

FORUM: DISCOVERING THE ENVIRONMENT

# The Fallout from Residential Segregation

Jennifer Thomson

In 2015, residents of Flint, Michigan, a majority black city, discovered that their water supply had been contaminated with high levels of lead resulting from the undemocratically appointed mayor's decision to switch the city's water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the heavily polluted Flint River. After nearly a full year of prevarication and finger-pointing among involved officials, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and President Barack Obama declared states of emergency. Emergency managers Darnell Earley and Gerald Ambrose now face felony charges, and the state of Michigan will spend eighty-seven million dollars to replace lead pipes in the city. Despite this resolution, many Flint residents still lack access to safe tap water, the city has threatened to foreclose on residents with outstanding bills for contaminated water and sewage service, and nearly three thousand cities in the United States suffer from levels of lead contamination higher than those discovered in Flint.<sup>1</sup>

The Black Lives Matter National Network (BLM) identified state violence as the root of the crisis. Connecting Flint residents' lack of clean drinking water with other forms of racialized violence, including police brutality and residential discrimination, BLM framed the crisis in terms of human rights: "The right to clean drinking water is a matter of health and dignity, and for many Black residents in Flint, it is also a matter of life and death."<sup>2</sup> On a national policy-making level, however, little has been done to remediate the structural causes of the Flint water crisis or the widespread lead contamination of drinking water supplies around the country.<sup>3</sup> A narrow legalistic solution, focused on the egregious actions of Flint's emergency managers, has so far triumphed over another that understood environmental problems as one facet of broader, racialized, structural violence in the United States.

Just as environmental protection has never meant a unified set of objectives, so too Americans have never responded to environmental challenges as a single polity. As the limited resolution of Flint's water crisis suggests, there has been a strong correlation between practices of environmental protection and social citizenship in the modern United States, and neither has been equally distributed. The intertwined histories of slavery, settler colonialism, and restrictive immigration policies bluntly demonstrate that American-ness has always been exclusionary and impermanent—in reality a multiplicity of precarious citizenships sustained by a carefully policed potential for inclusion. While many individuals and communities in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Jacey Fortin, "In Flint, Overdue Bills for Unsafe Water Could Lead to Foreclosures," *New York Times*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/us/flint-water-home-foreclosure.html> (accessed Jul. 19, 2017); M. B. Pell and Joshua Schneyer, "Off the Charts: The Thousands of U.S. Locales Where Lead Poisoning is Worse than in Flint," *Reuters*, Dec. 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-lead-testing/> (accessed Jul. 19, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Black Lives Matter, "Solidarity Statement with Flint, Michigan," <https://www.workers.org/2016/01/26/black-lives-matter-extends-solidarity-to-people-of-flint-mich/> (accessed Feb. 8, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>M. B. Pell and Joshua Schneyer, "Thousands of U.S. Areas Afflicted with Lead Poisoning Beyond Flint's," *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/thousands-of-u-s-areas-afflicted-with-lead-poisoning-beyond-flints/#> (accessed Feb. 16, 2018).

United States have aspired to and eventually have been granted membership within the polity, others have been repeatedly excluded and reminded of their unworthiness.<sup>4</sup>

The enduring legacy of oppression on the distribution of power in the United States means that only certain Americans can realistically expect their demands on policy makers to be heard and answered. Moreover, residential segregation and the dependence of most public services and infrastructure on local property taxes means that communities are incentivized to protect those environments which they identify as their own, and are differentially equipped to do so.

How have millions become secure in their citizenship and embraced certain forms of environmental protection while turning a deaf ear to the environmental needs and demands of others? Any analysis of the success or failure of environmental protection in the United States must begin by acknowledging that racial residential segregation is the experiential, ideological, and economic backbone of worsening environmental inequality—a sustained system of injustice that has limited Americans' imaginative response to environmental crises.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, best known as the G.I. Bill, offers a clear way to think through the interwoven environmental enfranchisement of white Americans and disenfranchisement of poor and minority communities. The G.I. Bill provided grants for school and college tuition, low-interest mortgages, small business loans, job training, unemployment insurance, and hiring privileges to returning World War II veterans. Although written without reference to race, the Bill's benefits were disbursed through local agencies often in a racially discriminatory manner with the result of facilitating social mobility for white veterans while blocking it for many African Americans, and in such a way as to obscure the structural reason for their exclusion. Elevating home ownership to a perceived birthright of millions of white Americans, the G.I. Bill also exacerbated residential segregation. The Federal Housing Administration's mortgage policies, which included assessments based on racially discriminatory redlining and privileging new suburban housing, often marked by racial covenants, over urban renewal projects, combined with the unequal distribution of other G.I. Bill benefits, created acres and acres of racially exclusive suburbs.<sup>5</sup> This association of race, place, and belonging continued a longer tradition in the United States of defining desirable environments as those free *from* certain groups and free *for* a circumscribed elite.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to identify a single sphere of life not impacted by residential segregation. Educational opportunities; access to amenities such as after-school programs, parks, and open space; and the functioning of public services like sanitation and garbage collection are so closely tied to local property taxes as to make their presence, absence, and quality a direct reflection of the racial and economic makeup of a neighborhood. Decades of disinvestment (or lack of investment) in black communities by banks and industry has drastically eroded the value of properties in black neighborhoods. And segregation shows few signs of lessening.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham, NC, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Although metropolitan residential segregation has declined slowly since the 1960s, suburban segregation has increased, as whites move into exurbs at increasing removes from cities. Daniel T. Lichter, Domenico Parisi, and Michael C. Taquino, "Toward a New Macro-Segregation? Decomposing Segregation within and between Metropolitan Cities and Suburbs," *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 4 (2015): 843–73; John R. Logan, "The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis," *City & Community* 12, no. 2 (Jun. 2013): 160–8; Alana Semuels, "White Flight Never Ended," *Atlantic*, Jul. 30, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/white-flight-alive-and-well/399980/> (accessed Jul. 10, 2017).

For many white Americans, residential segregation is either invisible or justified by a meritocratic mythology that portrays those who have achieved the “American Dream” of homeownership in a prosperous neighborhood as successful through their own individual hard work, and those who have not as personally at fault.<sup>8</sup> This assumption occludes the radical dependency of most white Americans’ standard of living on government assistance, tax policies, and social welfare programs such as the G.I. Bill. Meritocratic myths and the structural inequality they obscure have profound environmental consequences, such as determining the distribution of environmental burdens and which communities historically have been able to protect their residential environments.

Residential segregation produces stark environmental inequalities. Minorities are exposed to higher levels of nitrogen dioxide, a pollutant linked to higher risks of asthma and heart attack that is emitted by cars, construction equipment, and industrial facilities.<sup>9</sup> Hazardous waste facilities, industrial operations, and local undesirable land use areas are disproportionately located in poor and nonwhite communities, as are noise pollution and mosquito infestations.<sup>10</sup> Environmental burdens are not distributed equally, nor is the cost of their remediation shared.

Arguments about environmental quality, public health, and the threats posed by hazardous waste meanwhile have provided the means for some white communities to resist residential integration. As Lily Geismer demonstrates in her analysis of postwar liberalism in the Boston suburbs, affluent white communities used arguments for the protection of open space to restrict neighborhood integration. Case studies of Gary, Indiana; Oakland, California; Detroit, Michigan; and Love Canal, New York reveal similarly racist practices embedded in local environmental protection efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Because political power is so unevenly distributed, because economic enfranchisement remains so tenuous, and because affective connections are so often dependent on place and race, the possibility for forging a national, much less global, understanding of environmental threats, their causes, and collective solutions, remains elusive. Indeed, these impediments cut straight to the heart of why a majority of Americans are now firmly in favor of maintaining existing national environmental protections, but comparatively indifferent to the need to enforce these policies equally in all communities and often openly hostile to paying increased taxes to remediate environmental problems in communities other than their own.<sup>12</sup> Thus, despite the best efforts of activists, environmental hazards continue to be unequally distributed, minority communities continue to experience deteriorating public health conditions, the

<sup>8</sup>“The House We Live In,” *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, season 1, episode 3, dir. Christine Herbes-Sommers (California Newsreel, 2003); Naa Oyo A. Kwate and Ilan H. Meyer, “The Myth of Meritocracy and African American Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 10 (Oct. 2010): 1831–4.

<sup>9</sup>Lara P. Clark, Dylan B. Millet, and Julian D. Marshall, “National Patterns in Environmental Injustice and Inequality: Outdoor NO<sub>2</sub> Air Pollution in the United States,” *PLOS One* 9, no. 4 (Apr. 2014): e94431.

<sup>10</sup>Diana Budds, “Urban Poverty Has a Sound—And It’s Loud,” *Co.Design*, Mar. 30, 2017, <https://www.fastcodesign.com/90107856/urban-poverty-has-a-sound-and-its-loud> (accessed Jul. 17, 2017); Christopher Ingraham, “The Hidden Inequality of Mosquito Bites,” *Washington Post*, Jul. 5, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/07/05/the-hidden-inequality-of-mosquito-bites/?utm\\_term=.8c04e58ba949](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/07/05/the-hidden-inequality-of-mosquito-bites/?utm_term=.8c04e58ba949) (accessed Jul. 15, 2017); Paul Mohai and Robin Saha, “Which Came First, People or Pollution? A Review of Theory and Evidence from Longitudinal Environmental Justice Studies,” *Environmental Research Letters* 10, no. 12 (Dec. 2015), <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/10/12/125011>.

<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth D. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence, KS, 2008); Lily Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); Jennifer Thomson, “Toxic Residents: Health and Citizenship at Love Canal,” *Journal of Social History* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 204–23.

<sup>12</sup>“Environment,” *Gallup News*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1615/environment.aspx> (accessed Jul. 19, 2017).

environmental protections that exist are unequally enforced, and calls for the equitable distribution of environmental and social resources continue to go unanswered.

Historically, countless communities, organizations, and individuals in the United States have imagined their environment, assessed threats to it, and engaged in environmental protection work. But one of the most insidious consequences of structural environmental inequality is that notions of environmental protection by marginalized groups, in particular those which make sharp class or racial critiques, are seldom heard or taken seriously by policy makers or leading environmentalists. Bioregional ecological restoration, the direct action practiced by Earth First! and #NODAPL water protectors, the environmental health work of African American women, and animal liberation activism offer but a few strong examples of practices that have been stigmatized as fringe, terrorist, or, perhaps worst of all, not even recognized as practices of environmental protection at all.

The stigmatization of alternate environmentalisms stems from the degree to which residential segregation has stunted Americans' political imagination when it comes to envisioning possibilities for environmental protection in the United States. Until enfranchised communities directly acknowledge and work to remediate the structural historical inequalities that have allowed them to engage in particular forms of self-interested environmental protection, the nation as a whole has no chance of constructing, much less adhering to, a coherent national environmental agenda that protects all environments and all residents. Absent such a reckoning, we are likely to enter a state of eco-apartheid radically worse than the one in which we currently live.<sup>13</sup>

**Jennifer Thomson** is an assistant professor of history at Bucknell University. She studies how environmental activists in the late twentieth century United States used concepts of health to advance their politics. Her manuscript, *The Wild and the Toxic: Health and Environmental Politics in the United States*, is under contract with University of North Carolina Press.

---

<sup>13</sup>Daniel Aldana Cohen, "New York Mag's Climate Disaster Porn Gets It Painfully Wrong," *Jacobin*, Jul. 10, 2017, <http://jacobinmag.com/2017/07/climate-change-new-york-magazine-response> (accessed Jul. 17, 2017).