

Reviews

Tainted Tap: Flint's Journey from Crisis to Recovery

Katrinell M. Davis

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021

280 pp. Illustrations. \$95.00 (hardcover);

\$24.95 (paper); (eBook)

The Flint water crisis looms large as an iconic example of environmental racism and the struggle for environmental justice. Environmental racism includes the disproportionate siting of toxic land uses in communities of color, discrimination in environmental policymaking and enforcement, and the exclusion of people of color from leadership in the environmental movement (Chavis 1994). Environmental justice movements aim to address these disparities, improving the air, water, food, and built environment in communities of color, and thus the health of their inhabitants.

Sociologist Katrinell M. Davis's *Tainted Tap* examines the crisis in the context of uneven development with a focus on the rolling back of essential public services. The book summarizes Davis's impressively comprehensive and diverse research, including interviews with public officials and community members, policy analysis at the national, state and especially local level, archives, institutional documents, and numerous other sources obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests.

What emerges is an accessibly written yet detailed account of the ways that national, state, and local policies produce what she calls a discarded city, a "depopulated, resource-starved municipality undergoing fiscal distress . . . [that] cripple[s] and destabilize[s] remaining community and public resources" (p. 8). International trade agreements led to the closure of General Motors (GM) auto-plants in the 1980s, creating mass unemployment, poverty, and exodus. These macroeconomic shifts, along with changes to state statutory revenue-sharing formulas, decimated the city's tax base, and eventually resulted in bankruptcy. City services like police and fire were reduced to the point of seeming nonexistent. Schools were closed, grocery stores fled, and neighborhood-level blight became pervasive. Michigan governor Rick

Snyder appointed an emergency manager, Darnell Earley, whose charge to improve the city's fiscal health trumped the power of its elected officials. Earley's decision to change the city's water source to the Flint River resulted in skyrocketing bills for citizens while exposing them to gravely elevated levels of lead, causing a host of health ailments and deaths. Residents' complaints were ignored by government at every level for years until they were substantiated by civil engineers and pediatricians, and received national media attention.

Davis's book builds on the work of abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), who defines racism not as individual acts of meanness but as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Davis shows how the "persistent push to suppress resources in poor Black communities through deliberate policy choices" (p. 7) ensured that cities like Flint would be segregated and targeted Black neighborhoods for demolition. She then focuses on the period of planned shrinkage, or what she calls "benign neglect," a term I find odd since what occurred is anything but benign and appears to be more deliberate than neglectful. But labels aside, Davis convincingly demonstrates how cities depopulated by the white flight encouraged by racially exclusive Federal Housing Administration (FHA) lending policies left Black cities struggling to stay solvent and forced to reduce essential services such as trash pick-up, snow removal, and emergency services. The statute that allowed the state to appoint an emergency manager, which led directly to the water crisis, was used disproportionately in Black cities while white jurisdictions with similar fiscal health scores remained governed by elected officials. While Gilmore's definition of racism comes out of her work on mass incarceration, it can provide a framework to understand the health effects of racist policies that make daily life in cities like Flint so toxic.

I was pleasantly surprised to be asked to review this book for a journal focused on food. But it feels appropriate, if capacious, for several reasons. Producing food, of course, requires water; and food and water, along with shelter, are the most essential of our human needs. I've also long argued

that environmental justice frameworks laid the basis for communities to pursue food justice. In the preface to *Tainted Tap*, Davis, who was raised in Flint, lays out her personal connection to the city. Her most vivid memory of watching the state neglect her neighborhood features the local grocery store. Full of rotting meat, stale bread, and brown vegetables, and yet charging high prices, the local market was the “store of last resort” (p. xii) for those who couldn’t drive across town. Davis describes that store as part of an insulting local landscape, “like the unexplained fires that burned throughout the night” (p. xii). This experience sparked her desire to investigate the water crisis in the context of the racialized and class-based allocation of essential services in depopulating cities. To scholars of food studies, it can also serve as a reminder. Investigating the presence or absence of a grocery store is not enough. Inequitable access to food is part of a broader landscape of neighborhood abandonment, brought on by processes of urban development that deprive poor communities and communities of color of the ability to live healthy lives, and resulting in disproportionate vulnerability to premature death. We would do well to continue to bring this important context into our work.

—Alison Hope Alkon, *University of the Pacific*

REFERENCES

- Chavis, Benjamin F., Jr. 1994. “Preface.” In *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. Edited by Robert D. Bullard, xi–xii. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Meat the Future

Liz Marshall, director

Bullfrog Films, 2021

Released 2022

88 minutes. DVD; Streaming on CBC Gem

Addressing an assembly of secondary-school students in his hometown of Vijayawada, India, Uma Valeti, co-founder and CEO of US-based Memphis Meats (now Upside Foods), recounts when he first conceived of harvesting meat without animals. He was a young boy attending a birthday party. As the other children played in front of the house, he wandered to the backyard where he found older family members slaughtering chickens for the afternoon’s feast. It was a moment of striking clarity about the death required for meat, one that shaped the course of his life. This story, documented in Canadian director Liz Marshall’s film *Meat the Future* (2022)

about Valeti and Co’s high-stakes endeavor to bring lab-grown meat to the US market, emphasizes an underplayed aspect of this fledgling industry: that animal welfare motivates its leading figures as much as any other concern.

In general, popular media frames “clean meat” (the industry’s preferred term) as an imminent technology for mitigating conventional meat production’s significant contributions to anthropogenic climate change (Rogers 2022). Meanwhile, scholarly treatments of lab-grown meat, such as Benjamin Wurgaff’s *Meat Planet* (2019), explore the promethean discourse surrounding the uncertain science. From pioneering Dutch eccentric Willem van Eelen in the 1990s to tireless Valeti, scholars examine how the science of lab-grown meat relates to venture capital’s role in financing research, which as of 2022 still has no other revenue stream. Marshall’s film neither challenges her subject’s perspective nor contests the industry’s claim to be leading a world-historical scientific revolution. Yet, by focusing on their shared commitment to animal rights (consistent with her past filmmaking), she nevertheless captures a fascinating paradox—why proponents of ethical veganism have become utterly fixated with replicating animal flesh, cell-for-living-cell.

Meat the Future (2022) documents Memphis Meats’ journey from Midwestern start-up to Silicon Valley darling. Having raised \$400 million (USD) in its latest round of financing, its backers include tech titans and conventional meat processors. Today, the company is headquartered in Emeryville, California, which includes a 53,000-square-foot production facility where it carries out growth-media preparation, bioprocessing, harvesting, and food formulation. The film briefly introduces the technical process of growing animal tissues in human-controlled conditions and the enormous difficulties performing this at a scale required for mass distribution. As Marshall shows, bringing the animal to life is not only the responsibility of biologists working in laboratories but relies equally on company chefs and marketing managers to treat the harvested tissue as a culinary object. The film shifts from documenting to participating in this aspect by repeatedly presenting vivid slow-motion close-ups of lab-grown meat sautéing in pans before being sliced, garnished, and handed to expectant tasters. Considering the incredible costs of producing the first cell-cultured hamburger in 2013—approximately \$500,000 (USD)—*Meat the Future* features a cornucopia of visual content that suggests an equivalence has been reached between lab grown and conventional meat, from its inherent textural properties to the way it looks while being cooked, plated, and discussed by those trying these products. If there is doubt or disappointment among the tasters shown, Marshall does not let on.