegnondi Water Authority and their strategic and structural racism, these historical racist actions have been fueled by implicit, unconscious bias.¹⁴ The structural racism led decision-makers to repeatedly produce inequality in health, education, transportation, housing, income, and the environment. In addition, strategic racism drove agendas to future manipulate these basic constructs (i.e. education, income, housing, etc.).¹⁵ This report also insists that messaging about the water crisis illustrates structural racism and its continuation of inequity and inequity.¹⁶

DEMOCRACY IS AT RISK

(3) *Democracy is at risk while silencing and disempowerment is perpetuated.* The conservative agenda at the state government level has impacted communities around the state in various ways. As for Flint (as well as Detroit and Benton Harbor), the implementation of Act 436 of 2012 paved the way for Flint's fate in the water crisis. Signed by Governor Rick Snyder, Act 436 gives unyielding power of a wide range of city functions to the emergency manager. Capitalizing on the opportunity of corporate privatization, the Act derails local authority and ultimately denotes democracy.¹⁷ Furthermore, the complexities of race, poverty, and inequality persist while about 50% of Michigan's African American population lived in a city under emergency management, compared to 2% of white residents, in 2013.¹⁸

The nature of emergency management involves an inconsiderate desire for knowledge and power, for it is the knowledge and power that drives predetermined policies. Without hesitation, the emergency managers in Flint – Michael Brown as the first emergency manager, Ed Kurtz as the emergency manager in which the Act 436 was newly enacted, and Darnell Earley who decided to switch to untreated Flint River water – have traumatized and scarred its residents. Ignorance of negative impacts and community needs perpetuates political violence, which was present long before the crisis reached state

¹⁴ Hammer, page 2

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*, page 7

¹⁷ Michigan Legislature, 2012

¹⁸ Morris, 2016

and national attention.

The water switch to the Flint River occurred in April 2014; a few months later, residents started complaining about discolored and odorous water coming from their tap. Eight months after the switch (in December 2014), a mother of four, Lee Anne Walters, stopped using the tap water all together.¹⁹ With help from Walters, dozens of complaints, a Water Department (EPA) employee, a Virginia Tech professor, and a pediatrician,²⁰ water tests showed extreme levels of lead in the Flint water. It took another year for national news take ahold of the story, nearing the end of 2015.

Throughout this time, local officials muffled concerns from Flint resident, researchers and doctors. Not only had the city violated the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, but they also insisted that the water was safe to drink. It wasn't until the bustling national attention and the declaration of emergency by President Obama in January 2016²¹ that city officials and Governor Snyder considered the needs of Flint residents. Even then, local officials were quick to play the blame game while discrediting residents' concerns and needs. As Darnell Earley said, "What we have to do is respond to [the crisis], find a way to fix it, make it better and move on."²²

THE POWER OF SILENCING AND SHARING NARRATIVE

As the headlines developed, the backlash of how the local and state elected officials handled the crisis enraged communities around the country. There are many reasons for such anger. This is not first time of discovering a story of communities of color and low-income taken advantage from (i.e. colonization, slavery, post-industrialization, gentrification, etc.). These events include a person or party with power and a person or population without power, who have been silenced and disregarded. Looking back at these archival moments, it inflicts pain of everyday violence of silencing and trauma.

The matter in which Governor Snyder passed Act 436, which explicitly intends to

¹⁹ Smith, December 14, 2015

²⁰ Smith, December 15, 2015

²¹ White House, 2016

²² Smith, December 15, 2015

strip residents from their voice and participation, speaks volumes of how governmental systems have used power to self-advancement. The concern of money and budget constraints begins to fuel this executive power, numbing and ignoring the negative implications that residents, especially vulnerable populations, encounter. Masking the real issues of the crisis and the concerns of residents, Governor Snyder insisted the water was safe for all to drink.²³ In response, Darnell Earley insisted they will find a way to fix it, do so, and move on (as quoted above). These approaches will not restore trust and faith in local and state government, financial management, or public health administration. Moreover, these responses to fix the issue in Flint will not mend the brokenness the people of Flint have been enduring for decades. The silencing of residents' stories and struggles require a call to action that is whole-heartedly, radically different than what has been done in the past.

The fact that the story of the Flint Water Crisis began with a mother of four, Lee Ann Walters, who recognized the rashes on her child's skin after swimming in a pool, which was filled from Flint's switched water system, and to relentlessly spoke with the water department about her tap water, goes to show the layers of silencing. The Flint Water Crisis received spotlight news coverage in the aftermath of Walters' narrative was heard and shared.²⁴

Local officials were mistaken when speaking of the crisis as a "fix and move on" situation. In Judith Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*, Herman emphasizes on how political violence and trauma comes in the form of silencing and when those who experienced trauma are successfully silenced, the act of political violence is normalized. Normalization is the vehicle of dismissing one's narrative as it desensitizes or simply ignores the trauma and its implications. It is when the silence is broken that one's narrative may be rediscovered. This rediscovering of history sets precedents for healing and recovery.

While recognizing who holds the power and trying to hear the narrative of those

²³ Egan, 2016

²⁴ Smith, 2015

who have been silenced, it's is awfully loud to sort through the wavelengths of narrative. In many cases, the louder voice is angry and sometimes thoughtless. In the instance of the water crisis, local and state officials, as well as representatives at MDEQ and the EPA, spoke loudly to minimize the catastrophe and to blame anyone other than themselves for crippling an entire city. The quieter voices, those who have been silenced, are key to seeking healing and recovery. When listening and learning different narratives, it is crucial to assess who is speaking, whose narrative their sharing, how are they saying, and reasons why it is being shared. It is vital to recognize the motive of an emergency manager's narrative as well as a Flint resident's narrative. What is being conveyed and what will happen to the conveyed information? Herman discusses group recovery can be helpful and healing, or traumatic and harmful – depending on the narratives and present stages of recovery among the group.

RESTORING DEMOCRACY

One method towards recovery is to restore democracy. This includes sharing and valuing narratives of those most affected by the water crisis, assessing and implementing realistic recovery-driven interventions, and consistently working towards reconciliation between the power-driven officials and those who have been historically oppressed and silenced. The current reliance on emergency management with powerful decision-making abilities regarding financial, environmental, and social policy must reform as it derives the community participating and sharing their narrative. What will prevent another water crisis to occur elsewhere with how the current system functions? Repetitive injustices will continue if community members are not given a seat at the decision-making table or a voice to share stories and concerns. Accountability and transparent communication among elected offices is possible through community participation. There is a need for transparency between those in power and the general public, and implementing community participation would provide opportunities for dialogue between decision-makers and the people most affected by those decisions.

While Congress approved \$170 million dollars to address the lead in the drinking

water in Flint is a financial step towards recovery²⁵, Flint residents continue to encounter traumatic events, such as a declining population, growing unemployment rates as well as increasing health concerns of lead poisoning and other disease outbreaks. The trauma and stigmatization of Flint will linger longer than what tangible solutions may solve. That isn't to discredit remedies to mitigate economic and social isolation, including efforts to create jobs and to strengthen the economy. Economic healing may bring social, mental, and emotional healing, which offers a step forward.

CONCLUSION

So... What's next? How does theory of restoring democracy and giving voice to the silenced bridge practical and just actions?

Striding towards environmental justice, it is important to assess what failed and worked. The City of Flint failed to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act and, after sending notices to Flint notices about the danger of the water in summer 2014, city officials managed to keep the issue under the radar for months. Narrative is everything. The story is often told of the winner²⁶ while the "loser" is silenced, traumatized and discredited. In order to build trust, the voiced and voiceless must come together and mutually recognize the repetitive unjust history.²⁷ Restoring narrative and democracy is a form of peace in which empathy and love may overcome disruptive power-driven and greedy decision-making dynamics.

Environment Justice is the lens in which activists can guide themselves and others to create necessary change, to fight and to keep elected officials accountable for their decisions and actions, to facilitate transparency between parties, and to ensure that peace is carried out through breaking the silence. While there is a lot of work to be done in Flint, Michigan, the awareness of environmental justice and the efforts towards repairing the decaying water infrastructure are first steps. For long term remedies, it is key for the City of Flint, both elected officials and residents, work to create a more equitable community

²⁵ Carmody, 2016

²⁶ Tipullot, 1995

²⁷ Castillejo-Cuellar 2005

through job creation, transparency in politics, and expansion of health and human services. It is important to remember that while there are efforts towards improvement, the embedded trauma, historical racism, classism, and silencing will linger and will require time and peace to seek recovery.

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