

5 The Rise of the Water Warriors: Transforming Personal Troubles into Political Action

At the end of the day, we are not just victims, we're fighters.

—Melissa Mays, interview with author, February 17, 2016

In July 2014, three months after the switch to the Flint River, Melissa Mays began to notice changes in her water. It would turn yellow sporadically, sending her three sons charging through the house “running and screaming” to relay the news to their mother.¹ Filling up the family’s porcelain bathtub revealed a more consistent bluish tinge. The water also began to smell peculiar: depending on the day, it would reek of rotten eggs, dirt, or bleach.

Mays remembers thinking these developments were “weird,” but her initial impulse was to brush them off. The city, she recalled, had warned residents at the time of the switch that river water was different from lake water, and that the water would take time to “level out.” Although Mays later came to see official explanations like these as “excuses,” at the time they seemed like logical and well-intentioned efforts on the part of knowledgeable authorities to inform and reassure residents. She assumed the government agencies entrusted with public health had done their due diligence and would alert the public if there was any cause for concern.²

What began as mild uneasiness about the water’s fluctuations developed into real alarm, however, when Mays and her family were beset by a mysterious series of ailments. Upon contact with the water, she told me, their skin would break out in rashes—“bumpy and lumpy” rashes that felt like a “chemical burn” and were unresponsive to eczema cream. The water seemed to be affecting the family’s hair, too. Mays watched her sons’ naturally “silky” hair become “rough and wiry.”³ Her own hair started falling out in the shower.

Even the family cat's fur, she said, would slough off whenever someone would pet it.

In September, Mays instructed her family to stop drinking the water. But this was not the end of their exposure (they continued to use the water for cooking and showering) or the end of their perplexing health issues. The boys started complaining of muscle and bone pain: eleven-year-old Cole told his mom that his bones "burn from the inside out." Soon thereafter, Mays said, she started suffering from similar pains herself. When Cole fell off his bicycle and thrust his hand out to absorb the impact, his wrist buckled in two places, leading his doctor to surmise that his bones were unusually brittle. Mays's oldest son, seventeen-year-old Caleb, began to develop holes in the smooth sides of his teeth, a sign that rather than decaying in the usual fashion they were crumbling from the inside out. Furthermore, all three boys became lethargic, "tired all the time." Their sluggishness was mental as well as physical, manifesting itself in "brain fogs" that led to difficulties at school.⁴ Twelve-year-old Christian, a consistently straight-"A" student, got his first "C," and Caleb and Cole, who were forgetting skills already learned and finding it hard to remember new information, had to be assigned tutors.

Unbeknownst to Mays at the time, her family's ordeal was not unique. Across town, LeeAnne Walters and her family, too, began breaking out in rashes in the summer of 2014. Three-year-old Gavin would emerge from the bath with a visible water line, below which he was so red and scaly that when Walters tried to apply moisturizing ointment, "he would scream and cry about how bad his skin burned."⁵ Walters had to start giving him Bena-dryl before bath time as a preemptive measure.⁶

At first, the doctors said Gavin's rashes were contact dermatitis caused by an allergy of some kind. Then their diagnosis shifted to eczema and they instructed Walters to apply cortisone to the affected area. When the rest of the family began to develop rashes of their own, however, the diagnosis changed yet again: this time Walters was told that everyone had scabies. The treatment was another prescription cream, a pesticide meant to kill the tiny mites thought to be the source of the problem.

In the meantime, further evidence emerged that the water, not mites, was the real culprit. At a party celebrating eighteen-year-old Kaylie's high school graduation, a group of invited guests broke out in the same telltale rash after swimming in the family pool.⁷ With this incident fresh in her mind, Walters balked when doctors returned a third diagnosis of scabies the

next time she took Gavin in, insisting on further testing by a dermatologist outside city limits. A skin sample showed no evidence of any organism that would have accounted for the rashes.

Like the Mays family, the Walters family also experienced hair problems. Walters recounts rushing up the stairs in response to Kaylie's screams to find her "standing in the shower, staring at a clump of long brown hair that had fallen from her head."⁸ Kaylie was not the only one: the other members of the family were losing hair, too. At one point, Walters lost all of her eyelashes.

Problems with skin and hair were bad enough, but once again they were merely preludes to more serious conditions. In November, fourteen-year-old J. D. began to experience "terrible pains, dizziness, nausea." He had "a hard time walking up steps" and grew so ill that he missed an entire month of school between Thanksgiving and Christmas. At one point during the barrage of inconclusive tests that followed, doctors speculated that he had some form of cancer.⁹

Just as J. D. was getting over his symptoms, the water in the Walters household turned brown. Walters's initial reaction was disbelief: all water coming into the house was passing through the whole house filter she and her husband had installed when they purchased and renovated the home in 2011. Even after swapping out filter cartridges, though, the water continued to arrive at the kitchen sink the same disconcerting rusty shade. Deterioration of pipes within the house could be ruled out, given that they were only a few years old. There could only be one conclusion: the water coming in from the city was so contaminated that even a filter was no match for it. In December 2014, the family began to use bottled water.

While the whole Walters family had suffered in one way or another up to that point, Gavin, who was already immunocompromised and who tested positive for elevated blood lead, was ultimately impacted worst of all. Despite Walters's efforts to prevent his coming into contact with the water, his health continued to deteriorate. He developed anemia and speech issues, having difficulty pronouncing words he had already mastered. Most alarming of all, he stopped growing. As his fraternal twin Garrett continued to gain height and weight, Gavin plateaued. Two years after the switch to the river, more than two inches and almost thirty pounds separated them.

Before their lives were turned upside down by contaminated water, neither Melissa Mays nor LeeAnne Walters considered herself a political activist, or even politically inclined—Mays had been to one political march in her

life, Walters had dabbled in advocacy around stillbirth awareness. But out of the conjuncture of foul water, poor health, and the responsibility they felt as mothers to protect their families, they would develop into two of Flint's most prominent "water warriors." In the process, they would come to understand their personal experiences of contamination as products of larger socio-political dynamics that converged to cause the crisis, and their determination to protect themselves and their families would evolve into a broader commitment to the people of Flint and a newfound sense of political agency.

Many of Flint's water warriors followed a similar path to political action, driven not by prior political commitments but by the personal impact of contaminated water.¹⁰ For these residents, the first manifestations of the water crisis were often tangible harms to bodies, minds, and property: a stubborn rash, a child afraid to take a bath, a water heater corroded before its time and in need of replacement. These kinds of harms comprised the human face of the crisis, and they generated much of the emotion, energy, and resolve that fueled the burgeoning water movement in Flint. For personal troubles to be translated into collective political action, however, residents had to develop the belief that there were political remedies to their problems. They had to learn to direct their anger toward specific people, institutions, and policies. And they had to see their own struggles as intertwined with those of their neighbors and demanding of a common solution.

Residents also had to develop a belief in themselves as political actors, people who were capable of understanding what was going on with the water, judging what needed to be done, and mobilizing to do it. The treatment they received at the hands of officials was not, *prima facie*, conducive to fostering such self-confidence: with eye rolls and snide remarks, officials implied that residents were overreacting to changes in the water, jumping to conclusions about the causality of health symptoms, and unable (or unwilling) to assess the situation rationally. But far from causing residents like Mays and Walters to doubt themselves and withdraw back into the private realm, the experience of being dismissed caused them to grow even more certain of their views and assertive in voicing them. It also got them thinking about politics: the problem in Flint was not just that government failed in its protective function—"they" *didn't keep us safe*—but that it failed in its representative function—"they" *didn't listen to us and act on our concerns*. In light of these failures, residents vowed to take charge of their *own*

health, carry out their *own* research on the water, and force unresponsive decision makers to act.

Into this formative moment stepped the politically seasoned activists of the Flint Democracy Defense League. They introduced into the discourse of the water movement concepts and demands drawn from the pro-democracy movement, infusing immediate concerns about water quality with a farther-reaching political consciousness and strategic agenda. Thanks in large part to their influence, rusty water in the bathtub and blotches on the skin came to symbolize more than just a water crisis: they were the stigmata of democracy denied. Even newly politicized residents came to embrace the idea that the crisis would not be over, nor justice for Flint realized, until democracy was restored.

What I will call the water “movement” in Flint consisted, then, of the potent fusion of activists who came to water through democracy and residents-turned-activists who came to democracy through water. I tell the story of the collective action that fusion spawned in the next three chapters. Here, I examine its roots in residents’ everyday experiences of contamination and ill health, in the disrespect they suffered in their interactions with political officials, and in their developing sense of being united in the same predicament—and the same struggle.

The Phenomenology of the Water Crisis

To state the obvious: there was no one, universal experience of the water crisis. For some residents, the crisis began with perceptible changes in the quality of their water. For others, it began with the emergence of health symptoms they attributed to the water. For those without obvious water quality or health problems, it began with warnings from neighbors, friends, and family to avoid the water, or with news coverage of water issues, or with official notices about invisible contaminants in the water. Some residents realized there was something wrong right away, others drank the water for almost two years before they were alerted to the existence of a serious problem.

The crisis also caused varying degrees of hardship. For the minority of residents whose water showed no signs of contamination, who trusted filters to remove invisible threats, and who had no adverse reactions to bathing or showering, life under the crisis could proceed largely as before. For

others, the crisis had a devastating effect on their psychological and physical well-being and created considerable financial and logistical burdens.

Despite these variations, it is possible to sketch out a rough “phenomenology” of the water crisis, a set of generalizations about how the crisis appeared on the scene of everyday life, how it affected bodies and minds, and how people coped with it.¹¹ Within this outline of residents’ experience of contamination are clues about why they responded to it the way they did, seeds of the particular species of political agency that blossomed in Flint. In the intellectual journey inaugurated by these experiences, one can also trace the development of a “political etiology” of suffering that traced the causes of specific harms back to the state’s structural violence and neglect and warmed residents to the idea that the dissolution of democratic institutions was at the root of their troubles.¹²

For many residents, the first glimmers of a water quality problem appeared in the form of discernable changes in the taste, smell, and color of the water. Residents complained of the water tasting like chlorine and smelling like “bleach,” or, alternately, like a “swamp,” “raw sewage,” “rotten eggs,” or “fish.”¹³ It was rarer, at least at first, to experience discoloration, because it took time for the corrosive river water to destroy the protective passivation layer and leach metal from the pipes. By late 2014 and early 2015, however, as the water began to eat into cast iron mains and service lines made of galvanized steel, some residents saw their water turn shades of yellow, brown, and red—sporadically in most cases, but consistently in some. Sometimes the water contained visible sediment or was unusually cloudy, milky white. Sometimes clothes would emerge from the washing machine with stains from the water itself.

Before widespread water testing became the norm in Flint, empirical changes to the water offered the most concrete available evidence of contamination. Residents were quick to equate such impurities with danger. Some switched to other sources of water as soon as they sensed their tap water had taken a turn for the worse. The phenomenon was widespread enough by mid-June 2014—less than two months after the city began using the river—that Mayor Walling went on record opining that people were “wasting their precious money buying bottled water.”¹⁴ In the period before any official acknowledgment of a problem, however, even residents whose water didn’t seem right from time to time were, like Melissa Mays, likely to dismiss hiccups in water quality as anomalies, trusting that the

people paid to protect them wouldn't allow a hazardous substance into their homes.

Residents who developed health problems concurrently with observable changes in their water had more reason to believe something was seriously awry. The same was true of residents who saw symptoms emerge more or less immediately after direct contact with water, as in cases where showering, bathing, and even hand washing produced ill effects ranging from dry skin and rashes to burning eyes and hair loss. Residents also blamed the inhalation of steam for a variety of respiratory problems.

Those whose water was clear, palatable, and easy on the skin and lungs were slower to conclude that it was a threat to them. Activists derisively related to me stories of residents glibly reporting that *their* water was just fine and that all the fuss seemed overblown. Once news started to break about invisible contaminants, however, even "normal"-looking water began to take on an ominous appearance. First came the boil water advisories of late summer 2014 after the discovery of total coliform bacteria. Even outside the select parts of the city deemed to be at risk, these seem to have inspired avoidance of the water.¹⁵ More alarming still was the news in October that chloride in the water was corroding engine parts at GM. It was not until later that thoughts of corroded parts led to thoughts of corroded pipes—instead, residents imagined that what was eating away at engines must be eating away at their bodies.

By the end of 2014, skepticism of the water was running high, but officials still had not admitted to any public health threat implicating the population as a whole: the total coliform problem, they said, was limited in scope and soon under control, and the chloride was not, counterintuitively, abrasive to human flesh the way it was to metal. This changed with the city's acknowledgement in January 2015 that residents all over Flint had been exposed to high levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHMs), known carcinogens associated with liver, kidney, and neural disorders. The caveat that exposure to TTHMs had to take place over many years to be a concern to residents in good health did little to dampen the impact of the news. The "good health" qualification served mainly to conjure up thoughts of the many residents who fell into higher-risk categories, like the elderly, the immunocompromised, and pregnant women, and the aura of unfamiliarity around TTHMs fostered wide-ranging speculation about the unexplained ailments for which they might be responsible.

Arguably, however, the main significance of the TTHM notice was the damage it did to trust. When the flyer began to arrive in mailboxes in early January, residents learned that the city had been aware of the TTHM problem for months before it informed the public (a delay technically allowed by the Safe Drinking Water Act). The sense of betrayal residents felt not only factored into their wariness of the water coming out of their taps—which from that point forward bore the invisible mark of broken trust—it altered the way they received all subsequent official communications about water. Thereafter, many residents operated on the assumption that officials were not being forthcoming, especially when the latter's message was that the water was safe.

Trust in the medical community began to erode around the same time. As popular hypotheses of causal links between exposure to the water and ill health began to proliferate, residents began to seek confirmation of them from medical professionals. Physicians found themselves caught off-guard: unsure of what “TTHMs” even were, they were ill prepared to render assessments of their likely health impact, and as for symptoms like rashes and other skin problems, it was difficult or impossible within a clinical setting to link them definitively to the water. Miffed by the noncommittal, cautious responses they received to their inquiries, some residents concluded that Flint-area physicians were complicit in a broader conspiracy to deny that the water was causing harm. Those who had the means sometimes, like Lee-Anne Walters, went off in search of second opinions outside Flint or even outside Michigan.

For residents who chose to shun the water in whole or in part—a trend that picked up steam with the TTHM notice and accelerated greatly after the discovery of systemic lead contamination—once-routine activities involving water, like cooking, brushing teeth, washing dishes, and preparing the baby's bottle became sources of anxiety and inconvenience. Many residents ultimately chose to use bottled water as much as feasible, phasing it into their lives selectively at first (when they had to pay for it out of pocket), and more comprehensively from January 2016 forward, when it became widely available for free at point of distribution sites (PODs) in each of the city's nine wards. New routines evolved around the acquisition of bottled water, as visiting the PODs became a regular trek. The chore was not only dreary but often difficult: a strain on time, resources (even a trip to pick up free water required bus fare or gas money), and the body, especially

as less physically able residents struggled to hoist the heavy cases out of the car, up the stairs, and to their final destination. The stockpiling of water—a practice driven in part by fears of losing the PODs—became so common that the American Institute of Architects issued a warning that stacking cases of water too high could cause the floor to collapse.

Once free bottled water became abundant, residents began to substitute it for every conceivable activity involving water: they used it to prepare their food, wet their toothbrushes, rinse their dishes. They gave it to their pets. In some cases, they used it for bathing and showering, and even for filling kiddie pools in the summer. In representations of the crisis to the outside world, the ubiquity of bottled water and the extra hardship it imposed on residents became the most vivid illustration of the crisis's transformation of everyday life. Posing for a CNN profile with the 151 bottles of water she and her family used each day, resident-turned-activist Gina Luster invited outsiders to imagine using bottled water, day in and day out, for everything but flushing the toilet.¹⁶

Even with free water available at the PODs, however, using bottled water for *everything* was difficult to sustain. For washing, many residents opted to use shower filters instead, or simply took showers that were colder (because TTHMs and bacteria could be inhaled through steam), shorter, and altogether less pleasant. Some preferred to shower outside the city at friends' or relatives' houses. For cleaning children, baby wipes were popular, and hand sanitizer often stood in as an alternative to soap and water.

The intimate character of the harms caused by contaminated water, combined with these disruptions of everyday life (particularly the life of the home), may help to explain the prominence of women and mothers, especially, in the fight for clean water in Flint.¹⁷ Their contributions were so important, especially early on, that sometimes the movement as a whole was described as a movement of mothers—"No one would be doing anything now," remarked Melissa Mays at one point, "if it wasn't for a bunch of moms getting mad."¹⁸ Noting that women are often overrepresented in environmental justice struggles,¹⁹ scholars have proposed a variety of reasons why this may be the case. Some have suggested that women have distinctive "ways of knowing" more attuned to phenomena that are concrete, immediate, and associated with personal relationships, making them especially sensitive to changes in their environment, as well as in their bodies and the bodies of those around them.²⁰ Whether or not one accepts

this epistemological premise, it remains true sociologically that women are disproportionately tasked with the oversight of the household and the care of children and are therefore often on the front lines when the signs and symptoms of environmental contamination first appear.²¹ As Bishop Bernadel Jefferson put it to me, “When the child has broke out who gonna see it first? *Mama*. When you combin’ the baby’s hair and the hair comin’ out, who gonna see it first? *Mama*.”²²

For the same reason, women often have to shoulder a larger proportion of the daily burdens created by contamination events. Most of the female activists I spoke to heartily endorsed the idea that women and mothers had been especially impacted by the crisis and that this was an influence on their activism. Bishop Jefferson asked me rhetorically, “Why did the women step up? Who cooks food? Who takes care of the children? Who gets them off to school? ... And so, when you talk about water, who do it affect first?”²³ Mother-turned-activist Maegan Wilson expressed similar sentiments:

Women have to ... prepare the meals and women have to ... cart the water a lot of times and women have to go get the water and make sure that they have the water ... and then the women have to take care of the kids, take them to the doctor’s appointments, find out if they have lead problems or psychological problems or even mental health problems at this point because they can’t understand why this would happen to them and will anybody ever really care. That’s a lot of the women’s worries, and they deal with a lot of the behavior issues and things like that. ... [Men just] do their thing, they go work, they come home, but they don’t realize all the stuff that the woman has to go through, like ... the water didn’t get the clothes as clean this week or ... what if they smell now, or whatever, and so it’s extra work.²⁴

Mothers also spoke to me of having to rearrange their daily routines so they could visit the city’s water distribution sites before work, and of the inconvenience and awkwardness of having to drive their children to relatives’ homes in the suburbs for bathing and showering purposes. Summing up the cumulative effect of these everyday burdens, Flint mother and activist Laura Gillespie MacIntyre put it pithily: mothers’ activism springs from “life.”²⁵

The disruption of “life,” of the routines and spaces (like the home) that structure everyday experience, acted as a springboard to activism for residents who came into the water crisis without prior political commitments. As hard as life already was for many in Flint, the crisis created a pervasive sense of a loss of normalcy, a sense that everyday existence had become riskier and less certain in addition to being more difficult.²⁶ Residents no longer

viewed their homes as places of safety and respite, they no longer associated water with cleanliness and health, they no longer assumed that authorities were trustworthy or were keeping them safe. They could no longer tend to basic necessities by raising a lever or turning a knob. While there was no one experience of the crisis, a sort of archetype emerged—invoked frequently by activists—of what it was like to live in Flint from April 2014 forward: constant fear of what could emerge from the tap, the nursing of water-related injuries, and the rearranging of one's whole life around bottled water.

The Construction of Victimhood

The first step in converting the experience of injury into a proactive mindset in previously apolitical individuals is often the development of a sense of victimhood. Victimhood is often contrasted with “agency,” with victims depicted as helpless, cowering figures who are acted upon rather than acting themselves. But it is a mistake to think of victimhood as simply debilitating, leading to withdrawal and passivity. For one thing, to be a victim implies the existence of a victimizer who is responsible for the harm one has suffered and who can potentially be confronted.²⁷ Flint residents' belief that the water crisis was an unambiguously “manmade” (rather than “natural”) disaster tended to foster a fighting rather than a fatalistic mentality, fueled by righteous anger in search of specific targets.

Furthermore, in cases of environmental contamination where ambiguities exist around the severity and causes of harm, defining the boundary between victim and nonvictim is often itself a struggle. Flint residents frequently complained that officials were operating with too narrow a definition of victimhood, overly focused on the newborn to six-year-old demographic at the expense of adults and seniors. Determining who counted as a victim was not just a matter of semantics, for it directly implicated the recognition and resources residents stood to receive from the state, especially with the emergence of class-action lawsuits, which the State of Michigan fought all the way up to the US Supreme Court. In tangible ways, ordinary residents as well as activists found themselves locked in a battle over their status as victims that laid a foundation for political consciousness and political action.²⁸

The particular construction of victimhood that would come to underpin the water movement in Flint held that residents were both “victims” *and*

“fighters,” with the implication that these identities were not only reconcilable, but in some sense symbiotic. Residents often drew attention to their victimhood, and the victimhood of their children, as a tactical means of stoking outrage and inspiring action, especially through the graphic display of their victimized bodies (some activists, for example, were known for waving bags full of lost hair at rallies). Such displays came to express—and indeed were instrumental in constructing—what Phil Brown and his colleagues call a “collective illness identity.”²⁹ In Flint, this identity was not built around a particular illness *per se* (as in, say, the AIDS community) so much as the assortment of harms that residents traced back to the common cause of exposure to the water.

Noting the role that shared identities play in fostering collective action, Brown et al. argue that a collective illness identity can serve as “a unifying and mobilizing force.”³⁰ For such an identity to be unifying, however, it has to be constructed in an inclusive way. This does not necessarily rule out subcategories of victimhood—as already noted, the idea that women and mothers had suffered in special ways was popular among the Flint residents and activists I knew. But some distinctions between victims can be difficult to draw without generating controversy and division.

Perhaps the most instructive example from Flint was the claim—made repeatedly by commentators in academia, the press, and beyond—that the crisis was an instance of “environmental racism.”³¹ It was often remarked that what happened in Flint would not have happened, or at least would have been quickly acknowledged and remediated, in a majority-white city. The crisis became part of an ongoing national debate about racial injustice spawned by incidents of violence against African Americans in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland,³² and one commentator even suggested that, in the absence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the crisis would not have been a national story.³³

As intuitive as it was for outsiders looking in to depict the water crisis as a racial affair, what I encountered on the ground in Flint were far more complicated and mixed feelings about the racialization of residents’ victimhood. Certainly there were residents, especially within the city’s African American community, who saw the crisis through the lens of Flint’s long history of racial discrimination and disadvantage. Some believed the crisis would displace residents in predominantly black parts of the city, thereby advancing the city’s recently adopted master plan, seen by many as an effort

to reinvent Flint as a “college town” geared toward affluent whites (on more than one occasion, I heard it described as the “*master’s*” plan). One black activist told me that “they” wanted “all African Americans up out of Flint,”³⁴ implying that the crisis was a means to this end. The common lament that officials viewed residents as “guinea pigs” also had a racial tinge to it, as evidenced in comparisons of the switch to the Flint River and subsequent tinkering with the water treatment process to the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment. There were also signs that fears of outright extermination by white conspirators—fears with deep roots in black history³⁵—were very much alive. Some of the people I spoke to believed that the parts of the city with the worst lead contamination were those with the highest percentage of black residents, suggesting deliberate targeting of the black population.

A notable difference between these invocations of race and those made by outsiders was their implication, sometimes made explicit, that Flint residents were the victims of conscious racial animus and that the water crisis itself was orchestrated for racist reasons. The gap between this perspective and more mainstream understandings of environmental racism—a concept often invoked to capture patterns of racial disadvantage that are not intentional in origin—became especially clear upon the release of the final report of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) on the crisis, which (as discussed in chapter 2) treated racism as a historical, structural phenomenon whose influence on decision making in the present was “implicit” at most.³⁶ Those who believed that more insidious forms of racism were being missed had reason to feel vindicated when, a few months later, an activist journalist recorded a Genesee County Land Bank official saying the crisis was caused by “niggers not paying their bills.”³⁷ The remark became justification for reading dog-whistle racism into official comments that seemed to undervalue the lives of residents, like the earlier-mentioned quip by an Environmental Protection Agency employee that Flint was not “the community we want to go out on a limb for.”³⁸

Although some of these sentiments inevitably found their way into the water movement, where the theme of environmental racism surfaced from time to time, what struck me was how many activists resisted, or even flatly rejected, the idea that race had anything to do with the crisis’s impact or its origins. One example was the common remark that lead “does not discriminate,” meant to emphasize that everyone who had come into contact with the water, whatever their race, had been harmed. At the first public meeting

of the MCRC in Flint, when residents were invited to speak to whether they felt racially discriminated against, activist Tony Palladeno told the commission that “this is not a black and white thing because this is killing all of us.”³⁹ Although he was in the minority at that particular meeting, it was a sentiment I encountered repeatedly, in a variety of contexts.⁴⁰ The way LeeAnne Walters put it to me was that “there’s nothing racist about lead.” In early 2016, she refused an award from filmmaker Michael Moore because he had described the crisis as a “racial killing”—she had no use for his “racism stuff,” she said.⁴¹ It was perhaps understandable that white activists like Palladeno and Walters would resist racial framings of the crisis that threatened to diminish their victimhood or at least treated the harms they suffered as collateral damage. But I encountered similar sentiments coming from many black activists, too. In E. Yvonne Lewis’s words, “The disaster is framed as a poor, black, African American issue, but everyone of every race has been affected.”⁴²

Just as they rejected the idea that people of color were especially harmed by the water, many activists resisted the claim that the crisis was a product of racism. Of the possible demographic explanations for the crisis, a sizable majority of the activists I spoke with preferred to emphasize class rather than race. Typical was Gina Luster’s comment that, although race may have been a factor, the crisis was “more about class than anything.”⁴³ Claire McClinton, who balked whenever she was asked to speak on the racial dimensions of the crisis, thought it a “travesty” that the MCRC had placed so much stress on race instead of looking more concertedly at class.⁴⁴ Melissa Mays concurred when I asked her if a term like “environmental classism” would be more accurate than environmental racism to describe the crisis. She told me that the crisis was “all based on class” and that its effects on the black population were “byproducts” of class-based injustices.⁴⁵ A common belief was that poor white people and black people were in more or less the same category as far as oppression was concerned, and that there was little point in differentiating them—in Abel Delgado’s words, “If you’re a poor white person, you might as well be black.”⁴⁶ One of the reasons Flint was able to organize successfully around the water issue, Desiree Duell told me, was because of the large number of poor whites in the city, with class providing a bedrock of commonality between white and black activists.⁴⁷

I also found that language that appeared racially charged—talk of being “experimented” on, of being disposable, of being victimized by the

“master’s” plan, of being the targets of extermination, and so forth—was often stretched to encompass poor whites as well as blacks, and in the process purged of any specifically racial content. Activists often spoke of “genocide,” for example, as a class-based rather than a race-based phenomenon. Gina Luster suggested that the crisis was part of a plot to “cleanse” the city of its lower-class residents.⁴⁸ Wantwaz Davis, an African American activist and councilman who made headlines in early 2015 after calling the water contamination “an obvious genocide” against residents,⁴⁹ warned that the water problems would have the effect of running “low/moderate income people” out of the city.⁵⁰ Like Luster, he suggested that this was the plan all along.⁵¹ The notion that genocide could proceed along class lines allowed white activists, too, to take up the term enthusiastically and use it freely, without worrying about its traditionally racial connotations.

The way activists talked about race was not only an expression of their convictions about the nature of the crisis but a matter of *strategy*, informed by the imperatives of organizing a city that despite being mostly African American was split fairly evenly between black and white. At first, Claire McClinton remembered, water activism in Flint was mostly a “black” thing, focused on concerns about affordability and led largely by members of the black church community and black elected officials. When the deterioration of Flint’s water quality mobilized a new contingent of affronted white residents more worried about contamination than cost, it became necessary to foster cooperation across the racial divide. As McClinton put it, Flint was so segregated along racial lines, with people “living in different worlds”—each of which had a “skewed” perception of the other—that it was “a challenge to unite the two communities.”⁵²

Activists’ usual assumption was that cross-racial solidarity was best served by downplaying the significance of race. Occasionally, I heard activists claim that the powers-that-be were trying to use race to turn the grass-roots against itself; one black activist called the MCRC’s foregrounding of race in its final report a “trick” by the state to divide the movement.⁵³ The idea that the water struggle was an opportunity to put aside racial differences and model racial unity was reflected in the widely circulated motto “No religion, no color, no violence,” and a popular Facebook image showing two intertwined hands, one black, one white. The universal qualities of water itself came to stand for a kind of elemental human solidarity that

paid little heed to racial categories. As Pastor Al Harris of the Concerned Pastors for Social Action told *Belt Magazine*:

I think the beautiful thing is that we found out we're really not separated. If it really was an issue to bring the people together, this was it. Everybody needs water. Black, white, rich, poor, educated, uneducated. Everybody needs and deserves safe, clean water and so that caused people to come in from all different spheres, all different levels of government. We all had this one common goal to bring us together, so that's the good part of it. I wish we didn't have this situation, but everybody understood we've got to work together.⁵⁴

In Harris's formulation, common dependence on water unites people of every description—notably, across class as well as racial divides. The idea that residents' "human right" to water had been violated, that they had been victimized in their capacity as human beings—full stop—was certainly a pervasive sentiment in Flint. Part of its utility to activists was that it could be used to situate the movement in Flint within a wider world of activist discourse and praxis, making the city the latest front in a global struggle for water and eliciting solidarity and support from water activists elsewhere. The point was driven home at a September 2017 water summit in Flint headlined by renowned international water activist Maude Barlow, who emphasized that she and the many people from "outside the community" who had made the journey were there "to offer solidarity in our struggle for water justice here in Flint and around the world."⁵⁵

As important as affirmations of common humanity are in tying together the struggles of geographically disparate people, however, they offer thin gruel to activists whose objective is to forge a robust sense of shared identity at the local level. What proved to be most effective in uniting residents across racial, and even class, lines in Flint was building off of the mixture of victimization and pride that residents felt in being *from Flint*. The water movement's most prominent slogan, "Flint Lives Matter," obviously invited comparisons to Black Lives Matter, but its transcendence of racial categories was not accidental: it embodied the feeling that the city as a whole had been victimized, that all residents were in danger of being written off or abandoned, and that therefore everyone within city limits was, in some sense, in the same boat. This municipal identity formed the container that was gradually filled out by residents' sense of having experienced the same harms from the water.

The experience of emergency management greatly contributed to the salience of this municipal identity and to the belief that the city itself, in its corporate capacity, was a victim, too. Listening to the way that activists would talk about Flint, I got the sense that they saw it almost as an organism barely clinging to life, dismembered by the sale of its assets, emaciated through cutbacks into a fleshless skeleton (or “shell”), and now its innards rotted by corrosive water. I repeatedly encountered the belief that the city was “under attack” (as activists sometimes chanted, “What do we do when our city is under attack? Stand up, fight back!”), its very existence as a political entity threatened by the power of EMs to extinguish it. Although I did encounter fears that municipal dissolution would put blacks at a special disadvantage by turning them into political minorities within mostly white Genesee County, the specter of disincorporation lent itself to the feeling that everyone who called Flint home was at risk of having that home not only taken over, but taken away. Fighting for one’s own life, then, had everything to do with fighting for the life of the city.

Epistemic Injustice and Recognition

The evolution of residents into activists was a function not only of the personal impact of contamination and the indignation they felt at being victimized, but also of the response they got from officials upon coming forward with their concerns. Residents found their claims about the water and their own bodies dismissed as hyperbolic, uninformed, paranoid. They repeatedly had their common-sense intuitions about the danger they were in explained away by an “expert” in the authoritative register of scientific elocution. More than one person described this phenomenon to me as “gaslighting”⁵⁶: an attempt to convince residents that their worries were fanciful, merely the products of their imagination.

Following the philosopher Miranda Fricker, we might describe such reactions as instances of “epistemic injustice,” defined as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.” The dimension of epistemic injustice relevant here is what she calls “testimonial injustice,” which “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.”⁵⁷ The credibility, or epistemic trustworthiness, we impute to a speaker is, Fricker argues, built on our perception of the speaker’s

competence and sincerity. The question of competence frequently arises when members of the general public attempt to understand and respond to environmental contamination events. The issue of Flint's water quality involved highly technical matters of chemistry, microbiology, and infrastructure with which most residents had little prior experience. Grasping the complexities would have been daunting for members of any community, but, in Flint, residents faced the added hurdle of low educational levels: only 11 percent of the population over age twenty-five had a bachelor's degree, compared with a statewide average of 27 percent.⁵⁸ For anyone inclined to be skeptical of lay knowledge, these factors worked against the idea that residents could form meaningful judgments about the water or make valid recommendations about how to solve the quality problems.

The competence of residents was seen as suspect not only because they were assumed to lack technical knowledge, however, but because they supposedly didn't know *how* to think. Without a broader perspective on what they were experiencing, they were at risk of reading far too much significance into anecdotal experiences, placing too much stock in their knee-jerk reactions to sensory data (like brown water), and arriving at unshakable convictions and sweeping generalizations without adequate evidence. Regardless of how much truth there may or may not have been in these characterizations, they inflicted the epistemic harm of impugning, not only residents' knowledge, but their very *ability* to know. This helps to explain why the refrain that residents were not "stupid" and deserved *a priori* respect when putting forward claims about the water was woven into activist discourse.

If the occasional suggestion that residents were fooling themselves cut deep, even more insulting was the accusation that they were consciously trying to fool others. In an infamous encounter at a January 2015 public meeting, LeeAnne Walters held up two bottles of brown water in front of emergency manager Jerry Ambrose to illustrate what was coming out of her tap. Ambrose's response was to ask if she really expected him to believe the samples were from her house. The grimace this provoked from Walters, captured in a widely circulated photograph that became one of the enduring images of the water crisis, embodied the sting residents felt at the implication that they were deliberately misrepresenting their struggles with the water. To preempt the kind of skepticism voiced by Ambrose, residents began collecting videos of discolored water coming straight out of their faucets and sharing them over social media.



Figure 5.1

LeeAnne Walters presents her tap water to EM Jerry Ambrose. © Detroit Free Press /ZUMA Press.

Epistemic injustice, in Fricker's formulation, is an outgrowth of prejudice, understood as a prejudgment of a speaker's reliability premised on assumptions about his or her social identity. Identity prejudice, according to Fricker, "*distorts the hearer's perception of the speaker,*" filtering perceptions of what is spoken through the lens of who the speaker is—or is perceived to be.⁵⁹ In this sense, epistemic injustice is related to what theorists of social justice call "recognition."⁶⁰ Political recognition hinges on a general social perception of individuals and groups as having a legitimate perspective on social reality, as well as legitimate needs that should be factored into political decision making. Theories of recognition pay particularly close attention to the way in which prejudices around ascriptive characteristics and social categories—like race and gender—can result in people and groups being written off, ignored, or rendered "voiceless" or "invisible."

Activists were keenly aware that their race and gender affected whether their knowledge was recognized as legitimate. In the early stages of the water

struggle, when they were being treated like alarmists and liars and were desperate to gain some sort of foothold of credibility, whiteness served as an epistemic resource. A number of activists told me that racial considerations influenced who was put out front to represent the movement and that it was not coincidental that the leading activist voices—among the political newcomers, anyway—were, like Melissa Mays and LeeAnne Walters, white. At the very least, the greater prominence of white activists in the media was tolerated as a strategic necessity (though not without a certain amount of resentment) because “America needed a particular face” if it was to take the crisis seriously.⁶¹ The discomfort both Mays and Walters felt when others highlighted their race as if it carried special epistemic privilege undoubtedly fed into their desire to avoid the subject altogether.

But any epistemic advantage that activists like Mays and Walters enjoyed on account of their whiteness was, to some extent, counteracted by assumptions about the epistemic limitations of women and mothers. Stereotypes about the subjective, experiential, and relational character of women’s “ways of knowing” can undermine women’s credibility in contexts, like environmental contamination events, where the (purported) objectivity, detachment, and universality of scientific knowledge is accorded special authority. Added to these stereotypes, often, are others about women’s supposed susceptibility to affect, thought to have a distorting effect on their perception and judgments, especially when imperiled children are involved. Mays, for example, remembers being called a “crazy mom,” as if suffering from a special kind of hysteria fed by mother love.⁶² Less pejorative was the term “Mama Grizzly” (Walters told me she was “100 percent comfortable” being described this way⁶³), which at least celebrated the protective ferocity of that love. The epistemological connotations of describing mothers as enraged animals, however, were not as flattering, suggestive of unapologetic partiality and blind devotion.

In many ways, the core of the struggle for clean water during the first eight months of the water movement was a struggle by residents to be taken seriously as knowers—by officials, by the media, even by fellow residents. The city and state said the water was safe; a growing chorus of residents said it wasn’t. The relative respect with which these competing perspectives were treated was not just a matter of their truth value, it was a matter of power and justice. And in a city whose residents had already had their competence and judgment called into question by the imposition of emergency management, it was necessarily a matter of political recognition as well.

From Troubles to Issues to Collective Action

A critical turning point in the genesis of a social movement is when individuals begin to see their personal “troubles” as outgrowths of a broader “issue” that cannot be adequately addressed without collective action.⁶⁴ Within weeks of the switch to the Flint River, water troubles began popping up throughout the city, but because they did so within the private space of the home, residents first needed a way of determining that they were not isolated, singular events. Before there were any physical meetings about the water, Facebook served as an essential medium for residents not previously acquainted, in disparate parts of the city, to discover that they were living through the same thing. The Flint River Water Support Group page began accumulating testimony as early as May 2014, but it was principally the Flint Water Class Action (FWCA) group, created by business student and mother Florlisa Fowler in September, that activists would later look to as one of the kernels of the water movement.

The FWCA page served as a clearinghouse for tales of water and health woes and a vehicle for a kind of collective investigation of the city’s water quality problems. It became a repository for a growing pile of visual evidence that Flint’s water problems were systemic: when one resident would post a photograph of cloudy or discolored water, or a nasty rash that appeared in the shower, several more photographs of the same thing from other residents would pour in. When residents who had connected online started mingling in person at the first rallies and town halls about water quality in January 2015, they got further confirmation that their troubles with the water were shared by people all over Flint. Melissa Mays remembers the revelatory effect this realization had on her: “Different parts of the city, different ages, different backgrounds—we were all having the same problems.”⁶⁵

Fowler attempted to steer the discussion on the FWCA page toward something like “popular epidemiology,” a term used to describe grassroots efforts to assess the distribution of disease and its contributing factors.⁶⁶ She asked people posting with complaints to identify the parts of the city they lived in so that a possible geographical pattern could be discerned, leading to much speculation about which neighborhoods were most affected. As this investigation proceeded, the group began to spawn other forms of collective action as well. Fowler began to encourage members to contact political representatives, media outlets, and environmental justice advocates like

Erin Brockovich. Members began to talk of legal action, of in-person meetings, of protests.

And along the way, the pro-democracy activists became part of the conversation. They were already working to convince residents that the steep price of water and the threat of shutoffs were products of the assault on democracy in their city and their state. Now they began to convince residents that the decline of their water quality and the deterioration of their health had the same origin.⁶⁷ As Melissa Mays put it to me, activists like Claire McClinton, Nayyirah Shariff, and Bishop Bernadel Jefferson helped her and other residents to understand that “every single thing that’s going to happen to us and has happened to us is politically backed and motivated.”⁶⁸ That realization not only imparted a political hue to what residents were experiencing, it refined, elevated, and channeled the popular energies that were bubbling up: the fear and the anger, the indignation and the insult—and most importantly, the determination to band together and fight until justice was done.