

The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism

Testimony before Michigan Civil Rights Commission Hearing on Flint Water Crisis

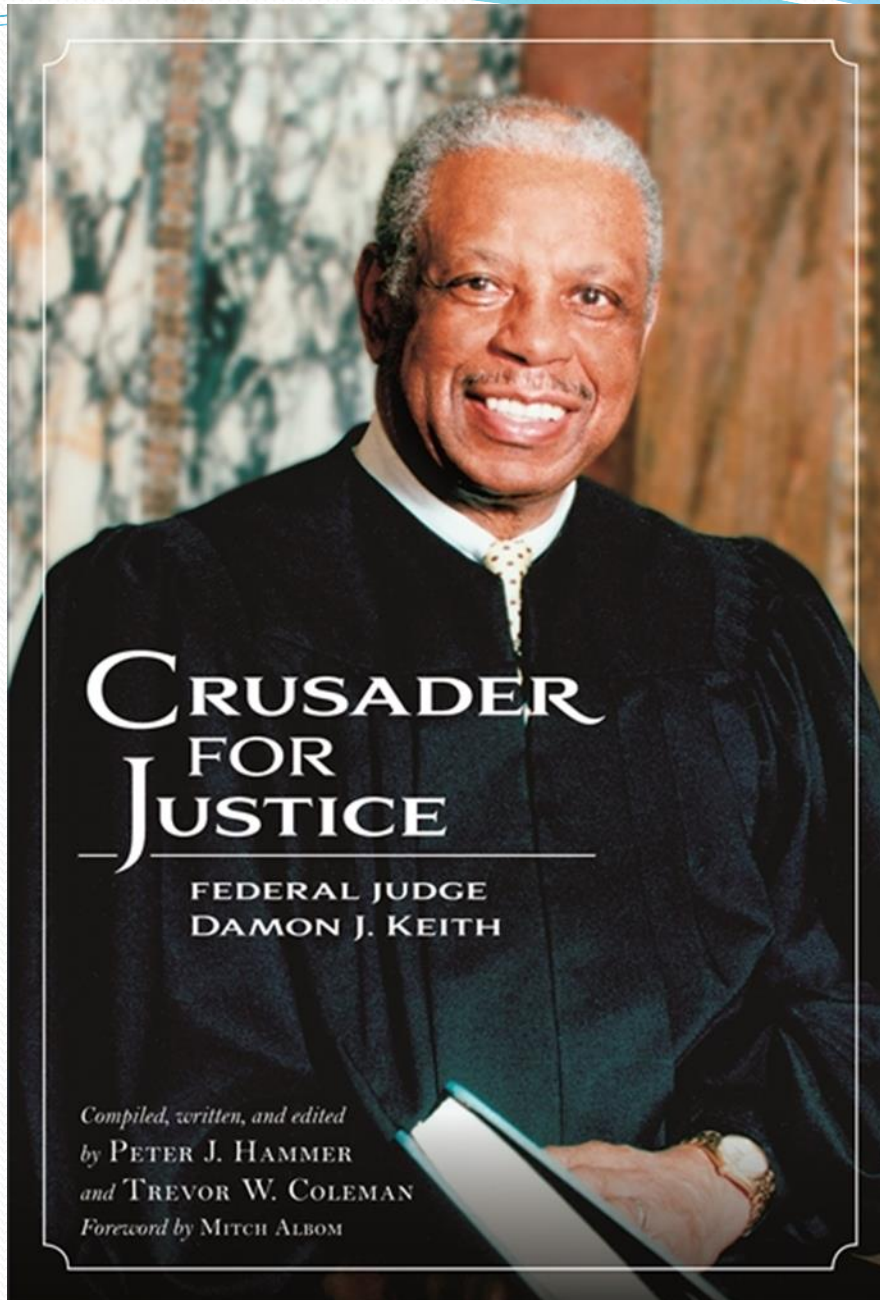
Peter J. Hammer

Professor of Law and Director

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

July 14, 2016



CRUSADER FOR JUSTICE

FEDERAL JUDGE
DAMON J. KEITH

*Compiled, written, and edited
by PETER J. HAMMER
and TREVOR W. COLEMAN
Foreword by MITCH ALBOM*

Central question of our time

- How do systems of racial oppression produce and reproduce themselves over time?
- Claim: This process involves dynamic interaction between “beliefs” and “institutions”
- This transformation has moved from
 - slavery to
 - Jim Crow segregation to
 - the “spatial racism” that defines Flint and Genesee County today

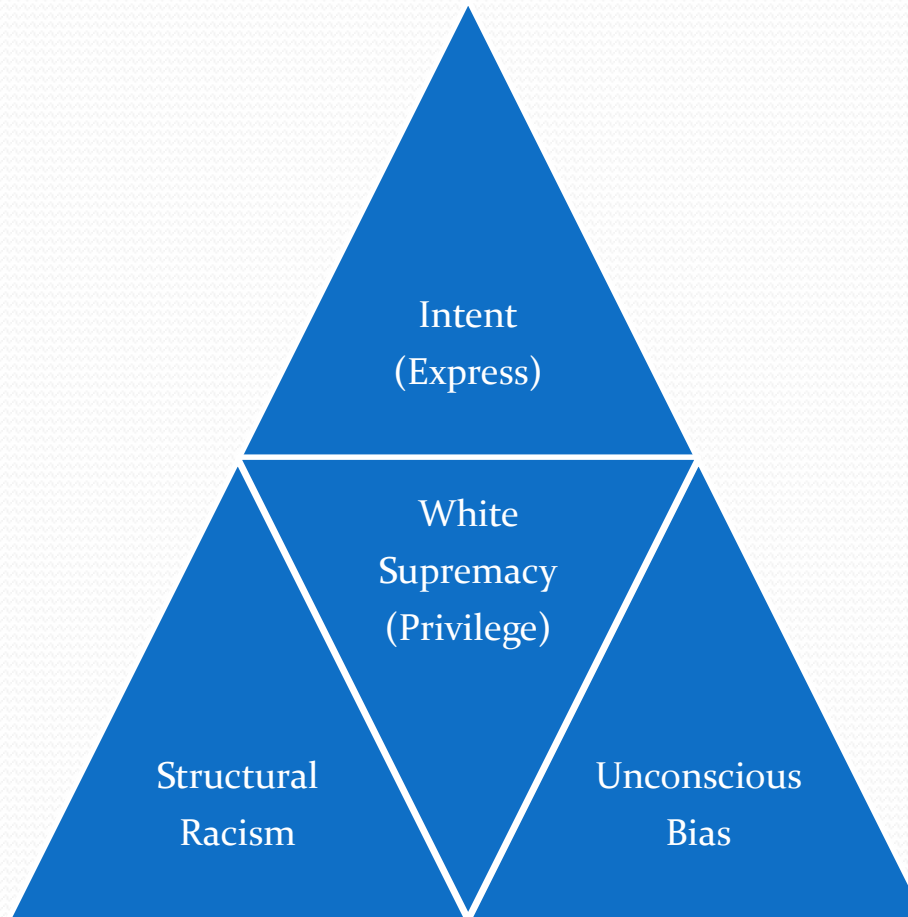
Overview: Spatial Racism in Flint and Genesee County

- 1920's-1950's
 - Racial containment in Floral Park and St. John Street
 - Near-complete segregation of race, wealth and opportunity
- 1960's-1970's
 - Containment breached at the edges
 - Racialized panic and “blockbusting”
 - Escalating white flight
- 1980's-present
 - Reproduction of spatial racism at the county level
 - All of Flint is now Floral Park and St. John Street

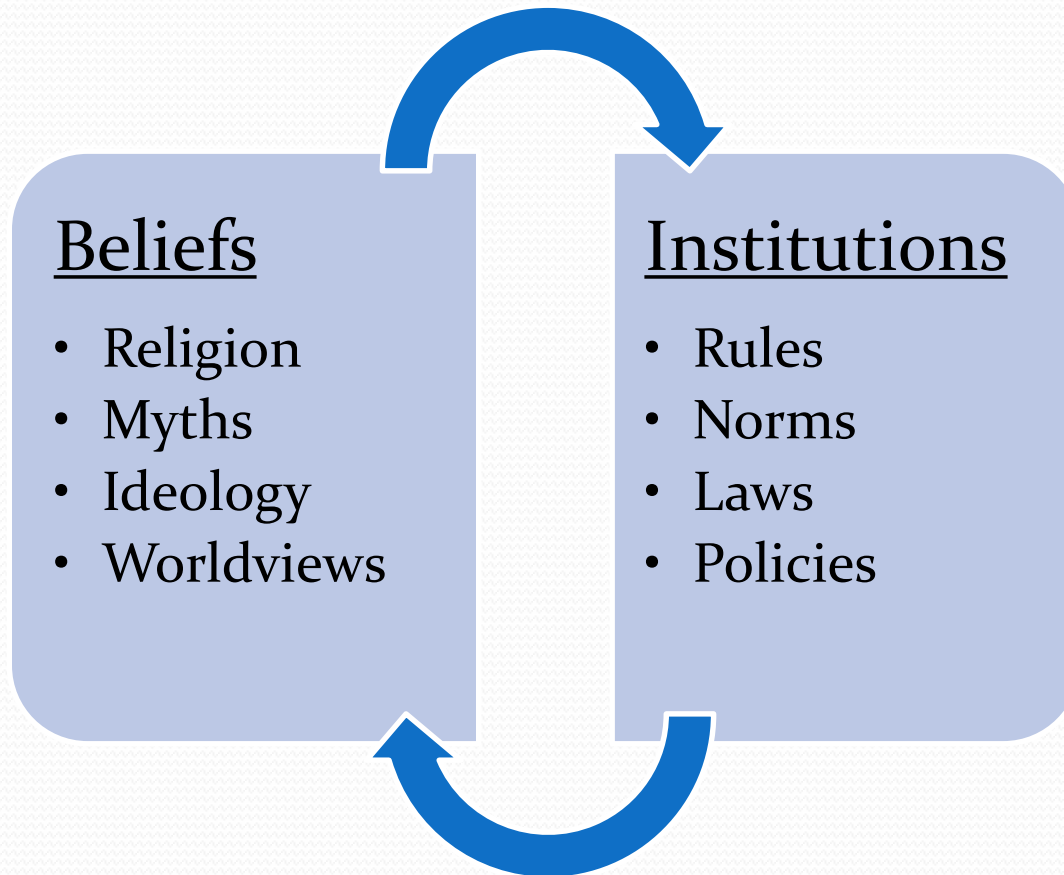
Implications for Flint Water Crisis

- Spatial-Structural Racism is the root cause of Flint's municipal distress mediated by
 - Collapse of property market and property tax revenue
 - Regional division, deindustrialization and the collapse of income tax revenue
- Emergency Management was a fatally misguided response to spatial-structural racism
- Emergency Management and fiscal austerity created the preconditions for the Flint Water Crisis

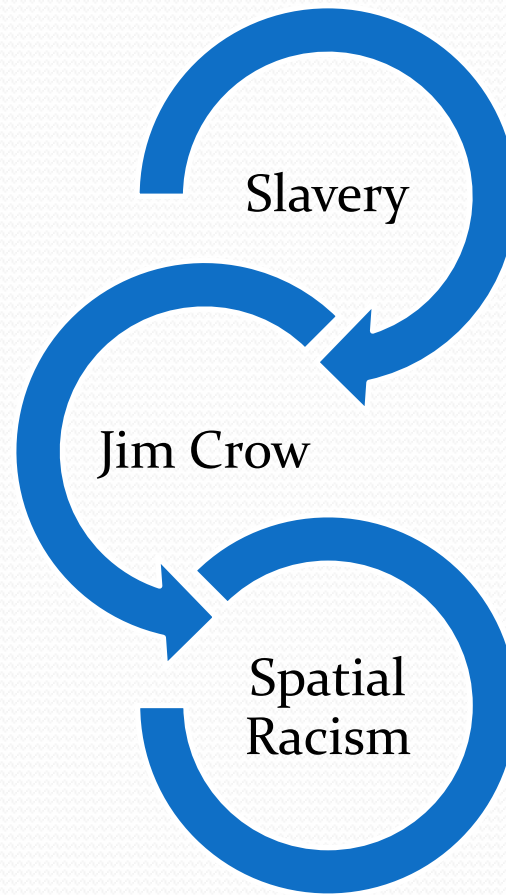
Structuralized Racialization (Verb)



Co-Evolution: Beliefs & Institutions



Historic lineage of “spatial racism”



What is a “Belief System”?

- Belief Systems: Provide (1) order and (2) meaning
- Functions of Belief Systems
 - Existential (explain the mystery of life to itself)
 - Cosmological (explain how the world works)
 - Sociological (provide rules of social conduct)
 - Psychological (guide individuals through life cycle)(Joseph Campbell)
- Belief systems are “internal” manifestations of Institutional Matrix

Belief Systems shape action

- Two common frames (myths?)
 - Time is linear
 - Race is marginal
- What are implications for thought and action?
 - Past injustices can be ignored
 - Problems of racial justice are not important and will take care of themselves
- How does thought and action change when
 - Time is cyclical?
 - Race is central?
- Social reproduction of systems of oppression

The myth of white supremacy

- Existential (defines meaning through racial exclusion)
- Cosmology (necessitates a false science)
- Sociological (repressive social orders of domination and hierarchy – slavery and Jim Crow segregation)
- Psychological (what does it do to a person to be raised in this environment? Implications for oppressed and oppressor?)

Where is white supremacy today?

- Claim: The myth of “white supremacy” has been divided into two parts
 - External: The myth of colorblindness
 - Internal: The denial of “white privilege”
- These beliefs underlie Emergency Management
- *Time is linear & race is marginal*

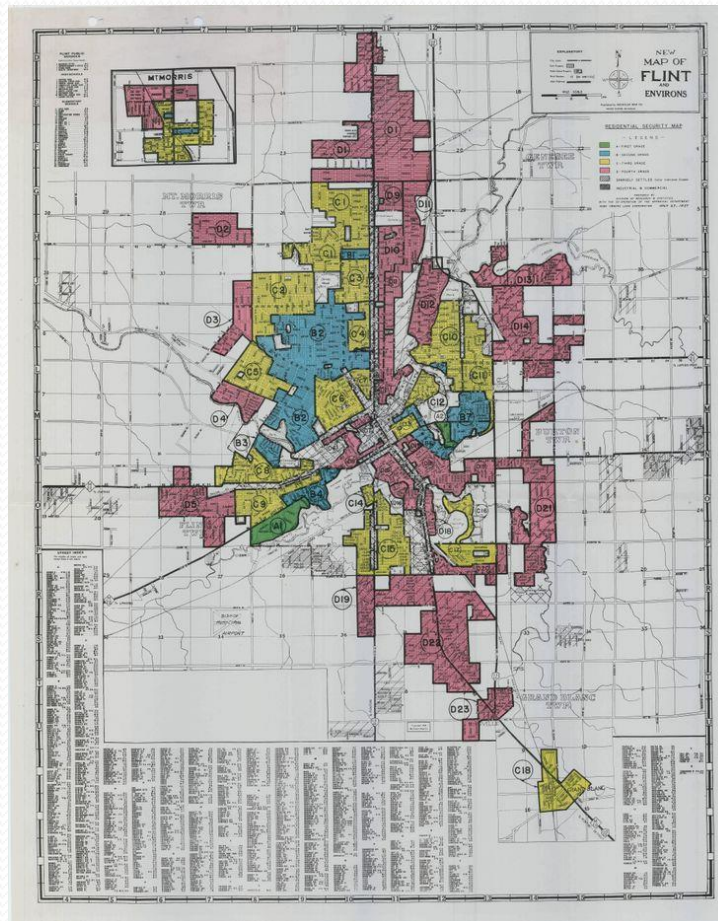
What is an “Institutional Matrix”?

- Formal and informal rules, norms, laws and regulations that control social behavior
 - Rules of the game
 - Players of the game
 - Interaction between the Players and the Rules
- Institutional Matrix is the “external” manifestation of Belief Systems

Institutional Matrix facilitating spatial racism in Flint

- Racially restrictive covenants (1920's-1940's)
- Federal Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and Federal Housing Authority (FHA) racialized lending practices (redlining, denial of loans to African Americans and African American neighborhoods) (1930's-1960's)
- Racism in Flint Realty Board (racial steering and other practices)
- Physical violence from white homeowners
- Police harassment outside St. John and Floral Park

1930's FHA Redlining map



Andrew R. Highsmith

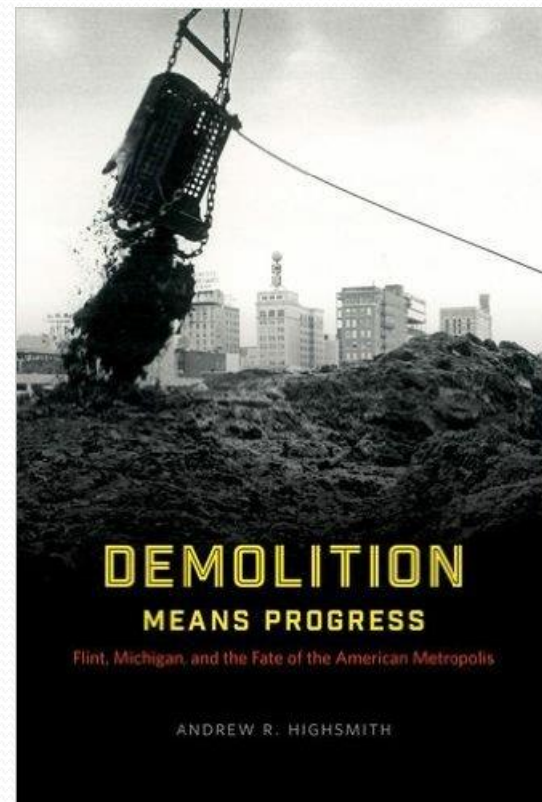
Demolition Means Progress:
Race, Class, and the
Deconstruction of the
American Dream in Flint,
Michigan

by

Andrew R. Highsmith

A dissertation submitted in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (History)
in the University of Michigan

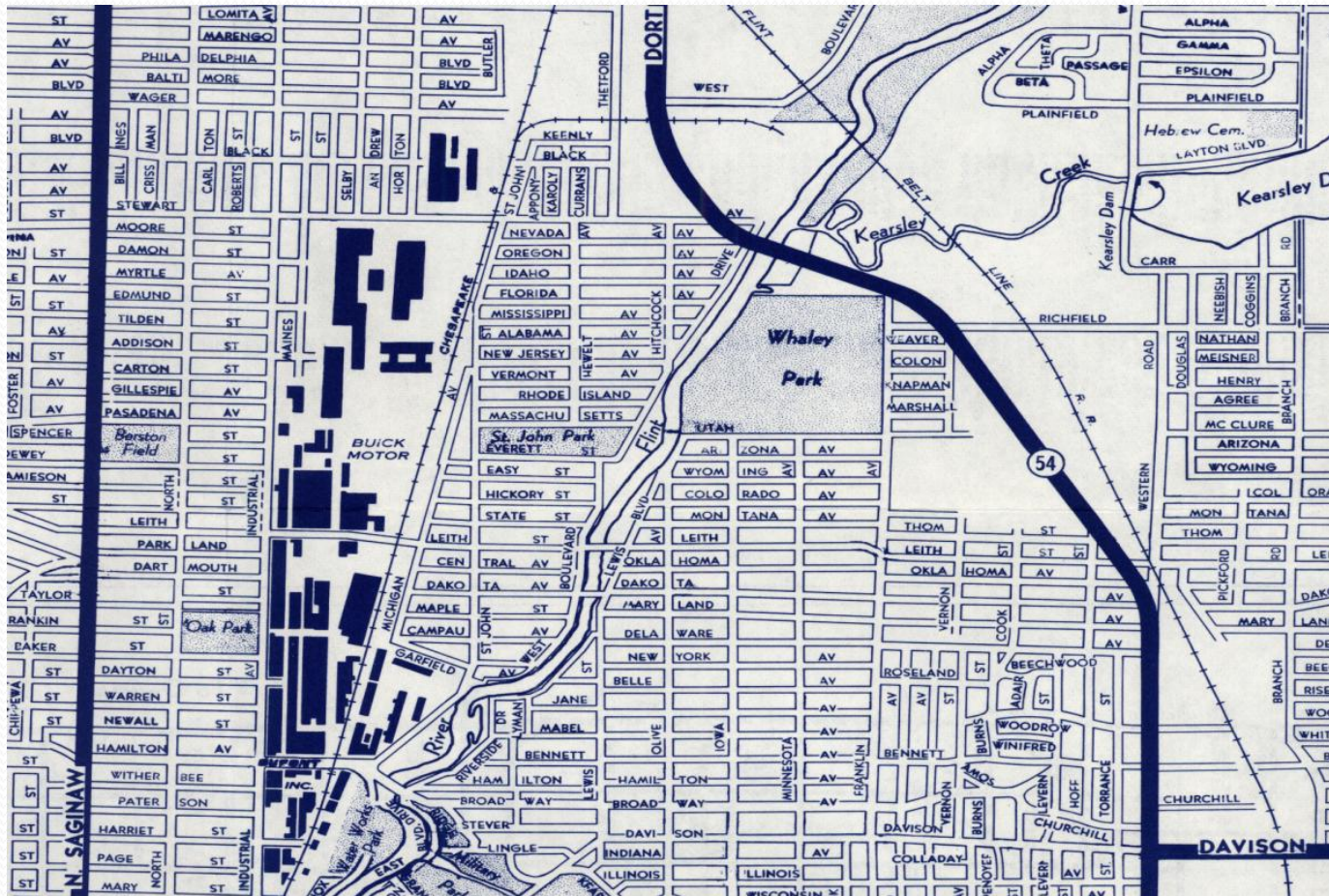
2009



Spatial Racism: Floral Park and St. John Street neighborhoods

- Floral Park
 - Original home of free persons of color and former slaves
 - Located south of downtown
- St. John Street
 - Near-north side
 - Surrounded on three sides by the Buick factories, the Flint River and a maze of rail lines
 - Largest concentration of poverty and highest proportion of African Americans
 - “St. John is virtually an island in a city . . . there are few ways to get in and out” (Highsmith 54-55)

St. Johns Street



Segregation by the numbers

- 1940 Census study: Flint is third most segregated city in the country (Highsmith 37)
- 1940 and 1947: black population doubles, but builders build only 25 privately financed new homes, all in St. John and Floral Park (Highsmith 140)
- 1940 and 1955: African-American population triple to 18,000
- End of 1960's: Black population grows to 35,000, but boundaries of segregated neighborhoods remain essentially fixed – “St. John, Floral Park, and other increasingly overcrowded, segregated, and polluted neighborhoods along Saginaw Street.” (Highsmith 326)

Effects of spatial racism

- Rosa Kimp (Flint Urban League Director) (1955): “We are living . . . in compressed segregated neighborhoods whose boundaries are well defined . . . this segregated living pattern is forced!” (Highsmith 322)
- MCRC Commissioner Burton Levy (1966): “I do not know of even one white community or white section of a city, where an [African American] citizen visiting a realtor chosen at random or a home advertised for sale would get the fair and equitable treatment that is theoretically required by law and this Commission.” (Highsmith 337)

1966 Flint MCRC hearings

- “Flint Urban League’s executive director John W. Mack testified that the city of Flint, with a segregation index of over 94 percent, was the most segregated non-southern city in the United States . . . Mack informed the commission that Flint’s African-American population, despite comprising over 20 percent of the city’s total, remained confined to just twelve adjacent census tracts along the north-south and east-west axes of Saginaw Street and Lapeer Road.” (Highsmith 339)
- The commission called for a municipal open occupancy law, a comprehensive ordinance prohibiting discrimination in housing (Highsmith 349)

1967-68 Open Housing struggle

- July 1967 Rebellions in Detroit and Flint forced Flint's civic leaders to reevaluate the merits of a fair housing ordinance
- August 1967: Flint City Commission reject the fair housing ordinance (5-4) and triggering the resignation of the City's first African American Mayor
- October 1967: Flint City Commission approved open occupancy legislation (5-4) (after many compromises)
- February 1968: Ballot referendum to repeal Fair Housing Ordinance defeated by razor thin margin of thirty votes
- "Rather than uniting the city around a shared commitment to fair housing and civil rights, the open housing referendum highlighted the depth of the city's racial fissures." (Highsmith 361)

Flint's solution to Spatial Racism?

Demolition!

- 1960 Master Plan: recommended clearance of St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods (Highsmith 329)
 - Floral Park => present day 475 freeway interchange
 - St. John Street => now largely vacant industrial park
- Flint's first segregated public housing program adopted in 1964 to facilitate freeway construction projects to provide subsidized housing for displaced persons
- “By funneling St. John and Floral Park residents to recently integrated areas, the city's relocation program triggered waves of panic selling in formerly all-white neighborhoods.” (Highsmith 475)

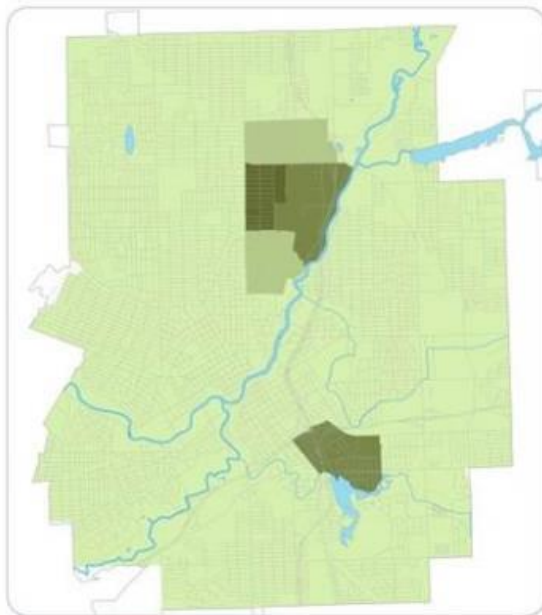
From racialized containment to white flight

- “Emanating from St. John in the North End and Floral Park on the south side, the geographic expansion of the city’s two primary black enclaves tended to occur in a rather linear, block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood progression.
 - On the south side of the city, migrants from Floral Park tended to move along an easterly axis towards Lapeer Park, Evergreen Valley, and points eastward.
 - In the North End, where racial transitions were more rapid and widespread, black population expansion during the 1960s and 1970s followed a northwesterly route towards Flint Park, Civic Park, Manley Village, Forest Park.” (Highsmith 488)

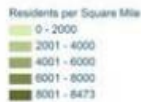
From racialized containment to white flight (cont.)

- “Between 1970 and 1980, Flint’s white population declined sharply, (from 138,065 to 89,470), while the city’s black population increased from (54,237 to 66,164). By the close of the decade, white flight and black population increases had combined to produce a city that was over 40 percent African American” (Highsmith 497)
- “Desperate to escape their changing neighborhoods, many white homeowners moved away before they could sell their houses, leaving behind thousands of empty structures. By 1979, nearly 10 percent of Flint homes were unoccupied.” (Highsmith 498)

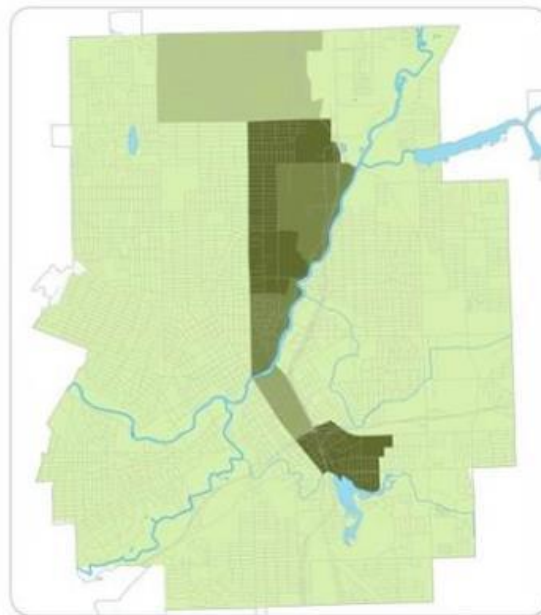
Population density by race, 1950-1970 (Rick Sadler)



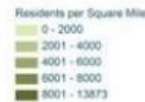
Density of Black Residents: Flint, 1950



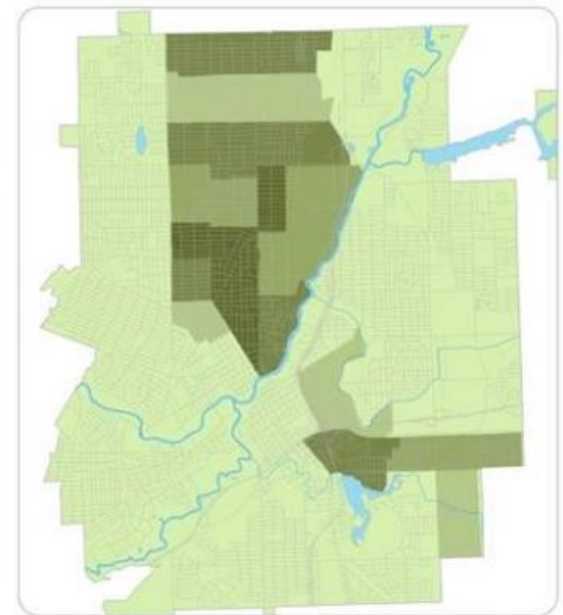
Created by Rick Sadler, GIS Analyst, readfir4@gmail.com, 2/11/13



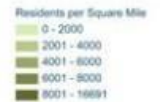
Density of Black Residents: Flint, 1960



Created by Rick Sadler, GIS Analyst, readfir4@gmail.com, 2/11/13

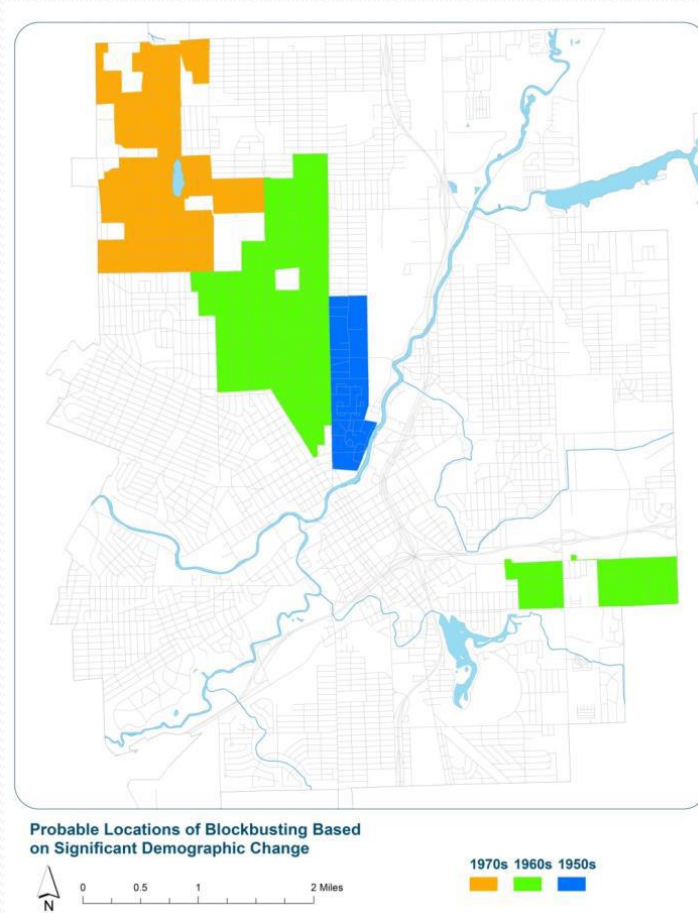


Density of Black Residents: Flint, 1970

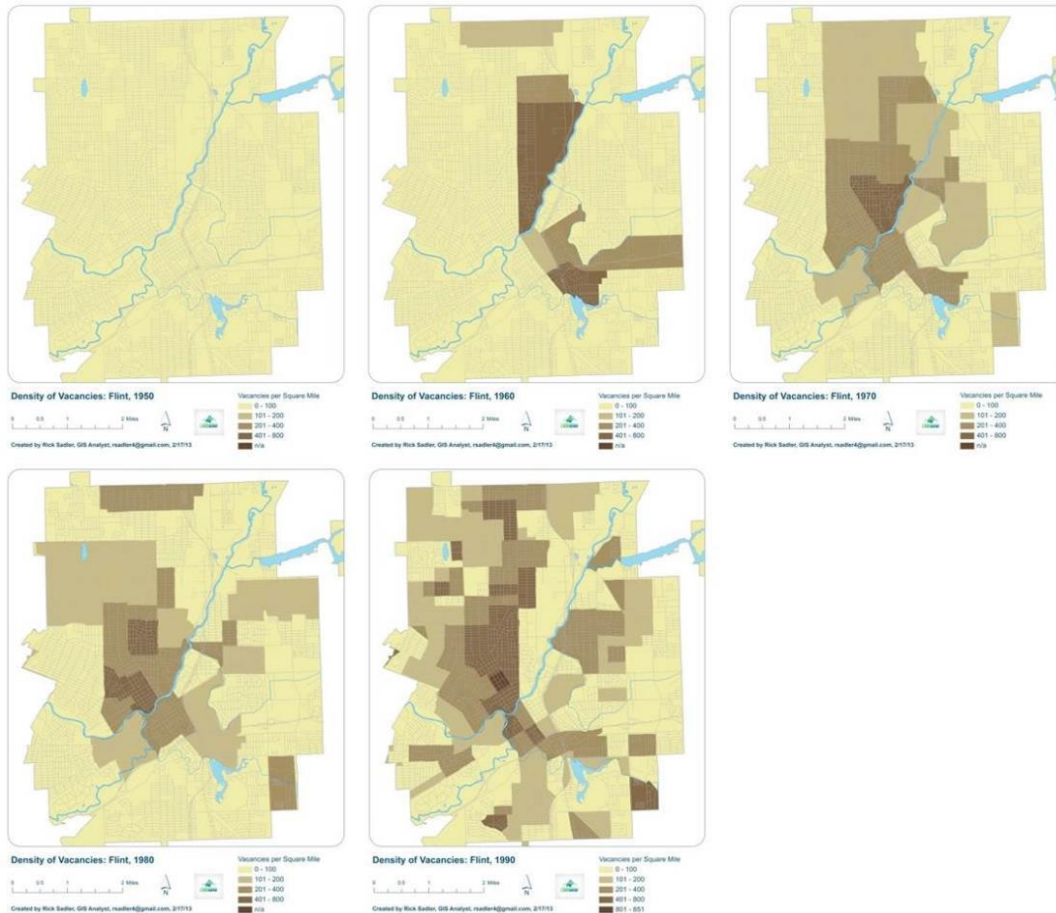


Created by Rick Sadler, GIS Analyst, readfir4@gmail.com, 2/11/13

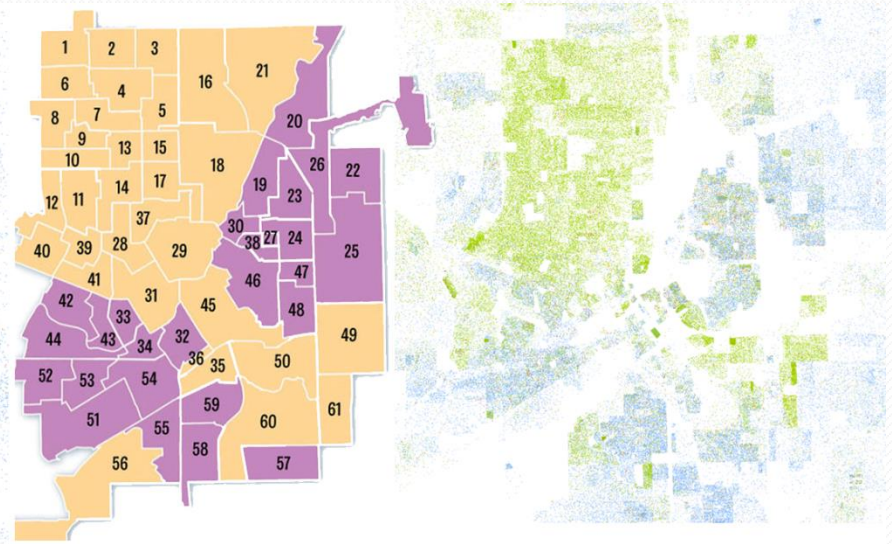
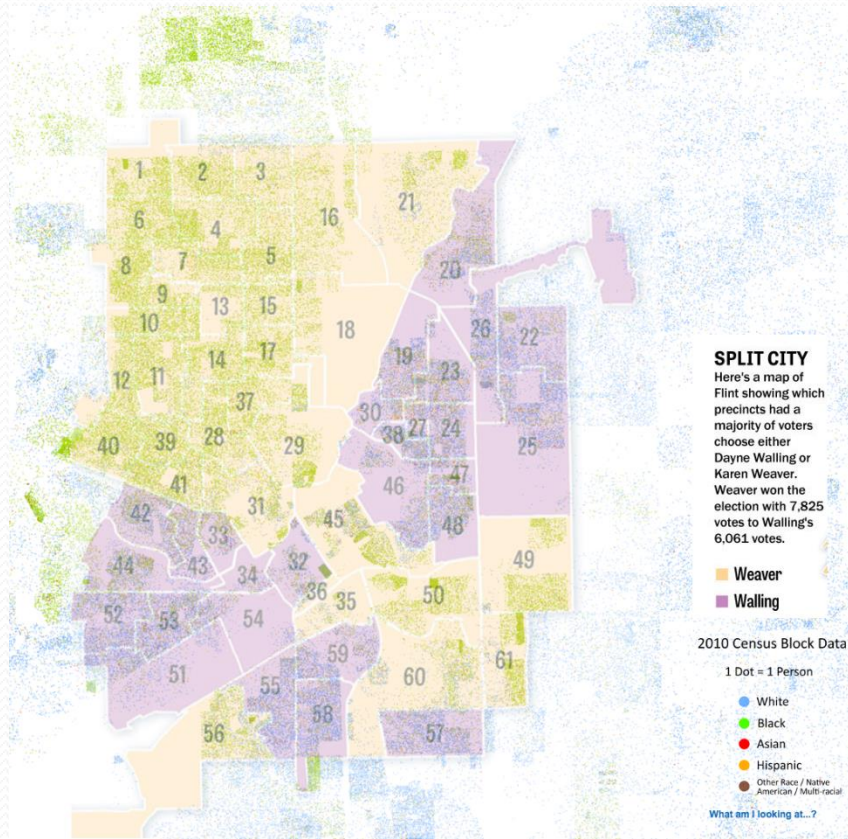
Blockbusting 1950 (blue), 1960 (green) and 1970 (orange) (Sadler)



Percent of vacant properties, 1950-1990 (Rick Sadler)



Race (2010) and Voting (2015) (Gridwood 2015)



Side by side comparison (above)

Overlay on the left

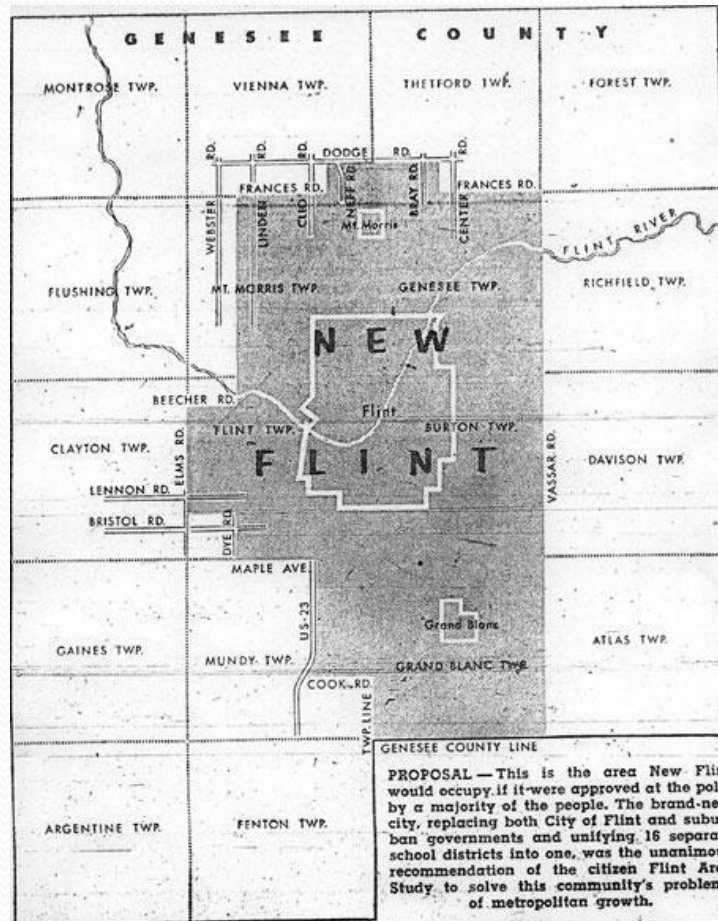
Institutional Matrix facilitating spatial racism in Genesee County

- Strong Michigan Home Rule Laws – “Inelastic boundaries” (David Rusk)
 - Difficulties in city annexation
 - Defensive “incorporation” and Charter Township status
- Milliken v Bradley: Prohibition against inter-district school desegregation remedies
- Exclusive zoning codes and building regulations preventing African Americans and poor whites from moving to the suburbs
- (Institutional mechanisms for the social reproduction of spatial racism)

Divided regionalism

- Every new GM complex opened in Genesee County between 1940 and 1960 was located outside Flint (Highsmith 222)
- 1958: “New Flint” plan sought to unite 26 governmental units within the urbanized area of Genesee County into a single city with a unified school district and a regional planning agency – plan had no suburban support (Highsmith 304-05)
- 1960’s-70’s: “Following the defeat of the New Flint plan, [Flint] . . . moved to annex suburban factories and shopping centers. In response, voters in the out-county launched several successful incorporation drives . . . The incorporation of Flint’s inner-ring suburbs left the city landlocked, surrounded by hostile suburban governments, and far removed from the county’s remaining industrial and commercial establishments.” (Highsmith 530-31)

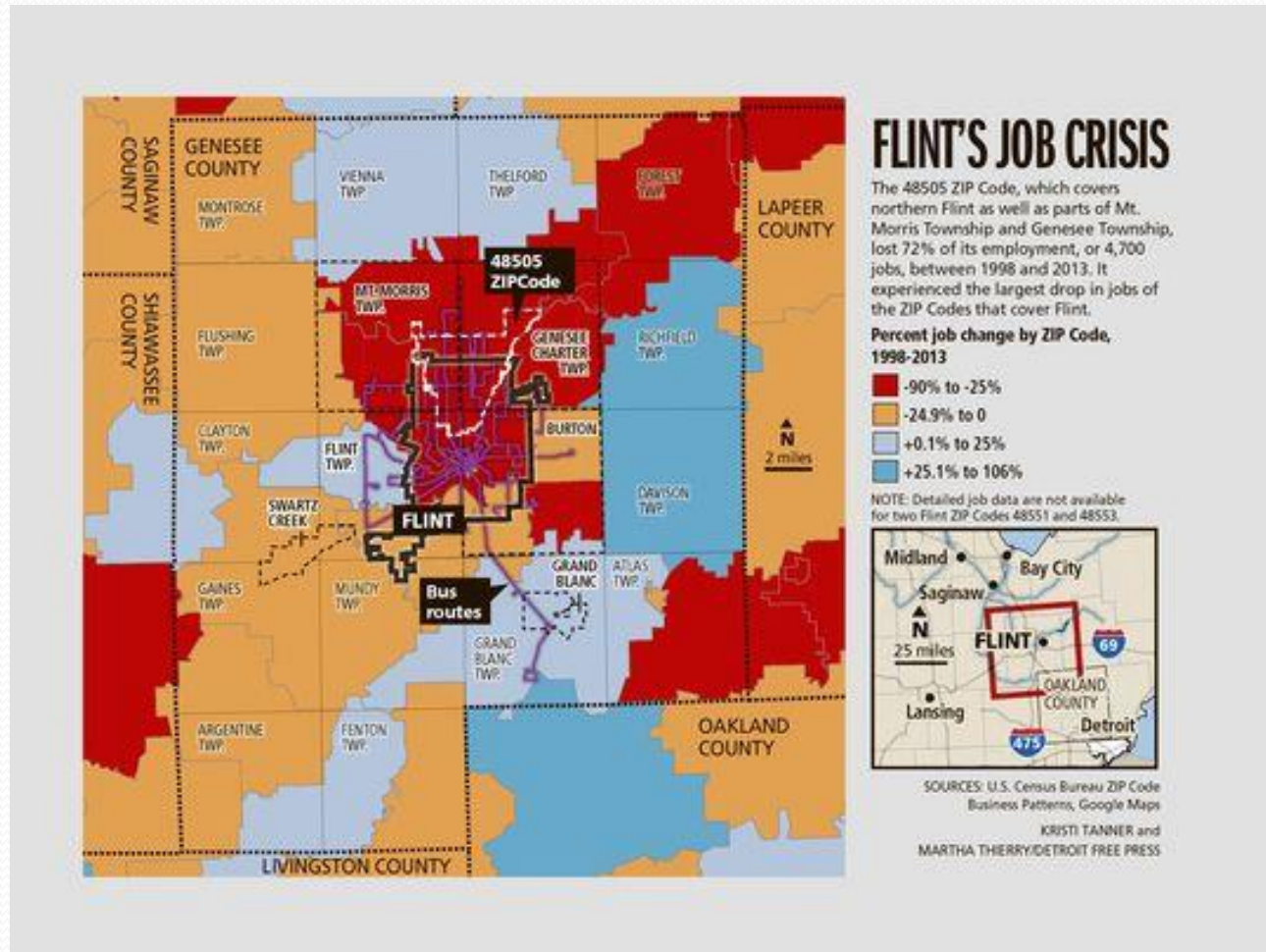
1958 “New Flint Plan”



Segregation by the numbers

- 1930: a quarter of Genesee County's residents live outside Flint
- 1960: 60 percent of the county's residents live outside Flint
- 1980-1992: "proportion of white pupils in the Flint Public Schools dropped sharply from 52.5 to 29.6 percent . . . Flint's public schools experienced a rapid transition from segregation to resegregation." (Highsmith 395)
- 1997: MSU study demonstrated how African Americans were "severely underrepresented in every area of the county except Beecher, Mt. Morris Township, and the city of Flint. At century's end, this study argued, white racism, restrictive zoning and building codes, and real estate discrimination continued to play a major role in limiting the housing options of all African Americans, regardless of their class status." (Highsmith 552)

Job loss 1998-2013 (Henderson and Tanner 2016)



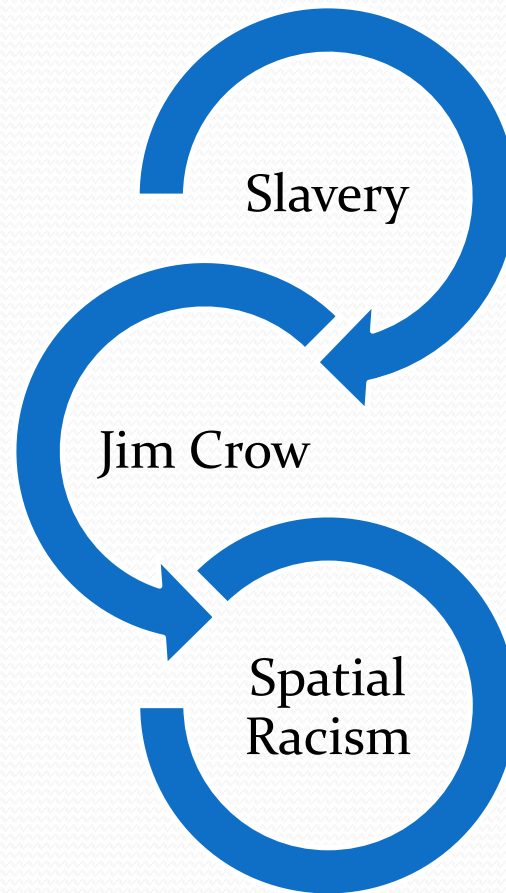
Spatial racism causes municipal distress

- Between FY 2006 and FY 2012, there were dramatic reductions in each of Flint's primary revenue sources
 - Property tax revenue fell 33% (from \$12.5 million to \$8.3 million), a sign of a collapsing real estate market
 - Income tax revenue fell 39% (from \$19.7 million to \$12 million), a sign of a collapsing jobs market.
 - State revenue sharing fell a dramatic 61% (from \$20 million to \$7.9 million), a sign of the state's abandonment of its older urban areas.
- Scorsone & Bateson (2011)

Emergency Management is a racially blind and fiscally flawed response

- Rather than addressing root causes of spatial-structural racism and root causes of municipal distress, the State imposed Emergency Management
 - Emergency Management disproportionately targets African American communities
 - Emergency Management imposes strict policies of fiscal austerity
 - Emergency Management established the preconditions of the Flint Water Crisis
- Peter J. Hammer, The Flint Water Crisis, KWA and Strategic-Structural Racism (work in progress)

Social reproduction of systems of oppression (beliefs & institutions)



Questions?

