

SYSTEMIC RACISM IN THE FLINT WATER CRISIS:  
A MEDIA ANALYSIS

A Thesis  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### **SYSTEMIC RACISM IN THE FLINT MEDIA CRISIS: A MEDIA ANALYSIS**

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An analysis of the media coverage of the Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan from April 2014 to January 2016 revealed that the news coverage of the crisis served to reinforce the white racial hegemony of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In the Introduction, I provide a general overview of the contents of the thesis. In Chapter One, I sketch an outline of the colorblind paradigm I constructed as an analytic model using the theories of Joe R. Feagin, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Cedric C. Clark. I then apply that model to four types of media – advertisements, sports, reality television, and news media – to demonstrate how the media perpetuates and reinforces white racial hegemony. In Chapter Two, I provide a historical sketch of Flint, Michigan and the events that led to the Flint Water Crisis. In Chapter Three, I apply the colorblind paradigm to the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis to underscore the prevalence of white racial hegemony within the coverage of the event. Finally, in the Conclusion, I offer potential avenues for future research.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to Media Analyses .....	24
Chapter Two: The Racial Reality of Flint and the Water Crisis.....	58
Chapter Three: The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to the Flint Water Crisis .....	80
Conclusion: Future Research and Historiography .....	98
Bibliography .....	120
Appendix A: List of All News Articles Consulted .....	131
Vita.....	139

## Introduction

The ideology of colorblindness asks people not to see color, not to notice race. Rather than dismantling racial barriers, however, the ideology of colorblindness serves as the lynchpin of white dominance because it “reinforces whiteness as the unmarked norm against which difference is measured.”<sup>1</sup> Colorblind ideology prevents engagement with the societal structures that privilege whiteness by denying that any such structures exist. According to George Lipsitz, a professor in the Department of Black Studies at the University of California, the ideology of colorblindness requires historical fiction. He argues that the very idea that colorblind racism has only existed since the Civil Rights Movement is itself an ahistorical idea that serves to reinforce the hegemony of white supremacy, which colorblind ideology undergirds. Lipsitz claims, “The falsifications of history central to colorblindness attribute conquest, colonization, slavery, segregation, and immigrant exclusion to the mere fact of racial recognition rather than to carefully constructed structures of racial rule.”<sup>2</sup>

Lipsitz explains that the manner of dispossession Europeans and European Americans forced on the indigenous peoples of the Americas originated from a refusal to recognize that People of Color were human. Lipsitz also states that the nature of dispossession the native peoples were subject to relied on “*not seeing*” due to the fictional nature of legal ideas like “*terra nullius*” that claimed that lands possessed by native tribes sat empty just waiting for Europeans to come along and claim the land for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Lipsitz demonstrates that even the founding documents of the country held colorblind ideology. He discusses the three-fifths clause and the fact that the Constitution never

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<sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines* (University of California Press: California, 2019), 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*,” 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,” 25. Italics in original.

explicitly mentioned slaves or African Americans, but in the social context of the time, everyone would have understood whom the three-fifths clause referenced. This held true for the fugitive slave clause baked into the Constitution that required the federal government to return runaway slaves to their owners, and it also held true for the clause that protected the slave trade up until 1808 under the guise of permissible migration.<sup>4</sup>

Among race scholars, Lipsitz is one of the few that posits that colorblind racism has always existed within the United States. He illuminates the existence of colorblind ideology throughout the Jim Crow era, an era often viewed as one of the most overtly racist in American history. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment ensured that African American men could vote, but many states had grandfather clauses that ensured only individuals whose grandfathers had been eligible to vote could vote. Despite the lack of an explicit reference to race, these clauses often prevented African American men from voting because many of them had grandfathers who had been slaves who did not have the right to vote. Even though the grandfather clauses were colorblind because they did not specify race, they worked to disenfranchise African American men. With examples such as these, Lipsitz's argument is a hard one to refute, and it raises the question as to why so many race scholars insist that the ideology of colorblind racism originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

While colorblind racism may have penetrated the Constitution and other legal documents within the United States, it may also safely be argued that it did not become the dominant racial ideology espoused by society until the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The concept that the significance of race within society decreased after the Civil Rights Movement originated with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid," 28.

<sup>6</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*: 26.



William Julius Wilson's 1980 publication of *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. In a 2011 article meant to update readers, Wilson explains that the argument he had been trying to make in *The Declining Significance of Race* was that socioeconomic status became more important than race in determining someone's life chances after World War II during the modern industrial period.<sup>7</sup>

In *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (2010), activist and race scholar Tim Wise examines the myth of a post-racial society that became a popular narrative after Barack Obama, an African American man, secured the position of the President of the United States in 2008. Wise discusses how President Obama used the "rhetoric of racial transcendence" in his pursuit of the presidency to mitigate the fears of white voters.<sup>8</sup> The rhetoric President Obama may have helped him secure white votes, but it also made it more difficult for him to address societal issues pertaining to race. Wise discusses how the rhetoric of a so-called "post-racial" society serves to disguise not only the existence of structural racism within the United States but also serves to hide its extent.

Regardless of when colorblind racism became the dominant racial ideology of the United States, the ideology of colorblind racism pervades the country today. The completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003 established that race is a socially constructed category, as there is no genetic difference between racial groups.<sup>9</sup> Because race is a societally

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<sup>7</sup> William Julius Wilson, "The Declining Significance of Race: Revisited & Revised," *Daedalus* Vol. 140, No. 2 (2011): 56.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Wise, "Colorblind: The Rise of Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity," (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2010), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Jinny Huh, "Race in Progress, No Passing Zone: Battlestar Galactica, Colorblindness, and the Maintenance of Racial Order," in *The Colorblind Screen* (New York University Press: New York, 2014), 325-326.

constructed concept, and because it is not a “real” category, it is easier for whites to deny the power and influence of race in the current colorblind era.

Elaine A. Robinson, a professor of Methodist studies and Christian theology at the Saint Paul School of Theology, references Anthony Appiah’s threefold structure of collective identities to explain how collective identities like race are socially constructed. Appiah’s threefold structure of a socially constructed collective identity begins with public discourse that builds labels around specific characteristics about a distinct group of people. From there, the people within that group start to recognize those labels as part of their identity. Finally, people outside the group develop patterns of behavior towards both the labels and the group they are applied to that then becomes the type of treatment members of a specific collective identity receives. In this way, collective identities such as race and gender are socially constructed.<sup>10</sup>

While race is a social construction, it has a very real impact on the lives of People of Color. Those who are considered racially marginalized within the United States have no difficulty seeing the societal disadvantages race creates for them, while white individuals often deny accusations of racial discrimination that arise. Rather than acknowledging that there are structural and systemic issues within the United States, many whites prefer to blame specific individuals or groups for structural issues in a way that ignores race. The denial of a racial component to the structural issues within the United States is what scholars of race refer to as “colorblind racism,’ ‘racial realism,’ and ‘modern racism.’”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine A. Robinson, “Whiteness: The Structure of Institutional Racism,” in *Moral Issues and Christian Responses*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and L. Shannon Jung, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers: Nashville, 2013), 227-228.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, “Whiteness: The Structure of Institutional Racism,” 228.

According to Elaine A. Robinson, colorblind racism contains a few key central assumptions about race. The first assumption made by those who adhere to the ideology of colorblindness is that the civil rights legislation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s has been so successful that racism and racial inequalities have been eradicated, although there are still pockets of individuals who act from a racist vantage point. A second assumption made by those who adhere to the ideology of colorblindness is that there is a level playing field in society, so everyone – regardless of race – has equal access to societal resources and opportunities. These two assumptions logically lead to the third assumption adherents of colorblindness make—failure in society is due to individual or cultural characteristics of specific people or racial groups who fail to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. For this reason, colorblind racism can also be referred to as “cultural racism,” as adherents of the ideology presume that there are cultural characteristics and personality traits that prevent people from succeeding.<sup>12</sup>

One of the seminal titles in the field of race theory is Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s book, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1994).<sup>13</sup> Omi and Winant’s monograph provides an overview of how the U.S. transitioned to a society built on the idea of colorblindness from the 1960s to the 1980s as well as a critique of race theory that they say tends to decentralize race in favor of ethnicity and nationality. The main argument that Omi and Winant make in their work is that race plays a central role at all levels of U.S. society, and that “Race will *always* be at the center of the American experience.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Robinson, “Whiteness: The Structure of Institutional Racism,” 228.

<sup>13</sup> The first edition was published in 1986, then updated in 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (Routledge: London, 1994), 5. Emphasis in original.

Another prominent race scholar is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the author of several books and articles on race theory. *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2014) serves as one of the primary references on colorblind rhetoric for the arguments in this paper. In *Racism without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva compiled data from 627 random interviews taken from the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students given to three colleges – one a large Midwestern university, one a medium western united, and one a large southern university. He also used data from eighty-four randomly selected interview samples from the 1998 Detroit Area Study to ensure the data came from a wider population than just college students. The data he examined allowed him to extrapolate four central frames of colorblind racism – abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism, which serve as the pillars used in the construction of colorblind racial ideology.<sup>15</sup> Bonilla-Silva also authored the book *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* in 2001 where he argues that the United States operates from a racialized societal structure in the 21st century.

Augmenting that argument is historian Ibram X. Kendi in his work, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016). Drawing on primary sources from five prominent historical figures—Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W.E.B. DuBois, and Angela Davis—Kendi chronicles the racist sentiment towards African Americans that has pervaded and continues to pervade American society. In their book, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1998), Douglas S. Massey and Nancy Denton illustrate how governmental policies of the 1960s forced African Americans out of white neighborhoods and into dilapidated neighborhoods

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<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 12, 74.

that quickly became predominantly filled with impoverished African Americans and created the phenomena of hypersegregation. Despite laws against segregation, the practice of restrictive neighborhood covenants and redlining ensured that African Americans remained segregated. Even after the 1968 Fair Housing Act passed, realtors often used (and still use) underhanded techniques to restrict the access African Americans had (and have) to property. Massey and Denton's monograph provides valuable insight into the structural inequalities African Americans contend with in their everyday lives.

Those structural inequalities lead to the school-to-prison pipeline that Michelle Alexander discusses in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). She highlights the racial order of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, arguing that the criminal justice system in the United States functions as a system of racial control because a disproportionate number of African Americans and other People of Color are incarcerated in comparison to white individuals. Ava DuVernay, the filmmaker behind the documentary "13<sup>th</sup> (2016)," continues Alexander's line of argumentation further. In the documentary, she makes it clear that the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment features a loophole that allows the U.S. government to use prison labor as slave labor. She rightly points out that the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment itself does not outlaw slavery entirely; there is a loophole that allows slavery as punishment for a crime. The combination of DuVernay and Alexander's arguments underscores the troubling reality that the criminal justice system, through a false lens of colorblind justice, continues to perpetuate the racial order established during the era of slavery.

In Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki's book, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (2000), the authors explore the racial patterns embedded in the media portrayal of

African Americans. While the authors do not find that the media actively promotes racism, they do find that the media has embedded within it the subtle implication of a racial hierarchy with whites at the top of the racial order. Entman and Rojecki also find that the media, while not actively encouraging racist behavior, does not promote racial cohesion (a.k.a. racial harmony).

In contrast to Entman and Rojecki, Dennis Rome finds in his monograph, *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (2004) that the media's perpetuation of the image of African American males as criminals proliferates throughout society. The proliferation of that image reinforces the stereotype of African American males as violent, and Rome argues that racism within the United States will exist until the stereotype of the violent black man is eradicated from the media and American society.

Like Rome, Jeannette Covington focuses on the negative portrayal of African American individuals in the media. In her work, *Crime and Racial Constructions: Cultural Misinformation about African Americans in Media and Academia* (2010), Covington finds that films released after the 1970s often depict African American males as violent and African American females as sexually promiscuous and irresponsible. She then examines the way criminologists have used the stereotypical portrayals of African Americans to link crime to African Americans.

The book, *The Racial Contract* (1999), penned by philosopher Charles W. Mills, takes John Locke's social contract theory and illustrates that racism against non-white Europeans is at the heart of Locke's philosophy. Mills discusses how that hidden racial contract has created a global racial order that paints whites as persons and non-whites as sub-

persons and thus works to justify historical and ongoing exploitation of People of Color by white individuals.

While Charles W. Mills explores the philosophical implications of the racial contract, sociologist Joe R. Feagin outlines the way systemic racism operates in the United States. Like Bonilla-Silva, Feagin is a prominent race scholar, and most of his books focus on depicting how systemic racism operates within the United States. That focus is reflected in the titles of his monographs. Some of Feagin's works include *White Racism: The Basics* (1994), *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* (1994), *The Agony of Education: Black Students at a White University* (1996), *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (2000), *The Many Costs of Racism* (2002), *White Men on Race: Power, Privilege, and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness* (2003), *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006), *How Race Has Been Framed in America* (2009), and *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (2013).

In his monograph, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992), social scientist Andrew Hacker argues that America has largely divided itself into a white and black sphere. In the first half of the book, he explores the subjective realities experienced by both whites and People of Color in American society. In the second half, he uses statistical evidence to demonstrate the role race plays in several societal spheres, including the spheres of education, business, and income. Hacker also explains how white individuals benefit from this societal division, and states that "No white American, including those who insist that opportunities exist for persons of every race, would change places with even the

most successful black American. All white Americans realize that their skin comprises an inestimable asset.”<sup>16</sup>

Continuing the conversation about white privilege are the race scholars David R. Roediger, the author of *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (2007), and George Lipsitz in his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (2006). Both Roediger and Lipsitz discuss how white individuals profit, often invisibly, from the societal disenfranchisement of People of Color. Specifically, Roediger looks at how racism developed in working-class America, fostered on working-class whites by the white bourgeoisie. In contrast, Lipsitz illustrates how white individuals at all levels of society invest in whiteness as a type of property – because whiteness is treated like a property, relinquishing it becomes incredibly difficult for white individuals.

While it is difficult for whites to relinquish the concept of whiteness, it is not impossible. Richard Dyer, a white media studies scholar, demonstrates through his monograph, *White* (1997), that it is not only possible for white individuals to relinquish whiteness but to also learn how to analyze the racial structure of the United States. For *White*, Dyer compiled several essays about how white individuals are portrayed in the media as non-raced. As Dyer says it, “The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people.... This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 60.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.



Turning to the scholars who have researched the history of Flint. Ronald Edsforth provides an overview of Flint's history from 1890 to 1960 in his book, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint Michigan* (1987).<sup>18</sup> He argues that the auto workers of Flint already contained a culture of mass consumption during the 1920s and emphasizes the role that consumerism played into integrating auto workers into the capitalist economy of the United States. In the space of two monographs, *Remembering Flint, Michigan: Stories from the Vehicle City* (2010) and *Hidden History of Flint* (2017), Gary Flinn provides historical anecdotes about Flint and its architectural history, and he includes a fifty-year overview of how the Flint Water Crisis emerged.<sup>19</sup> Stephen P. Dandaneau's monograph, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan Confronts Deindustrialization* (1996) discusses how Flint became a deindustrialized city after General Motors stopped operating within its borders and the devastating impact deindustrialization had.<sup>20</sup>

In his 2012 article, "Beyond Corporate Abandonment: General Motors and the Politics of Metropolitan Capitalism in Flint, Michigan," Andrew Highsmith provides a direct counter to Dandaneau's argument, as he contends that General Motors shifted jobs away from Flint in an effort to create a metropolitan government that would help expand the city.<sup>21</sup> Highsmith furthers that argument in his monograph, *Demolition Means Progress* (2015), where he discusses the way that the policies and programs implemented in Flint in an effort

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<sup>18</sup> Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint Michigan* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 1-294.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Flinn, *Remembering Flint, Michigan: Stories from the Vehicle City* (Charleston: History Press, 2010), 1-195.

Gary Flinn, *Hidden History of Flint* (Charleston, History Press, 2017), 1-179.

<sup>20</sup> Steven P. Dandaneau, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1-259.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Highsmith, "Beyond Corporate Abandonment: General Motors and the Politics of Metropolitan Capitalism in Flint, Michigan" *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012: 31-47).

to revitalize the city resulted in its economic and racial fragmentation.<sup>22</sup> George Lord and Albert Price's argument in their 1992 article, "Growth Ideology in a Period of Decline: Deindustrialization and Restructuring, Flint Style," predates that of Highsmith's, but they also argue that the growth ideology associated with a need to develop the economy eventually failed and resulted in the deindustrialization of Flint.<sup>23</sup>

Justin Hollander analyzes how population decline impacted Flint, Michigan in his 2010 article, "Moving Toward a Shrinking Cities Metric: Analyzing Land Use Changes Associated with Depopulation in Flint, Michigan," while Amy Cantor and John Nystuen evaluated the presence and impact of redlining in Flint in their earlier 1982 article, "De Facto Redlining a Geographic View."<sup>24</sup> The last monograph that pertains specifically to the history of Flint is the personal memoir of Gordon Young, *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City* (2013) who moved back to Flint after living in San Francisco for fifteen years. He interviewed Flint residents to discover what had changed since he had left, so his memoir supplies insight into early 2000s Flint.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the relative recency of the Flint Water Crisis, few individuals other than journalists, environmental scholars, and activists have offered any analysis of the crisis. This is understandable, as many historians are hesitant to engage with events that are still ongoing, as it is difficult to discern the impact any event will have on the future. The journalists who have analyzed the crisis have tried to provide clear accounts of the origins of the crisis. The first journalist to compile a monograph on the subject was Anna Clark. In her work, *The*

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-293.

<sup>23</sup> Justin B. Hollander, "Moving Toward a Shrinking Cities Metric: Analyzing Land Use Changes Associated with Depopulation in Flint, Michigan" *Cityscape*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2010): 133-151.

<sup>24</sup> Amy C. Kantor and John D. Nystuen, "De Facto Redlining a Geographic View," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (October 1982): 309-328.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Young, *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 1-288.

*Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy* (2018), she sketches an overview of the crisis through viewpoints of the individuals she interviewed.<sup>26</sup> Clark included interviews with a variety of people, including individuals who instigated the crisis, people who suffered from the high levels of toxins in the water, and the people who worked to bring the problem to the attention of the state and, eventually, the nation.

The pediatrician, Mona Hanna-Attisha, wrote a personal account of the crisis, and she was one of the many who worked hard to bring the problem to the attention of the government. In her book, *What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City* (2018), she discusses how she became part of a group of activists that rallied against the government to force the truth about the water into the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> The staff of *Bridge Magazine*, who compiled information about the crisis in the book, *Poison on Tap (A Bridge Magazine Analysis): How the Government Failed Flint, and the Heroes who Fought Back* (2016).<sup>28</sup> Benjamin J. Pauli, a journalist who also worked as an activist in Flint, provides an account of the crisis in his monograph, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (2019). He sketches three different narratives of the crisis - the political, the historical, and the technical narratives - and provides insight into the view the activists themselves held of the crisis as a fight with democracy on the line.<sup>29</sup>

Two government works deal specifically with the crisis, and that is the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) report, *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Eyes of Flint* (2017) and the testimony given by Peter J. Hammer in "The Flint Water

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 1-302.

<sup>27</sup> Hanna-Attisha, *What the Eyes Don't See*, 1-352.

<sup>28</sup> Staff of *Bridge Magazine*, *Poison on Tap (A Bridge Magazine Analysis): How Government Failed Flint, and the Heroes who Fought Back* (Michigan: Mission Point Press, 2016), 1-311.

<sup>29</sup> Pauli, *Flint Fights Back*, 1-396.

Crisis: History, Housing, and Spatial-Structural Racism.”<sup>30</sup> The MCRC investigation, outlined in *The Flint Water Crisis*, discovered that systemic racism was responsible for the development of the water crisis. Other articles, including Paul Mohai’s “Environmental Justice and the Flint Water Crisis” (2018), Richard Sadler and Andrew Highsmith’s “Rethinking Tiebout: The Contribution of Political Fragmentation and Racial/Economic Segregation to the Flint Water Crisis” (2016), and Morgan Robinson’s “Thirst for the American Dream: The Lost City of Flint” (2018), discuss the racial segregation of Flint and how it led to the environmental racism that allowed the Flint Water crisis to occur.<sup>31</sup>

The only scholar that has thus far examined the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis has been the environmental consultant, Derrick Z. Jackson, whose article “Environmental Justice? Unjust Coverage of the Flint Water Crisis” (2016) made clear that the national media often fail to pay attention to communities and People of Color who try to raise awareness of environmental problems in their neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup> This thesis thus expands on Jackson’s work and more fully engages with the colorblind racism that is present within the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. While his focus is on environmental racism, this work focuses on colorblind racism.

Colorblind racism is hidden from sight; it is masked and disguised in ways that make it seem to be non-existent to those who most often engage it. The colorblind paradigm is designed to unmask those mechanisms, particularly within the media, so that those who are

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<sup>30</sup> MCRC, *The Flint Water Crisis*, 1-138; Hammer, “The Flint Water Crisis,” 1-38.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Mohai, “Environmental Justice and the Flint Water Crisis,” *Michigan Sociological Review*, Vol. 32 (2018): 1-41.

Richard Sadler and Andrew Highsmith, “Rethinking Tiebout: The Contribution of Political Fragmentation and Racial/Economic Segregation to the Flint Water Crisis,” *Environmental Justice*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (2016): 143-151.

Morgan A. Robinson, “Thirst for the American Dream: The Lost City of Flint,” *Michigan Sociological Review*, Vol. 32 (2018): 170-86.

<sup>32</sup> Derrick Z. Jackson, “Environmental Justice? Unjust Coverage of the Flint Water Crisis,” *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy* (2017), 32.

blinded to the presence of colorblind racism can start seeing it and thus work to stop enhancing its effectiveness within U.S. society. Within race and media studies, this thesis helps expand on work done by previous scholars that discuss colorblind racism and colorblind ideology. Taking three theories and creating the colorblind paradigm as an analytical model for determining the underlying racial structures of social institutions is the meta-goal of this thesis.

The colorblind paradigm, described in Chapter One “The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to Media Analyses,” is an analytical model that consists of the theories proposed by sociologist Joe R. Feagin, race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and communications scholar Cedric C. Clark. The colorblind paradigm uses Feagin’s concept of the white racial frame, Bonilla-Silva’s definition and frames of colorblind racism, and Clark’s stages of media representation to highlight the reality of the white racial hegemony within the United States. The first chapter begins with an overview of Feagin’s white racial frame, Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism, and Clark’s stages of media representation. Once the three theories that the colorblind paradigm uses are defined, the model is then used to assess five media studies conducted by other scholars. Four media types are examined – advertisements, sports media, reality tv, and news media – to illustrate how the colorblind paradigm operates within the social institution of the media to maintain white dominance.

The analysis conducted of Vanessa Hazell and Juanne Clarke’s content analysis of advertisements from the African American magazines *Essence* and *Jet*, “Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines (2008)” reveals that even media sources geared towards People of Color promote the ideology of white dominance. While Hazell and Clark’s analysis demonstrates the

stereotypical portrayal of African American females, Armondo R. Collin's chapter, "The Media Assault on the Black Male: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson," in the book *The Handbook of Research on Black Males* (2019) depicts how the media used Jack Johnson's image to "solidify a narrative of black male marginality and criminality."<sup>33</sup> The media painted Jack Johnson and other African American men as a threat to whiteness, reinforcing the white racial hegemony of the United States.

Katrina E. Bell-Jordan's analysis of three reality television shows in her article, "*Black:White. And a Survivor of The Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV*" (2008) found that all three shows purposefully juxtaposed racial perspectives, promoted inter- and intra-racial conflict, depicted African Americans as violent and angry individuals, privileged individual racism over societal racism, and did not provide resolutions for racial conflicts depicted on the shows.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Bell-Jordan's analysis demonstrated the pervasiveness of white racial dominance within the media of both traditional and colorblind racism.

Turning to the news media, two analyses conducted by scholars on the media coverage of the Hurricane Katrina crisis of 2005 are considered. These analyses were chosen due to shared elements between the Hurricane Katrina crisis of 2005 and the Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014. Hemant Shaw, the Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, conducted a textual analysis of conservative news commentary of the Hurricane in his 2009 article, "Legitimizing Neglect:

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<sup>33</sup> Armondo R. Collins, "The Media Assault on the Black Male: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson" in *The Handbook of Research on Black Males* ed. Theodore S. Ransaw, C. P. Gause, and Richard Majors (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2019), 507.

<sup>34</sup> Katrina E. Bell-Jordan, "*Black.White. and a Survivor of The Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 2008): 357. The italics in the title were in the original, so I have kept them as they appeared.

Race and Rationality in Conservative News Commentary about Hurricane Katrina.” He found that many conservative news outlets portrayed African American residents as distinct from the rest of New Orleans by referring to them as “creatures” or “primitive.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, in their 2006 article “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications and Future Research Questions,” Samuel R. Sommers, an experimental social psychologist and Laboratory Director of the Diversity and Intergroup Relations Lab at Tufts University, and associates found that journalists disproportionately associated African Americans with crime.<sup>36</sup> These analyses revealed the continued prevalence of white dominance within the media, demonstrating the strength of the colorblind paradigm. These two analyses were particularly helpful, as both Hurricane Katrina and the Flint Water Crisis were and are sites of environmental injustice. These scholars provided critical insight into how to approach the analysis of the media coverage of events caused by or made worse by environmental injustice through the lens of the colorblind paradigm.

Chapter One is purely sociological and supplies vital insight into how the colorblind paradigm operates on a general level. The heaviest sociological component of the thesis is introduced first, both to demonstrate the strength of the colorblind paradigm and to provide readers with the lens through which this work is meant to be viewed. The general

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<sup>35</sup> Hemant Shah, “Legitimizing Neglect: Race and Rationality in Conservative News Commentary about Hurricane Katrina.” *The Howard Journal of Communications*. Vol. 20 (2009): 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel R. Sommers, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Kristin N. Dukes, Negin Toosi, and Elsie J. Wang, “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2006): 39-55. Evan P. Apfelbaum is an associate professor of the Questrom School of Business at Boston University. Kristin N. Dukes is the Dean of Institutional Diversity at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Negin Toosi is an experimental social psychologist and assistant professor of psychology at California State University on the East Bay campus. Elsie J. Wang is a professor of hospital medicine at Stanford University.

applicability of the colorblind paradigm to multiple forms of media provides the necessary sociological foundation to conduct an analysis of the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis.

Moving from sociology to history, Chapter Two, “The Racial Reality of Flint and the Water Crisis,” as a historical overview of Flint, Michigan and the Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014. Because media is a cultural reproduction, it is imperative to understand the history of Flint itself before turning to the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis, as nothing happens void of historical and social context. The activism of Flint residents ensured that the Water Crisis came to national attention in 2014, and activists continue to work today to keep the crisis in the national spotlight. Activism is a historical legacy in Flint and has been since the General Motors (GM) sit-down strike of 1936-1937. The forty-four-day strike resulted in GM’s capitulation to the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) and the establishment of collective bargaining throughout the industrial sector of the United States.<sup>37</sup>

The United States has been dealing with deindustrialization since the close of World War II, and Flint is no exception to that. General Motors, still the largest employer in Flint, started moving operations away from Flint gradually and then more rapidly during the 1980s as environmental regulations and financial instability threatened the company.<sup>38</sup> Between 1980 and 1986, the closure of GM plants cost the city of Flint 30,000 jobs.<sup>39</sup> The loss of every factory job led to the loss of six more jobs within the community of Flint.<sup>40</sup> The dwindling population of Flint is not the only historical legacy that Flint, Michigan must

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<sup>37</sup> Shaun S. Nethercott and Neil O. Leighton, “Memory, Process and Performance,” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Autumn 1990): 48.

<sup>38</sup> Gary Flinn, *The Hidden History of Flint*, (South Carolina: History Press, 2017), 60-62.

<sup>39</sup> Nethercott and Leighton, “Memory, Process and Performance,” 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



contend with today. In addition to GM's impact on the city, Flint's history of racial segregation has played - and continues to play - a significant role.

In Flint, the population exploded in the 1900s and the African American population grew exponentially. In 1900, 13,000 people lived in Flint; fewer than 300 were African American residents who were clustered around the Thread Lake area in the southwestern corner of the city (Floral Park).<sup>41</sup> After the Great Depression, wartime industries drew more African Americans, which saw a doubling of the African American population in Flint in the 1940s.<sup>42</sup> By 1960, the ratio of white residents to African-American residents was six to one.<sup>43</sup> Economic means largely determined where African Americans resided in Flint, as those who were relatively affluent could afford property in the community near Thread Lake while the poorer African Americans found themselves confined to the slums along the edges of the Buick factory in the northern part of the city (St. John Street).<sup>44</sup>

In the 1960s, Flint attempted to solve the issue of spatial racism by engaging in clearance projects of both the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup> The clearance of the Floral Park neighborhood resulted in the creation of the 475 freeway interchange, while the clearance of the St. John Street neighborhood saw the creation of an industrial park that largely went unused.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Flint attempted to relocate residents of the two neighborhoods to integrated areas, which led to panic and escalated the problems of white

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<sup>41</sup> Pierce F. Lewis, "Impact of Negro Migration on the Electoral Geography of Flint, Michigan, 1932-1962: A Cartographic Analysis," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (March 1965): 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Peter J. Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism," *Testimony before Michigan Civil Rights Commission Hearing on Flint Water Crisis*, July 14, 2016. Page numbers not listed.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

flight.<sup>47</sup> White flight refers specifically to the practice of white individuals moving out of neighborhoods with a heavy African American presence. White flight transforms both the demographic geography of a neighborhood and the neighborhood's economic status, as white individuals often take critical resources with them when they leave. The phenomenon of white flight has served as a method of hypersegregation, or spatial racism, between whites and African Americans that is especially prominent in Rust Belt cities; Flint is a hypersegregated Northern city.<sup>48</sup>

Much of the spatial racism in Flint originated from the white flight that began in the 1960s, increased in the 1970s, and by the 1980s had turned Flint into a majority minority city.<sup>49</sup> Spatial racism has been reproduced throughout Flint and the entirety of Genesee County.<sup>50</sup> In Flint, that is made readily apparent by the fact that the whole of Flint is the two historically African American neighborhoods of Floral Park and St. John Street.<sup>51</sup> The spatial racism experienced in Flint led to drastic tax revenue reductions in the city of Flint between the years of 2006 and 2012.<sup>52</sup> This rapid decrease in revenue led to Michigan's governor, Rick Snyder, installing emergency management in Flint.

Emergency management, introduced by the state of Michigan in the 1988 Public Act (PA) 101 and followed in 1990 by Public Act 72, allows the state of Michigan to install Emergency Financial Managers (EFMs) in distressed municipalities.<sup>53</sup> The collapse of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Dardin, Linda Jones, and Julianne Price, "Ethnographic Evaluation of the Behavioral Causes of Undercount in a Black Ghetto of Flint, Michigan," *Ethnographic Evaluation of the 1990 Decennial Census Report #24*, Bureau of the Census, 1990, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Shu Wang and Andrew Cosby, "Emergency Managers in Michigan: Just What the Doctor Ordered?" *Michigan Applied Public Policy Brief*, Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, n.d., 3.

revenue in Flint indicated a state of fiscal distress, and Flint acquired an EFM in 2012. Peter J. Hammer, a Professor of Law at Wayne State University and the Director of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights provided testimony before the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) on the Flint Water Crisis that outlined the segregated racial history of the city of Flint. In that testimony, he claimed that the decision to turn to Emergency Management was “a fatally misguided response to spatial-structural racism” that “created the preconditions for the Flint Water Crisis.”<sup>54</sup>

As part of another “cost-saving” measure, Flint’s officials decided to stop receiving water from the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) and turn to the Flint River as a source in April 2014. This decision catalyzed an environmental disaster. Government officials and media representatives “gathered at the city’s water treatment plant on the northeast side of town to commemorate the switch of Flint’s municipal water source.”<sup>55</sup> Mayor Dayne Walling led those present in a toast, and one councilman, Joshua Freeman, said that the water tasted like water, which seemed to be a portent of good tidings.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps it would have been, if the government officials had ensured that all of the environmental laws were followed. Instead, a critical environmental law that requires water treatment plants to implement corrosion control went ignored and unenforced, and the city of Flint was subjected to water contaminated with lead that poisoned the entire population.<sup>57</sup>

The MCRC released a report in 2017 that definitively concluded that systemic racism and environmental injustice created the circumstances that led to the poisoning of Flint. Their

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<sup>54</sup> Hammer, “The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism.”

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Clark, *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2018), 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-38.

report, entitled “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Eyes of Flint,” found that the citizens of Flint had no voice in decisions made about their environment, and they were not afforded equal protection of environmental and public health laws.<sup>58</sup> The Commission stated outright that race was a factor in the Flint Water Crisis due to the racialized structure of public policy that forced undue hardship on a community whose population primarily consists of People of Color.<sup>59</sup>

The report had a section that discussed structural racism and how it differed from personal racism. Structural racism is more insidious and difficult to pinpoint because it is often both invisible and imbedded in institutions that feature prominently in everyday life.<sup>60</sup> One of those institutions is the media, which the MCRC stated provided only minimal coverage of the Flint Water crisis. The authors of the report asked if the coverage of the event would have differed if the crisis had occurred in a different city.<sup>61</sup> The MCRC also acknowledged that the media workers who provided coverage of the event would “doubtlessly insist that race played no part in their decision making.”<sup>62</sup>

In Chapter Three, “The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to the Flint Water Crisis,” using the colorblind paradigm to analyze the mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water crisis illustrates the prevalence of white dominance. The colorblind paradigm thus proves effective in the analysis of a specific event. The chapter starts with an assessment of how the news articles reveal Feagin’s white racial frame. Next, it is demonstrated how the articles fit within the four frames of colorblind racism described by Bonilla-Silva (defined previously).

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<sup>58</sup> MCRC, “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Eyes of Flint,” 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, the chapter turns to considering how the news articles fit within Clark's four stages of media representation.

The conclusion discusses how future scholars can build from this work. It features a brief discussion of the paths that other historians, sociologists, and media scholars may want to take concerning Flint, the Flint Water Crisis, and other environmental disasters catalyzed by systemic racism. Finally, Appendix A consists of a list of all the news articles consulted in the analysis of the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis.

The colorblind paradigm itself was born out of a need for an analytical tool to expose the mechanisms underpinning the social institutions of the United States that has created a white racial hegemony visible to everyone except white individuals, the ones who profit the most from the racial status quo. Systemic racism is itself a system of oppression forced upon People of Color by white individuals, a system that most white individuals are unable to see. To dismantle systemic racism, a tool that exposes the mechanisms that maintain white racial dominance is a vital necessity. The meta-goal of this thesis is to provide an analytical tool that allows for the invisible mechanisms of systemic racism to be made visible so that racial structures that promote white dominance can be dismantled and transformed.

## Chapter One

### The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to Media Analyses

#### *The Colorblind Paradigm*

The colorblind paradigm is an analytical model that utilizes the work of three other scholars – that of sociologist Joe R. Feagin, race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and communications scholar Cedric Clark. The white racial frame conceived by Feagin joins with Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of colorblind racism and Clark’s four stages of media representation to create the colorblind paradigm. Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism serve as the lynchpins that undergird the white worldview espoused by Feagin’s theory of the white racial frame, and Clark’s stages of media representation situates the analytical model referred to as the colorblind paradigm firmly in the intersecting fields of race and media studies. The colorblind paradigm is, therefore, an analytical model that supplies a method for analyzing social institutions, particularly that of the media, to illustrate how those social institutions reinforce and perpetuate white racial dominance within the United States.<sup>63</sup>

Following a brief overview of the work of each scholar that is synthesized within the colorblind paradigm is a demonstration of how that paradigm can be applied to four media sources – advertisement media, sports media, reality television, and news media – through the augmentation of analyses performed by other scholars. The first analysis considered is that of Vanessa Hazell and JUANNE CLARK, “Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines” (2008). Their analysis of the contents of the African American magazines *Essence* and *Jet*, seen through the three

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<sup>63</sup> To make the colorblind paradigm applicable to social institutions outside of the media, Clark’s theory of the stages of media representation would need to be replaced by a theory relevant to the particular institution being studied. The third leg of the colorblind paradigm is purposefully designed to be replaceable by theories relating to the institution under study, a built-in level of flexibility that allows scholars to adapt and modify it as needed.

theories that constitute the colorblind paradigm, depict the prevalence of white racial dominance even in media sources geared towards African Americans.

Moving from advertisement media to sports media, Armondo R. Collin's chapter, "The Media Assault on the Black Male: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson," in the book *The Handbook of Research on Black Males* (2019) depicts how the media used Jack Johnson's image to "solidify a narrative of black male marginality and criminality."<sup>64</sup> Using the three theories that constitute the colorblind paradigm, it becomes clear that the media used the figure of Jack Johnson to depict all African American men as a threat to whiteness and thus reinforced the racial hegemony of whiteness within the United States.

After applying the colorblind paradigm to sports media, I turn to the analysis of reality television shows done by Katrina E. Bell-Jordan. In her article, awkwardly titled "*Black.White. and a Survivor of the Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV* (2008)," she found that the three television shows – *Black.White*, *Survivor*, and *The Real World* – purposefully juxtaposed racial perspectives, promoted inter- and intra-racial conflict, portrayed African Americans as violent, angry individuals, privileged individual racism over societal racism, and failed to provide resolutions for racial conflicts.<sup>65</sup> Through the application of the colorblind paradigm, it seems that reality television shows clearly demonstrate the media's reinforcement and perpetuation of white racial dominance within U.S. society.

Finally, the colorblind paradigm is applied to two analyses conducted by scholars on the media coverage of the Hurricane Katrina crisis of 2005. Hemant Shah, the Director of the

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<sup>64</sup> Collins, "Media Assault on the Black Male," 507.

<sup>65</sup> Bell-Jordan, "*Black.White and a Survivor of the Real World*," 357.

School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, conducted a textual analysis of conservative news commentary of the Hurricane in his 2009 article, “Legitimizing Neglect: Race and Rationality in Conservative News Commentary about Hurricane Katrina.” He found that many conservative news outlets portrayed African American residents as distinct from the rest of New Orleans by referring to them as “creatures” or “primitive.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in a 2006 article “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications and Future Research Questions,” Samuel R. Sommers, an experimental social psychologist and Laboratory Director of the Diversity and Intergroup Relations Lab at Tufts University, and his associates found that journalists disproportionately associated African Americans with crime.<sup>67</sup> These analyses revealed the continued prevalence of white dominance within the media, demonstrating the strength of the colorblind paradigm.

### *Feagin’s White Racial Frame*

Since its inception, the United States has operated through what the sociologist Joe. R. Feagin calls the white racial frame in his monograph, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-framing* (2013). Frames are perspectives that become embedded in the individual and collective memories and histories. People use a variety of frames to understand and interpret the world around them, and those frames range from “specific micro-level framing of situations to a broad framing of society.”<sup>68</sup> Because

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<sup>66</sup> Shah, “Legitimizing Neglect,” 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Sommers et. al, “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” 39-55.

<sup>68</sup> Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 9.



repetition is critical to the process that imbeds frames in people's minds, the continuous and constant use of elements of the white racial frame ensures its dominance in U.S. society.<sup>69</sup>

According to Feagin, the white racial frame is “an overarching white worldview that encompasses a *broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate.*”<sup>70</sup> The white racial frame that exists today has existed since the founding of the United States, though some of its elements have changed. The three most important elements of the frame, according to Feagin are, “(1) the recurring use of certain physical characteristics, such as skin color and facial features, to differentiate social groups; (2) the constant linking of physical characteristics to cultural characteristics; and (3) the regular use of physical and linked cultural distinctions to differentiate socially ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ [social groups].”<sup>71</sup> These elements of the colonial white racial frame persist today.

Frames, once activated, tend to activate subframes. The dominant white racial frame tends to activate subframes of class and patriarchy. In addition to activating these subframes, dominant frames tend to be resistant to change. Because of this, the activation of the white racial frame tends to cause whites to ignore or reject facts that do not fit nicely into the dominant frame. Many whites are thus unable to see the racial frame or analyze it critically because attempting to do so falls outside the purview of the dominant frame, and dominant frames are highly resistant to change.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 9-15.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 3. Emphasis in original.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 15.

One of the most common subframes activated by the white racial frame is that of the Horatio Alger myth, also known as the rags-to-riches story or Protestant work ethic.<sup>73</sup> This is a familiar narrative in America, as states that anyone can become rich with enough effort. The narrative has roots in English colonialism, as it hearkens back to the early English colonists who came to America. The dominant frame states that the English colonists arrived in America with next to nothing, but through religious faith and hard work they were able to make the land prosper despite the “savage” natives they encountered in an otherwise empty world. The reality, of course, is that the world the English colonized was not empty, as they were an occupying and invading force on lands that belonged to the native tribes. The dominant white racial frame overwrites reality, so that the native tribes are painted as “savage” and the English settlers branded as “heroes.”<sup>74</sup>

The heroic narrative is one that the United States has long preserved. Alongside the myth of the successful colonist resides the myth that resides underneath the genocidal truth of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny.<sup>75</sup> Feagin states, “In that narrative white ‘settlers’

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<sup>73</sup> The Horatio Alger myth is named for the author of several young adult novels written in the late 1800s. These novels featured main characters who began in difficult life circumstances and eventually became prosperous. The most well-known of Alger’s novel, and the one that served as the plot outline for future novels, was *Ragged Dick*, published in 1868. In the novel, Dick is a fourteen-year old homeless teen who has an industrious nature, and he finds himself tasked with giving a tour of New York to a gentleman named Frank, who encourages Dick to go to school while painting a picture of the buildings of New York as palaces. Dick agrees to attend school and is subsequently cornered by a bully, Mickey, who Dick eventually chases away through physical violence. Another teenager, Henry, has been a constant target of Mickey and sees the altercation. Dick sees himself in Henry and offers to let Henry spend the night in his room, a room provided by his school. Both boys seek better employment for themselves, and on their way to Brooklyn, a boy falls into the river off the ferry. Dick instantly jumps into the river and saves the child, whose father happens to be the wealthy James Rockwell, who then gives Dick a high-paying job as an office clerk. When Dick arrives at the office for his first day of work, he introduces himself as Richard Hunter, leaving the life of “Dick” behind. This became a standard narrative that Horatio Alger used in his novels, which is why the “rags-to-riches” story is called the Horatio Alger myth. During his lifetime, he was a popular young adult novelist but he himself did not leave much behind and has become almost a myth himself. For more information, see John A. Geck, “Biographies: The Lives of Horatio Alger, Jr.,” in *The Cinderella Biography*, 2002, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/cinderella/text/biography-the-lives-of-horatio-alger-jr>

<sup>74</sup> Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Manifest Destiny refers to the idea that colonial expansion into America was the work of Providence. For more information, consult Julius W. Pratt, “John L. O’Sullivan and Manifest Destiny,” *New York History*, Vol

again fought battles against ‘savage’ Indians, with the heroes being rewarded with land and villainous Indians being killed off or isolated on reservations.”<sup>76</sup> This particular narrative makes no mention of the fact that the native tribes were the rightful owners of the land or that the white colonists committed atrocious acts against the tribes so that they could wrest control of the land away from the indigenous peoples. This heroic subframe of the white racial frame ensures that it communicates false narratives about the creation of the United States and helps disguise the reality that the U.S. was largely founded by the conquest of native tribes.<sup>77</sup>

Like the problematic subframes concerning Native Americans, the white racial frame features ten distinct stereotypes about African Americans that have been repeated for the last four hundred years. Those stereotypes, according to Feagin, are as follows:

1. To have distinctive color, hair and lips;
2. To be bestial and apelike;
3. To be unintelligent;
4. To have a disagreeable smell;
5. To be uncivilized, alien, and foreign;
6. To be immoral, criminal, and dangerous;
7. To be lazy;
8. To be oversexed;
9. To be ungrateful and rebellious;
10. To have disorganized families.<sup>78</sup>

In the white racial frame, the first four of these stereotypes center on perceptions of African American’s biological and physical characteristics while the rest center on perceptions of African American culture and moral character. The stereotypes embedded in this frame

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14, No. 3 (July 1933): 213-234, Julius W. Pratt, “The Origin of Manifest Destiny,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July 1927): 795-798, and/or Dan E. Clark, “Manifest Destiny and the Pacific,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1932): 1-17.

<sup>76</sup> Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

served a purpose—they justified both the enslavement of the African people and the brutalities inflicted on African slaves. The existence and prevalence of these stereotypes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a testament to the persistent strength of the white racial frame.<sup>79</sup>

### *Bonilla-Silva's Frames of Colorblind Racism*

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines colorblind racism as “a set of frames, styles, and scripts that are used to explain and justify the racial status quo without sounding racist.”<sup>80</sup> He demonstrates the prevalence of colorblind racism within society in an empirical study discussed in his monograph *Racism without Racists* (2014). Bonilla-Silva compiled data from 627 random interviews taken from the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students given to three colleges – one a large Midwestern university, one a medium Western university, and one a large Southern university. He also used data from eighty-four randomly selected interview samples from the 1998 Detroit Area Study to ensure his data came from a wider population than just college students. The data he examined allowed him to extrapolate four central frames of colorblind racism. Because frames create distinct paths for analyzing information received from the world, the four central frames Bonilla-Silva identified serve as a critical element of the colorblind paradigm.<sup>81</sup>

The four frames Bonilla-Silva identified in his study were the frames of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. In the frame of abstract liberalism, the concepts of individualism and egalitarianism enter the foreground,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 49-56.

<sup>80</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, (Rowman & Littlefield: Maryland, 2014), 26.

<sup>81</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 12, 74.

crowding out the concepts of collectivism and societally reproduced inequalities.<sup>82</sup> The abstract liberalism frame works to create the impression of a level playing field, allowing whites to reference both individual choice and the perception they hold of equal economic opportunity in the explanations they use about racial differences.<sup>83</sup>

In the second frame, that of naturalization, whites use the concept of natural differences between races to explain racial inequalities or racial phenomena they observe within society. When white individuals use phrases like “That’s the way it is,” to describe social situations that have racial origins, the frame of naturalization is active. This is what allows whites to explain residential segregation by stating that it is “only natural” that whites gravitate towards white-dominated neighborhoods and African Americans to majority minority neighborhoods.<sup>84</sup>

The frame of naturalization logically leads to the third frame, that of cultural racism, to argue that distinct racial and/or cultural groups hold specific characteristics that explain their standing within the social hierarchy. Comments such as “Mexicans do not place much emphasis on education” or “Blacks have too many babies” serve of examples of the frame of cultural racism in action.<sup>85</sup> The emphasis of cultural characteristics allows for a focus on individual characteristics, which leads back to the first frame of abstract liberalism.

In conjunction, these three frames lead to the fourth frame that Bonilla-Silva found served as a vital component of colorblind racism, that of the minimization of racism. Through this frame, the concept of discrimination is dismissed as a relic of the past, something that once affected minorities but no longer serves to disenfranchise them within

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>83</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 74-76.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 76. These are quotes from the interviews Bonilla-Silva used in his study.

society.<sup>86</sup> This frame is active when a white individual acknowledges that discrimination exists but that it exists in isolated pockets. When posed a question about discrimination in employment opportunities, one of the white students that Bonilla-Silva interviewed said, “I think that there’s probably less [discrimination] than it used to be, but that it still happens. It’s just in isolated places, or you know, it happens in different places, but in most jobs, I think it probably does not happen.”<sup>87</sup> Another student, asked the same question, said that discrimination is a matter of perception, and that if a person is looking for racism, then they are going to find it.<sup>88</sup>

The frames of colorblind racism serve to disguise a white racial order that has been in operation since the founding of the United States. The frames of colorblind racism serve as the lynchpin of the hegemony of white racial dominance within the nation – and every social institution, including that of the media. Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of colorblind racism thus serve to augment Feagin’s white racial frame, providing an overview of the mental framework that provides individuals with the tools they need to deny the prevalence and persistence of white racial hegemony within the United States. Through the use of colorblind frames, individuals continue to adhere to and perpetuate the white racial frame.

### *Clark’s Stages of Media Representation*

According to Clark, the media representation of every social group occurs in the four stages of nonrecognition, ridicule, protectors, and respect.<sup>89</sup> In the stage of nonrecognition, there is no mention of the social group in the media coverage at all. Groups within this stage

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, *Racism without Racists*, 74-77.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>89</sup> Clark, “Television and Social Controls,” 18-32.

have little to no visibility within the media. An example of a group that fits within this stage is Native Americans, as they are rarely depicted within mainstream media.<sup>90</sup>

In Clark's second stage, that of ridicule, the media representation of a specific social group includes only stereotypical images of that social group.<sup>91</sup> Generally, individuals are shown in stereotypical and degrading ways, and the early portrayal of African Americans as slapstick clowns and brutes are demonstrative of this particular stage.<sup>92</sup> Current media portrayals of African American males as drug dealers, gang members, and dead-beat dads fit within this stage, as do portrayals of African American females as welfare queens.<sup>93</sup>

The third stage, that of protectors, is when the media representation of a social group expands to include images of individuals of that particular group in positions of authority.<sup>94</sup> While Clark called this stage "protectors," it is also known as the stage of "regulation." In this stage, minority groups are more frequently depicted but usually in very specific authoritative roles (thus the "protectors" label for the stage). An example of a group within this stage are African American males, who are often depicted in authority figure roles like those of judges, police officers, and heads of state.<sup>95</sup>

Clark's fourth stage, that of respect, is a stage of media representation where members of a social group from a variety of personal backgrounds are represented in the media in a positive light.<sup>96</sup> In this stage, members of a social group are depicted in nuanced

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<sup>90</sup> Christopher Steven Josey, "Race and Stereotypes in New Media: An Examination of How Internet News Frames Persons of Color," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Clark, "Television and Social Controls," 18-32.

<sup>92</sup> Josey, "Race and Stereotypes," 9-10.

<sup>93</sup> These stereotypical portrayals of African Americans were discussed in the sociology course Dr. Anastacia Schulhoff taught. The assertion that these portrayals are representative of Clark's second stage of ridicule are my own assertions.

<sup>94</sup> Clark, "Television and Social Controls," 18-32.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

and balanced roles – the background stories for characters of social groups within this stage of media representation are dynamic and diverse. Of Clark’s four stages of media representation, the media coverage of minority groups never reaches stage four.<sup>97</sup> The only racial group that has achieved this status in media representation are whites. The fact that the media representation of minority racial groups has never reached stage four is emblematic of how the media perpetuates and reinforces the white racial hegemony of the United States.

Combined with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism and Joe Feagin’s white racial frame, Clark’s four stages of media representation serves as the final component of the colorblind paradigm. Now that these components have been defined, the colorblind paradigm may be applied to analyses performed by other scholars on advertisement media, sports media, reality television, and news media to demonstrate the prevalence of white racial dominance within the media institution of the United States.

### ***The Paradigm Applied***

#### *Advertisement Media*

The content analysis of advertisements conducted by Vanessa Hazell and JUANNE CLARKE of advertisements in two African American magazines, *Essence* and *Jet*, between 2003-2004, revealed that ideologies of white supremacy and racism pervade even the advertisements found in magazines targeted towards African American audiences. The stereotypes embedded in the advertisements illustrate some of the stereotypes directed towards African Americans that Feagin includes in the white racial frame.

Advertisements influence people, and one of the ways they do that is through the circulation of beauty ideals. During the 1950s, the beauty ideal fell along a spectrum of color

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



with white being at the top; in turn, this meant African Americans with lighter skin tones fell closer to the European standard of beauty than those African Americans with darker skin. The white standards of beauty included light skin, long straight hair, thin lips, and thin figures, so any African Americans who fell further away from the European beauty ideal often found themselves excluded from advertisements altogether.<sup>98</sup>

In addition, advertisers portrayed white women and African American women very differently in terms of temperament. Advertisers typically showed white women as submissive, while they assigned dominant depictions of African American women in their advertisements. Advertisers also often portrayed African American women as a matriarch, the head of their own household, while they depicted white women in more submissive roles. There are two other roles that advertisers often use as depictions of African American women – that of Sapphire and Jezebel. An African American woman slotted into the role of Sapphire demonstrates character traits of independence, stubbornness, and extreme emotionality. Similarly, African American women portrayed as Jezebel are assigned character traits like sexual aggression, enhanced seductive abilities, and features that align more closely with the European beauty ideal.<sup>99</sup>

During the era of slavery, Jezebel was often a term used to describe African American women as “an apologetic for the exploitation of the female slave.”<sup>100</sup> White slave owners depicted African Americans they viewed as promiscuous, provocative, and rebellious

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<sup>98</sup> Hazell and Clark, “Race and Gender in the Media,” 6.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 2.

as Jezebels, purposefully pitting the image of the promiscuous Jezebel against that of the maternal and religiously pious mammy.<sup>101</sup> Stark and Deventer explain:

These images were created by white masters to control and dominate the female slave. The mammy represented the desire for a positive image of African Americans whereas the jezebel was an excuse for white masters to justify their adolescent and later adulterous behavior. White women blamed the jezebels in order to deny the oppression and rape of slave women.<sup>102</sup>

Depicting African American women as a Jezebel in advertisements thus pulls the legacy of slavery into the present.

Alongside depictions of African American women as Sapphires and Jezebels is the image of the “strong Black woman.” In her monograph, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (2009), the womanist social scientist and Louise R. Noun Chair in Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies at Grinnell College in Iowa, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant discusses how the media depiction of the “strong Black woman” maintains racial oppression by elevating the role of personal agency in what would otherwise be seen as societal abuse.<sup>103</sup> The narrative of strong Black womanhood is captured in well-known historical figures like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks.<sup>104</sup> The “strong Black woman” is a narrative fiction, itself a false story of redemption that shoehorns African American women into roles of strong independent individuals and deny them the traits of emotionality and vulnerability.<sup>105</sup> This creates a juxtaposition of the portrayal of African American women as dominant women with

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<sup>101</sup> Trudie Stark and Hans J.M. van Deventer, “The ‘Jezebel Spirit:’ A Scholarly Inquiry,” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2009): 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>103</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

the portrayal of white women as submissive, which advertisement media uses to its advantage.<sup>106</sup>

In similar fashion, African American men and white men are depicted differently in advertisements. While advertisers often portray white men as fitting the stereotype of the ideal man – “dominant, strong, successful, and sexually appealing,” – advertisers tend to depict African American men as “intimidating, aggressive, or even hostile.”<sup>107</sup> Advertisers also use an overabundance of African American men in advertisements that feature musicians and athletes.<sup>108</sup> The portrayal of African American men as intimidating and hostile is a direct reflection of Feagin’s white racial frame.

While the stereotypes found within advertisements clearly demonstrate the continuing strength of Feagin’s white racial frame, the advertisements geared towards African American audiences in *Essence* and *Jet* fluctuate between stage two and three of Clark’s four stages of media representation. The portrayals of African American individuals in the advertisements found in the magazines are full of stereotypes, but there are also African American individuals represented. Even in magazines targeted towards African Americans, media representation does not reach stage four, and it even occasionally falls to stage one where white individuals feature in advertisements instead of African Americans.

Hazell and Clark found that the number of white models had increased despite the intended audience being African Americans. An increase in white models necessarily decreases the number of African American models. The increase in white models also suggests a stronger reliance on the European standards of beauty, and thus undermines and

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<sup>106</sup> Hazell and Clark, “Race and Gender in the Media,” 6-10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 10.

undervalues African American beauty standards.<sup>109</sup> Hazell and Clark also noted that ads featuring African American models often depicted them segregated from white models and in stereotypical jobs.

In both *Essence* and *Jet*, advertisements featured models in familial roles, as mothers, wives, and husbands.<sup>110</sup> Most often, female models played roles such as community members or entertainers – especially singers and actresses – while male models played roles such as basketball players, boxers, and bodyguards.<sup>111</sup> The roles these models played, roles selected by the advertisers, is demonstrative of Clark’s second and third stages. In the stage of ridicule, only stereotypical images exist. The advertisements featuring African American models as matriarchs and sports stars, which are racial stereotypes, illustrate how subtle ridicule can be within the media. The advertisements that feature African American models as community members and bodyguards falls within Clark’s stage of protectors, where a modicum of respect is afforded to individuals who hold some level of authority within the community.

Other ads depicting African American models objectified the models by associating them with the advertised product, while advertisers portrayed white models as consumers of the product advertised. This is indicative of the continuation of negative racial stereotypes of African Americans, perpetuated and reinforced in the media through a variety of avenues, including advertisements.<sup>112</sup> In advertisements, the level of media representation hovers between stage two and three, though there were some attempts to reach towards Clark’s fourth stage of respect. By 2004, *Essence* and *Jet* had both started to include advertisements

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 18-19.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 19.

that depicted African American models outside of stereotypical or community roles, in roles of students, artists, and therapists.<sup>113</sup>

It could be argued that this is still firmly within stage three of media representation, however, as these are societal roles that are still afforded a modicum of authority within society. Students are valued because of their education, artists for their contribution to culture, and therapists for their expertise. Because these roles are outside those traditionally associated with authority figures and are not roles stereotypically associated with African Americans, it could also be argued that the media representation of African Americans is beginning to approach stage four, that of respect.

The problem with that, however, is that it creates the illusion of a level playing field, which is where Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism, especially that of abstract liberalism, proves their strength. It would be very easy for a white individual to argue that because African American models are featured in ads, that there is a level playing field between whites and African Americans. The frame of abstract liberalism deliberately redirects attention away from facts of racial inequality. Few white individuals would understand that racial inequality is demonstrated by the way that African American models are rarely featured alongside white individuals.

The frames of colorblind racism are less present within the article and are more present in the way that white individuals are prone to approach the information in Hazell and Clark's article. Wrestling with the structures of colorblind racism is hard for any white individual because colorblind racism is so insidiously packed into social structures that white individuals struggle to develop the capacity to see it let alone work through it. Philosopher

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 16.

and race scholar Charles Mills discusses how difficult this is in his book, *The Racial Contract* (1999). Mills defines the racial contract thusly:

The Racial Contract establishes a racial polity, a racial state, and a racial juridical system, where the status of whites and nonwhites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or custom. And the purpose of this state...is...specifically to maintain and reproduce this racial order, securing the privileges and advantages of the full white citizens and maintaining the subordination of nonwhites.<sup>114</sup>

Mills further explains that the logic required to sustain this contract is rather convoluted, and that is why it is so difficult for white individuals to understand racial issues. As he states,

The requirements of “objective” cognition, factual and moral, in a racial polity are in a sense more demanding in that officially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality. So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to *misinterpret* the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular.

*Thus, in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. Part of what it means to be constructed as “white” (the metamorphosis of the sociopolitical contract), part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully to become a white person (one imagines a ceremony with certificates attending the successful rite of passage: “Congratulations, you’re now an official white person!”), is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities.*<sup>115</sup>

Because of the insidious nature of white dominance, most white individuals cannot perceive it.

Due to difficulty seeing racial and social realities, Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of colorblind racism proved an invaluable tool of illustrating the racism embedded in social institutions that would otherwise seem to lack it. Within advertisements media, it would be easier to attribute segregation of white and African American models to advertiser bias

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 261. Kindle edition.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 330-331. Kindle edition.

instead of extent racial inequalities. It is in little rationalizations like this that abstract liberalism works to shift the blame from social inequalities to individual bias, and, in the process, disguise the reality of the racism that lies beneath those inequalities.

That is also true of Bonilla-Silva's other three frames of colorblind racism. The frame of naturalization occurs where differences caused by social inequalities are attributed to so-called natural differences between races. It would be easy for a white individual to claim that African American models are featured as entertainers or sports stars because stereotypical images suggest that there are more African American entertainers and sports stars than there are white individuals within those professions. How people are depicted in media advertisements has a profound impact on those viewing the advertisements. When African American models are portrayed in stereotypical roles, those advertisements help reinforce the racial status quo. White dominance is maintained, and the idea that natural differences exist between races and that those differences determine where someone stands in that racial hierarchy fuse into the frame of cultural racism.

Bonilla-Silva's final frame is, of course, the minimization of racism, and it runs throughout advertisement media just as seamlessly as it runs through all of society. Advertisers can easily make decisions based on racial ideologies they are completely unaware they hold. If it were possible to ask the advertisers who produced the ads in *Essence* and *Jet*, it is unlikely that they would say they purposefully chose to segregate African American and white models. It is far more likely that they would attribute their decisions to individual preference, not be aware of how prevalent the practice of segregation of models are within advertisement media, and continue to produce advertisements with no thoughts towards reducing racial inequality. That is far more likely when a white individual is the

person responsible for producing the advertisements. Since most advertisers are white, it is hard to speak for how nonwhite advertisers approach their work.

Overall, advertisement media demonstrates the prevalence of colorblind racism and how white racial dominance is maintained within the United States. The white racial frame operates in conjunction with colorblind racism so that the media representation of African Americans never reaches stage four of Clark's model. The stereotypes of African Americans contained within advertisement media ensure that whites have a consistent set of material to use in the application of the colorblind frames Bonilla-Silva describes. The reality of white racial dominance in the United States is clear to nonwhites and anti-racist whites, but, as Mills explains in *The Racial Contract*, the hegemonic racial polity is designed in a manner that purposefully makes it invisible to the majority of white individuals. .

### *Sports Media*

Sports media is similar to advertisement media, in that it portrays African Americans in a stereotypical light. Armondo R. Collins, the author of a chapter entitled "The Media Assault on the Black Male: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson" in the book *The Handbook of Research on Black Males* (2019) discuss how stereotypes of African American men permeate sports media. He states that prior to the image of the African American male as a "super predator" came the social construction of Jack Johnson. Collins argues that the media used Jack Johnson's public image to "solidify a narrative of black male marginality and criminality."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>Armondo R. Collins, "The Media Assault on the Black Male: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson" in *The Handbook of Research on Black Males* ed. Theodore S. Ransaw, C.P. Gause, and Richard Majors (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2019), 507.



The narrative began on the day that Jack Johnson became the first African American to win the world heavyweight boxing champion title, the day of December 26, 1908. Essentially an overnight success, Jack Johnson found himself thrust into the limelight of stardom and racially codified as a stand-in for all African American men; he essentially became the quintessential African American everyman (at least that was how the media portrayed him). Jack Johnson became an important figure in white history as well. According to Collins, “The white media used [Jack Johnson’s] masculinity to indict all African Americans in a manner that arguably has transcended time, effecting a postmodern racial narrative with adverse inter-and-intraracial life course outcomes for black males.”<sup>117</sup>

Because Jack Johnson catapulted to the world stage of a boxing championship, both whites and African Americans viewed his ability to compete as a positive for the boxing world. While the media depicts African American males as aggressive, aggression channeled through athletics has a positive impact since most individuals view sports as entertainment. Despite his rise to fame in the boxing world, Jack Johnson fell from grace as the media took hold of his public image and tarnished it, turning him into “a depraved savage intent on inflicting social damage to the sanctity of white womanhood.”<sup>118</sup>

Jack Johnson’s refusal to abide by the status quo raised ire among white elites, as he became known for his marriage to a white woman at a time when interracial marriage was socially—and often legally—prohibited.<sup>119</sup> Johnson’s marriage to a white woman outraged white elites, who often painted him as a “countercultural intruder.” Because Johnson was willing to disrupt the racial order, the elites and media worked together to turn Johnson’s

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 508.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 507-508.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 509.

image into one that the public could digest. His disruption of the racial order also made it easier for the media to vilify him and turn his image into one they could use to oppress other African Americans.

As Collins states, “It logically follows, then, that black masculinity played a part in the reproduction of white racist discourse in that the public construction of black masculinity represented a hauntingly dark silhouette conjuring fear for whites and nonwhites alike.”<sup>120</sup> In this way, the social construction of Jack Johnson in the eyes of the media and society suggested that Johnson and all men like him were a threat to whiteness; and, since Johnson had been depicted as an African American everyman, that meant all African American men.<sup>121</sup>

Collins argues that the rise and fall of Jack Johnson has served as a template for the destructive public image the media uses to delineate African American masculinity. The media uses a formula that reinforces the cultural stereotypes embedded in the Jack Johnson narrative. First, a talented African American becomes a superstar, often an athletic superstar, and the entire world showers him with fame. As the public becomes more invested in the African American superstar, they also become more invested in knowing about his private life. Once that happens, an information agent appears and uncovers a scandal that turns the African American superstar into a villain. His villainous nature is then attributed to racial characteristics, and the hero becomes a criminal who is escorted in police custody in the public eye, which serves to reinforce the stereotype of dangerous African American masculinity.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 509.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 509.

<sup>122</sup> Armondo R. Collins, “The Media Assault on the Black Male,” 510-511.

The depiction of African American men as dangerous and uncivilized harkens back to the colonial period and reinforces the white racial frame described by Feagin. In the era before the Civil War, the figure of Nat Turner captured the white fear of African American violence.<sup>123</sup> On August 21, 1831, Nathaniel Turner led a slave revolt in Southampton, Virginia that led to the death of nearly sixty whites.<sup>124</sup> The revolt ended by August 23, as most of the slaves who participated in the revolt had been captured or killed.<sup>125</sup> Turner himself evaded capture for two months, but regular manhunts led to his imprisonment and Southampton's court ordered Nat Turner's execution on November 11, 1831.<sup>126</sup>

While the Nat Turner revolt increased white fear of African American violence, the postwar period saw a rise of white fear towards African American victimization of white women and violation of the white racial order. During the Civil Rights Era, groups like the Black Panthers, the Deacons for Self-Defense, and individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X experienced both character assassinations and actual assassinations due to their unwillingness to continue supporting the white racial order. The media delineation of African American men often reduces them to "parasitical and predatory citizens reflective of the perceived disproportionate participation in countercultures that contradict mainstream society."<sup>127</sup> The media continues to depict African American men as dangerous and uncivilized, which then leads to the oppressive use of force against African American men by law enforcement personnel.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 510-511.

<sup>124</sup> Patrick H. Breen, "Nat Turner's Revolt: Rebellion and Response in Southampton County, Virginia," M.A. thesis, University of Georgia, 1994, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>127</sup> Armondo R. Collins, "The Media Assault on the Black Male," 512.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 511-512.

The media perpetuation of negative stereotypes of African American men reinforces the legacy of the white racial frame. African American men continue to be presented in the media as inferior and criminal, remonstrative of the colonial period when white elites considered African American men both inferior to whites and a threat to white dominance. As Collins argues, “The culture being produced in our society is strained through a history of violent racial inequality that seeks to mask its presence at every turn.”<sup>129</sup> The history of the American media and its racial constructions are largely built on the foundation of what came before it, and that racial frame is not one that lends itself to an easy dismantling process.<sup>130</sup>

The portrayal of African American males in sports media fluctuates between stage two – ridicule – and stage three, protectors. African Americans depicted as violent or as criminals are stereotypical images, as are those of African Americans as sports stars. It is not uncommon to see stories about African American sports stars who have been convicted of a crime; it is the Jack Johnson story retold. The narrative itself has become one favored by the media, as there is an odd fascination for stories that feature fallen celebrities and sports stars.

The frames of colorblind racism are easy to see here. African Americans can play sports, so there must be a level playing field, right? The very idea that African Americans are good at sports has become a microaggression in academic settings, where many African Americans are asked if they were admitted to college on a sports scholarship. Most whites who ask this are unaware of the racism embedded in the question itself; they do not realize that they are implying that African Americans are unintelligent and incapable of academic work.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 512.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 512.

<sup>131</sup> The discussion of African Americans, sports, and intelligence occurred during the “Sociology: Race and Ethnicity” class I took with Dr. Anastacia Schulhoff in 2018.

Naturalization and cultural racism fuse together so that differences between races found in sports are assumed to be natural. There are some stereotypes here that are easy to list. African Americans can jump higher than whites can; they can hit harder than whites can so are better at boxing/fighting; they are faster runners than whites are...etc. In many ways, the stereotypes around African American males have relegated them to sports, and, since sports are considered entertainment media in the United States, African American males are also relegated to entertainment. Whites have no problem with African Americans who are sports or entertainment professionals – after all, those professions do not pose a risk to the racial polity of the country. Unless, of course, they commit a crime. Then, they become entertainment in a different sense. It is still, in the end, all about entertainment. The enjoyment white individuals have in seeing an African American sports star turn into a criminal before their eyes echoes the enjoyment that whites found in attending lynchings during the Jim Crow era.

That statement would probably elicit many protests from white individuals, but it only takes a moment of consideration to identify the truth in it. Many African Americans were lynched during the Jim Crow era, and whites attended those lynchings like they were football games. Parents even wrote notes to excuse their students from classes so that they could attend the lynchings.<sup>132</sup> While parents may not write notes so students can watch criminal trials of African American sports stars, those trials still elicit morbid curiosity.

Whites who watch these trials often mutter confirmations to themselves, a “I knew that one was no good,” that is hard to misinterpret.<sup>133</sup> Such statements are racial confirmation

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<sup>132</sup> Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 93-112.

<sup>133</sup> I heard many of my relatives say these things growing up, and I understood pretty quickly that “that one” was a racial slur devoid of actual racial content.

bias in action. An African American sports star turning criminal is “proof” that African Americans are not trustworthy citizens; cultural racism reinforces colorblind racism. Individuals who say these things do not view themselves as racists or perceive anything racial about their comments. If asked, they would deny that they hold any sort of prejudice whatsoever towards individuals they are making racist remarks about. Minimizing the influence of racism, is, after all, critical to the maintenance of a racial polity built on white dominance and the pretense that it does not exist.

### *Reality Television*

The difficulty of dismantling white hegemony is best seen through the way that reality television shows perpetuate and reinforce the existing racial polity of the United States. Katrina E. Bell-Jordan examined three reality television shows to demonstrate the way that those shows construct race. She analyzed MTV’s *The Real World: Denver*, CBS’s *Survivor*, and FX network’s *Black-White* miniseries. In her analysis, Bell-Jordan found five similarities in the way these three Reality Television shows construed race.<sup>134</sup>

The five similarities that Bell-Jordan found between the three shows were that they 1) depicted race in a dramatic fashion by purposefully juxtaposing racially opposed perspectives, 2) promoted both inter- and intra-racial conflict, 3) supported the hegemony of white racial dominance by presenting African Americans as violent and angry individuals, 4) endorsed colorblind racism by privileging individual racism over societal racism, and 5) did not provide resolutions to the racial conflicts depicted on the shows.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Katrina E. Bell-Jordan, “*Black.White.* and a *Survivor* of *The Real World*: Constructions of Race on Reality TV,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 2008): 353-357.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

Of the three shows Bell-Jordan analyzed, the *Black-White* miniseries produced by R.J. Cutler on the FX network held the most promise of addressing racial issues. The premise of the documentary-style reality show requires that a white family and African American family swap lives to experience the social reality of race in a different way. While the premise of the show promised a unique social experiment, critics of the miniseries questioned the way producers sent the families into situations meant to inspire conflict. In addition, it was clear from the beginning of the show that the African American family was more racially aware than the white family – a reality that reflected the hegemonic racial structure of the United States.<sup>136</sup>

In a similar vein, the 2006 season of *Survivor: Cook Islands* demonstrated the racial hegemony of U.S. society. In the 2006 season, producer Mark Burnett divided the teams of *Survivor* into tribes based on their racial identities. The participants were assigned to four tribes—the “Hiki” tribe for African Americans, the “Puka” tribe for Asian Americans, the “Aitu” tribe for Latinx Americans, and the “Raro” tribe for white Americans.<sup>137</sup> As Bell-Jordan notes, “The structure of the game itself sets up the ethnic groups as *opponents*, thereby reinforcing the polarizing dynamic at the heart of each show.”<sup>138</sup>

Because the show purposefully pits racial groups against one another during the 2006 season, *Survivor: Cook Islands* depicts the four races as fundamentally different and in conflict with one another. By choosing to pit the racial groups against each other during the 2006 season, it is clear that the producer, Mark Burnett, subconsciously pulled elements from

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 356.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 356.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 360.

the white racial frame that depicts everyone nonwhite as a threat to whites and thus a threat to the white racial order.

In a similar vein to the other two shows Bell-Jordan analyzed, the 2006 season of *The Real World: Denver* depicts the centrality of the hegemonic racial order and the conflict it causes both interracial and intra-racially. The 2006 season contained two African American cast members, both male, who the producers depicted as having contrasting attitudes. Bell-Jordan references a scene where the two African American men, Stephen and Tyrie, are discussing which of the two of them are more acceptable. Tyrie says that Stephen is “uppity” while Stephen says that Tyrie is “hood,” and this rhetoric serves as a reinforcement of reductive thinking about African American men. The producers who chose to depict that moment to American audiences created the framing of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” African American masculinity.<sup>139</sup>

In another memorable scene in *The Real World: Denver*, Tyrie argues with his girlfriend, Jazelle, and the other housemates are all afraid that he is going to harm her. The episode where the argument starts ends at the beginning of the argument, while the preview for the episode after is entitled “Locked Up” and suggests that the argument between Tyrie and Jazelle turns so violent the police arrest him for his violent behavior. In actuality, the two of them take the argument outside and the Denver police happen to be parked outside the house. The police arrest Tyrie for being a public nuisance and disturbing the peace only after Tyrie urinates on the sidewalk. His arrest has nothing whatsoever to do with the argument he has with his girlfriend. By making the choice to frame Tyrie’s arrest in a manner that suggests he became too violent for society (despite the fact he never became violent), the

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 360.



producers of the show reproduced the hegemonic racial order and reinforced the white racial frame by construing an African American male as a societal threat.<sup>140</sup>

In these shows, African Americans are depicted as violent, aggressive, and threatening towards others. In Clark's four stages of media representation, African American males do not move much beyond stage two, that of ridicule, in their representation within reality television shows. Violence towards others is hinted at even when it does not occur, reinforcing the stereotype that African American men pose a threat to a white dominated society.

In one season of *Survivor*, African Americans are intentionally separated from other teams based on race, which easily demonstrates both the naturalization and cultural racism frames of colorblind racism. No matter how the individual members of each racialized team acted, those behaviors would have been ascribed to natural differences between the races rather than between the characteristics of individuals who made up each team. While it would be appropriate to judge a team dynamic based on the individuals present within the team, separating teams into races means that the teams were judged as race representatives instead of by team dynamics. This is perhaps the clearest example of the frame of cultural racism present in reality television, and it illustrates perfectly the insidious nature of colorblind racism.

Reality television shows are interesting because they hold a different dynamic to other types of media; they attempt to show real people in real situations. Ironically, while it seems that such shows would more readily engage with the problems of racism in both traditional and colorblind forms, they perhaps more readily illustrate those problems than

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 364.

deal with them. *Black.White* had a fantastic concept behind it – have an African American and white family switch lives for a day and experience those lives. Conceptually, it is brilliant. However, because whites minimize the reality of racism (that fourth frame of Bonilla-Silva’s), the practical application did not work for the show.

The African American family understood race and how to navigate around racial realities; they did not understand how to navigate around a life absent of the reality of race. In contrast, the white family understood how to navigate a life without ever considering race, but they had no understanding or ability to conceptualize navigating life with obstacles placed there simply because of their skin tone. The minimization of racism within white families makes it nearly impossible for white individuals to understand how African Americans and other nonwhite individuals traverse life. *Black.White*, as a show, poignantly demonstrates the reality of that.

The producers of all three reality shows tried to produce shows combating racial stereotypes and ended up reinforcing them. That is not surprising, once it is understood how deeply the hegemony of white racial dominance is embedded within U.S. society. *Black.White* meant to flip-flop the hegemony for two couples – it tried to be subversive but failed because the white family did not have enough understanding about racial realities to make a real effort to try to flip their life. *Survivor* tried to demonstrate through separating teams by race that races are equal and failed to do that, instead reinforcing stereotypes and playing right into the frame of cultural racism. *The Real World: Denver* featured two African American men who did not like each other, and their behavior demonstrated to viewers what was considered “proper” African American behavior in the character of Stephen and “improper” African American behavior in the character of Tyrie. All of these shows

reinforced the white racial polity of the U.S. through the stereotypes embedded in the white racial frame, the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans consistent with Clark's second stage of media representation, and the four frames of colorblind racism Bonilla-Silva defined.

### *News Media*

Turning to scholars who focused their analysis on the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina reveals the continuing strength of white racial dominance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hemant Shah, the Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, analyzed conservative news commentary about Hurricane Katrina. He explained that the reason he chose to focus on conservative news commentary was how effectively conservatives are in ensuring that the media relays their viewpoints and the strong influence that creates for conservatives in the public sphere. Because of this, conservative viewpoints are more salient and visible than liberal viewpoints when it comes to news coverage.<sup>141</sup>

Using textual analysis, Shah established that the conservative news media created a narrative of irrationality that prevented the African Americans who could not evacuate from the path of Hurricane Katrina from making rational decisions or engaging in responsible behavior. Three of the themes that Shah uncovered within this narrative were those of “a different breed,” “socio-cultural flaws, and unworthy victims.” Within the first theme of “a different breed,” Shah revealed that a variety of newspaper journalists used terms and phrases like “different breed,” “creatures,” “primitive,” and “law of the jungle” to evoke portrayals of African American residents of New Orleans as “distinct from the established community.” In

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<sup>141</sup> Hemant Shah, “Legitimizing Neglect: Race and Rationality in Conservative News Commentary about Hurricane Katrina.” *The Howard Journal of Communications*. Vol. 20 (2009): 3.

this way, journalists indulged in the portrayal of African American residents of New Orleans as eternally and permanently inferior to whites, evoking the white racial frame.<sup>142</sup>

In another analysis of the news media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, a team of scholars led by Samuel R. Sommers found that the journalists who covered Hurricane Katrina disproportionately associated African Americans with crime. The rhetoric used by journalists served to reinforce the message of African Americans as both racially inferior and prone to crime. In terms of language, journalists who covered Hurricane Katrina used the term “refugee” instead of the word “evacuee” until a controversy over the term occurred and news organizations stopped allowing the term “refugee” to be used to refer to survivors of the crisis.<sup>143</sup>

In response to the use of the word “refugee” to refer to survivors, Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton both offered scathing rebukes for using racially biased language that implied African Americans “were less than full citizens.”<sup>144</sup> Reverend Jesse Jackson told reporters, “It is racist to call American citizens refugees.”<sup>145</sup> Reverend Al Sharpton rejected the use of the term refugee because the word “gives the inference that [Katrina survivors] are not home citizens, taxpaying citizens, that are a victim of a catastrophe.”<sup>146</sup> In support of Jackson and Sharpton’s claims, a statistic analysis demonstrated that the word “refugee” was

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<sup>142</sup> Hemant Shah, “Legitimizing Neglect,” 8-9.

<sup>143</sup> Samuel R. Sommers, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Kristin N. Dukes, Negin Toosi, and Elsie J. Wang, “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2006): 39-41.

<sup>144</sup> As quoted in Sommers et. al., “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” 41.

<sup>145</sup> Reverend Jesse Jackson as quoted in Associated Press, “Calling Katrina Survivors ‘Refugees’ Stirs Debate,” *NBC News*, September 7, 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Reverend Al Sharpton as quoted in Jacob Gershman, “Storm’s Wake Includes Spat on ‘Refugee,’” *The New York Sun*, September 7, 2005.

68% more likely to appear in an article than the word “evacuee” when either term appeared within ten words of the words “poor” or “Black.”<sup>147</sup>

A second controversy surrounding language occurred in the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina when two separate news sources published images with two different captions that seemed primed for racial comparison. The photographers of both photos took the pictures for their respective news companies published in front of flooded grocery stores. One photograph depicted an African-American man wading through water up to his waist, carrying soft drinks and a garbage bag – the caption for this photo read “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store.”<sup>148</sup> The second photograph depicted a white couple carrying food and drinks through floodwaters with a caption that read: “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”<sup>149</sup>

While the captions themselves demonstrated a racialized use of language, the caption writers attempted to justify the reasoning behind the captions they wrote. The Associated Press, responsible for the publication of the image of the African American individual, had a spokesperson explain that the reporter who took the image saw the person enter the shop and take the items, which is why the reporter chose to use the term “looting.” In contrast, the photographer who took the picture of the white couple said that he legitimately believed that the white couple found the food and drink they were depicted carrying rather than having entered a store and looted it.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Sommers et. al., “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” 41.

<sup>148</sup> As quoted in Ibid., 42.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 43.

While these explanations seem sound enough, the reality is that people are racially primed due to the white racial frame that has been in operation since the inception of the United States. Because of that priming, the photographer who snapped the picture of the African American may have subconsciously associated the African American male with criminal behavior. In contrast, the photographer who took the picture of the white couple may have subconsciously chosen to give the white couple the benefit of the doubt rather than immediately associating them with the crime of looting.<sup>151</sup>

These associations demonstrate the stereotypes of African Americans in the white racial frame, specifically the stereotypes that depict African Americans as a threat. The photograph of the African American man as a looter also firmly places the media portrayal of African Americans in Hurricane Katrina in Clark's second stage of media representation, that of ridicule. Using a caption that called an African American man a "looter" with no evidence that looting had occurred ridicules African Americans and reinforces racial stereotypes.<sup>152</sup>

Of Bonilla-Silva's four frames of colorblind racism, the most prominent in the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina are those of naturalization and cultural racism. African American residents of Katrina were assumed to be criminals when they held food in their arms because they were near a store while white individuals holding food in their arms while near a store were assumed to have found the food floating in the river near them. The racism of that assumption may have never been questioned if two images featuring different captions had not been published at almost the same time. The photographers were different people, and each attributed their choice of caption to what they saw, not realizing that their

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 43-44.

<sup>152</sup> My assertion.

perception may have (and probably was) skewed by a racial bias that prefers minimizing racism to acknowledging it.

Colorblind racism emerged as the dominant racial structure of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has served the white racial hegemonic order because colorblind racism pretends that race has no relevance to social inequalities. The frames activated by colorblind racism weave an ahistorical fiction of a society where individualism and egalitarianism reign. All social institutions reinforce these frames, but perhaps none more so than the institution of mass media, whose primary producers use frames both consciously and subconsciously. Because frames are societally produced, it is imperative to understand the history of a location before analyzing its media. For this reason, the next chapter deals with the racial history of Flint, Michigan, and the water crisis that began there in 2014.

## Chapter Two

### The Racial Reality of Flint and the Water Crisis

Flint, Michigan has been a central site for the entanglement of activism and racism in the United States throughout its history. The activism of Flint residents ensured that the Water Crisis came to national attention in 2014, and activists continue to work today to keep the crisis in the national spotlight. Activism has been a historical legacy in Flint since the General Motors (GM) sit-down strike of 1936-1937. In the case of the GM strike, what drove the community to action was the dangerous work conditions within the factories that led Genora (Johnson) Dillinger to assert that a common phrase heard in Flint about GM plants was “Once you pass the gates of General Motors, forget about the United States Constitution.”<sup>153</sup> Dillinger explained:

Workers had no rights when they entered that plant. If a foreman didn't like the way you parted your hair - or whatever he didn't like about you - you may have looked at him the wrong way, or said something that rubbed him the wrong way - he could fire you. No recourse, no nothing. And practically all foremen expected workers to bring them turkeys on Thanksgiving and gifts for Christmas and repair their motor cars and even paint their houses. The workers were kept intimidated because if they didn't comply with what the foreman told them to do, they would lose their jobs and their families would stare. You can see what a feeling of slavery and domination workers felt inside the GM plants.<sup>154</sup>

The forty-four-day strike resulted in GM's capitulation to the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) and the establishment of collective bargaining throughout the industrial sector of the United States.

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<sup>153</sup> As quoted in Susan Rosenthal, “History is a Weapon: Genora (Johnson) Dillinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Trike: as Told to Susan Rosenthal,” *History Is a Weapon*, 1981.

<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/dollflint.html>

<sup>154</sup> As quoted in Susan Rosenthal, “History is a Weapon: Genora (Johnson) Dillinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Trike: as Told to Susan Rosenthal.”



When GM began to close its plants in the 1980s, Flint citizens started losing jobs. Between 1980 and 1986, the closure of GM plants cost the city of Flint 30,000 jobs.<sup>155</sup> The loss of every factory job led to the loss of six more jobs within Flint.<sup>156</sup> Nethercott and Leighton, two organizers of the Labor History Project (LHP) in Flint (an oral history program focused on drawing the significance of the 1936-37 strike into the present), stated:

[The] loss of one-third of [Flint's] factory jobs was devastating....In the wreckage, small businesses shriveled and closed, while divorce, child abuse, alcoholism, and crime skyrocketed. The downtown became a virtual ghost-town, boarded up and flapping in the breeze. Housing prices plummeted and thousands of people could not meet their mortgages. Foreclosures and evictions occurred daily.<sup>157</sup>

In April 2014, Blake Thorne, a reporter for *The Flint Journal*, wrote an article that confirmed Genesee County, where Flint is located, was the third-fastest shrinking area in the United States.<sup>158</sup> That report confirmed that Genesee County lost 2.4 percent of its population between 2010 and 2013, and Doug Weiland, the Director of the Genesee Land County Bank, informed Thorne that there had already been 2,500 property foreclosures in 2014, including 1,900 in the city of Flint.<sup>159</sup> Since the 1980s, Flint has continued to lose jobs because of GM's decisions to close plants and move facilities out of the city. The loss of these jobs, in turn, has decimated the population of Flint.

The dwindling population of Flint is not the only historical legacy that Flint, Michigan must contend with today. Flint's history of racial segregation has played – and continues to play – a significant role. Peter J. Hammer, a Professor of Law at Wayne State University Law School and the Director of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

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<sup>155</sup>Shaun S. Nethercott and Neil O. Leighton, "Memory, Process and Performance," *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Autumn 1990): 48.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Blake Thorne, "Report: Genesee County is the Third-Fastest," *The Flint Journal*, April 23, 2014, *NewsBank: Access World News*.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

provided testimony before the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) on the Flint Water Crisis that outlined the racially segregated history of Flint. In that testimony, he divided the racial history of Flint into three eras – the 1920s-50s, the 1960s-70s, and the 1980s-present.<sup>160</sup>

In his testimony, Hammer stated that the era from the 1920s to 1950s featured nearly complete segregation with African Americans contained in the neighborhoods of Floral Park and St. John Street.<sup>161</sup> Floral Park, a neighborhood located south of downtown Flint, originally served as the homestead of slaves and free People of Color.<sup>162</sup> St. John Street, located in the northern part of Flint, stands surrounded by Buick factories and holds the highest proportion of African Americans and is the most impoverished section of Flint.<sup>163</sup>

In the United States, residential segregation did not truly exist before the beginning of the 20th century, as prior to World War I, whites and African Americans lived closely together.<sup>164</sup> From the 1910s and through the 1920s, as Southern demand for African American workers dwindled, the need for workers in the North escalated, and hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved North every year.<sup>165</sup> The whites in Northern cities viewed the incoming African Americans as social and economic threats, so they utilized all the resources at their disposal to force African Americans into ghettos and used life-threatening methods to punish African Americans who attempted to live anywhere outside the ghettos.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Peter J. Hammer, “The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism,” *Testimony before Michigan Civil Rights Commission Hearing on Flint Water Crisis*, July 14, 2016.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Dmitri Mehlhorn, “A Requiem for Blockbusting: Law, Economics, and Race-Based Real Estate Speculation,” *Fordham Law Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (1998): 1147.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 1147.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 1147.

In the 1900s, Flint's population exploded, and the African American population grew exponentially. In 1900, the entire population of Flint was 13,000 with under 300 African Americans, all of whom lived clustered around Thread Lake in the southeastern corner of the city (Floral Park).<sup>167</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, the African American population increased by 5,000 individuals at a rate of in-migration double that of white workers coming to the city to find jobs in the auto industry.<sup>168</sup>

After the Great Depression, wartime industries drew more African Americans, which led to a doubling of the African American population in Flint in the 1940s, a population that doubled again during the 1950s.<sup>169</sup> By 1960, the ratio of white residents to African-American residents was six to one.<sup>170</sup> Economic means largely determined where African Americans resided in Flint, as those who were relatively affluent could afford property in the community near Thread Lake while the poorer African Americans found themselves confined to the slums along the edges of the Buick factory in the northern part of the city (St. John Street).<sup>171</sup>

According to Hammer, the second era, running from the 1960s through the 1970s, saw in Flint the breach of racial containment, the rise of racialized panic and "blockbusting" among realtors, alongside an ever-increasing problem of white flight.<sup>172</sup> Blockbusting became a common practice among realtors in the 1950s and escalated in the 1960s; it refers to the practice of realtors buying homes from white middle-class urbanites and then reselling those same homes to African Americans at highly inflated prices.<sup>173</sup> This, in turn, led to

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<sup>167</sup> Pierce F. Lewis, "Impact of Negro Migration on the Electoral Geography of Flint, Michigan, 1932-1962: A Cartographic Analysis," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (March 1965): 3.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>172</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>173</sup> Mehlhorn, "A Requiem for Blockbusting: Law, Economics, and Race-Based Real Estate Speculation," 1145.

white flight. White flight is the practice of white individuals moving out of neighborhoods with a heavy African American presence.<sup>174</sup> The result of white flight is the transformation of both the demographic geography of the neighborhood and the neighborhood's economic status, as white individuals often take critical resources with them when they leave. The phenomenon of white flight serves as a method of hypersegregation between whites and African Americans and Flint is a hypersegregated Northern city.<sup>175</sup>

In addition to the problem of white flight, the African American population in Flint has always been highly segregated, and that segregation gave rise to the era of spatial racism that continues into the present day.<sup>176</sup> Hammer explains that spatial racism has been reproduced throughout Flint and the entirety of Genesee County.<sup>177</sup> In Flint, that is made apparent by the fact that the entire city of Flint consists of only the two historically African American neighborhoods, Floral Park and St. John Street.<sup>178</sup>

In the 1960s, Flint attempted to solve the issue of spatial racism by engaging in clearance projects of both the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods.<sup>179</sup> The clearance of the Floral Park neighborhood resulted in the creation of the 475 freeway interchange, while the clearance of the St. John neighborhood saw the creation of an industrial park that largely went unused.<sup>180</sup> In addition, Flint attempted to relocate residents of the two neighborhoods to integrated areas, which led to panic and escalated the problems of white flight.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>175</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

The increase of white flight led to a sharp decrease of population in the city. As Highsmith explained, “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% African American.”<sup>182</sup> White homeowners fled the city, which led to an abrupt increase in empty houses, and, by 1979, around 10% of the houses in Flint were vacant.<sup>183</sup>

The third era of spatial racism that Hammer documents in his testimony to the MCRC spans the period from the 1980s to the present day. Much of the spatial racism in Flint originated from the white flight of the 1960s, increased in the 1970s, and, by the 1980s, had turned Flint into a majority minority city.<sup>184</sup> Between 1970 and 1980, the city of Flint lost 17.4% of its population, decreasing from 193,317 residents in 1970 to 159,611 by 1980.<sup>185</sup> Although the total population of Flint declined between 1970 and 1980, the African American population increased, rising from 54,237 residents in 1970 to 66,134 in 1980; the African American population then increased further by 1990 to 67,485 residents.<sup>186</sup> In contrast, the white population in 1980 decreased from a total of 138,065 residents to a total of 69,788 by 1990.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Andrew Highsmith, “Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan,” PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009, 497.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>184</sup> Joseph Dardin, Linda Jones, and Julianne Price, “Ethnographic Evaluation of the Behavioral Causes of Undercount in a Black Ghetto of Flint, Michigan,” *Ethnographic Evaluation of the 1990 Decennial Census Report #24*, Bureau of the Census, 1990, 1.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

The spatial racism experienced in Flint led to drastic revenue reductions in the city of Flint between the years of 2006 and 2012.<sup>188</sup> The revenue from property tax decreased by 33% (down to \$8.3 million from \$12.5 million), the revenue from tax revenue decreased by 39% (down to \$12 million from \$19.7 million), and state revenue sharing decreased by 61% (down to \$7.9 million from \$20 million).<sup>189</sup> The rapid decrease in revenue led to the installation of emergency management in Flint.

Emergency management, introduced by the state of Michigan in the 1988 Public Act (PA) 101 and followed in 1990 by Public Act 72, allows the state of Michigan to install Emergency Financial Managers (EFMs) in distressed municipalities.<sup>190</sup> In 2011, Governor Rick Snyder approved Public Act 4, making changes to PA 72 that widened the management authority allotted to EFMs the state appointed.<sup>191</sup> The wide authority granted to EFMs under PA 4 allowed them to break union contracts and override decisions made by elected leaders; for this reason, it prompted public outcry and was repealed.<sup>192</sup>

Immediately after the repeal of PA 4, PA 436 took its place and became active in 2013.<sup>193</sup> While PA 436 still gives broad power to EFMs, it offers municipalities four options when a city is faced with a financial crisis as determined by the state of Michigan.<sup>194</sup> A city may choose to install an EFM, file for bankruptcy, pursue mediation, or reach a consent agreement between the state and the city detailing a plan of action for resolving the crisis.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Shu Wang and Andrew Cosby, "Emergency Managers in Michigan: Just What the Doctor Ordered?" *Michigan Applied Public Policy Brief*, Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, n.d., 3.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

The collapse of revenue in Flint between 2006 and 2012 indicated a state of fiscal distress, and Flint acquired Michael Brown as an EFM in 2012. According to Hammer, the choice to turn to Emergency Management was “a fatally misguided response to spatial-structural racism” that “created the preconditions for the Flint Water Crisis.”<sup>196</sup> Before the repeal of PA 4, the state of Michigan appointed an EFM to Flint, foregoing the necessity to present the four options for managing financial crises outlined in PA 436 to the city.<sup>197</sup> Many activists have blamed the EFM law as the reason for the Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014, and the law itself is under review in federal court; the plaintiffs contend that the law disproportionately impacts African American communities and upholds a legacy of systemic racism.<sup>198</sup>

The Flint Water Crisis began in 2014, when Flint started using the Flint River as its main water source with the intention of switching to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) after its completion. By 2014, Genesee County and Flint had invested \$220 million in bonds to finance their move away from DWSD and towards the KWA, which had the expected completion date of 2016.<sup>199</sup> City officials, under the supervision of Darnell Earley, the EFM, decided to switch to the Flint River in the interim as a cost-saving measure for both Flint and its residents due to exorbitant monthly water bills imposed by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD).<sup>200</sup> Water bills from the DWSD had risen around 11% per year from 2009 to 2013, which meant residents had seen their water bills rise nearly 50%

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<sup>196</sup> Hammer, “The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing and Spatial-Structural Racism.”

<sup>197</sup> Kristin Longley, “Flint Emergency: Timeline of State Takeover,” *MLive*, December 1, 2012.

<sup>198</sup> Oona Goodin-Smith, “Flint’s History of Emergency Management and How it Got to Financial Freedom,” *MLive*, May 20, 2019.

<sup>199</sup> Caitlin Devitt, “Michigan Deal Finances Flint Breakaway from Detroit Water,” *The Bond Buyer*, March 26, 2014.

<sup>200</sup> Anna Clark, *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2018), 14-15.

within the space of four years; to make matters worse, the cost of water was expected to continue to increase.<sup>201</sup>

Flint's decision to stop receiving water from the DWSD and turn to the Flint River catalyzed an environmental disaster. The city turned to using the Flint River as its main source of water in April 2014. Government officials and media representatives "gathered at the city's water treatment plant on the northeast side of town to commemorate the switch of Flint's municipal water source."<sup>202</sup> Mayor Dayne Walling led those present in a toast, and one councilman, Joshua Freeman, said that the water tasted like water, which seemed to be a portent of good tidings.<sup>203</sup> Perhaps it would have been, if the government officials had ensured that all of the environmental laws were followed. Instead, a critical environmental law that requires water treatment plants to implement corrosion control went ignored and unenforced, and the toxin-filled water poisoned the entire city.<sup>204</sup>

Less than a month after the switch, residents of Flint began noticing changes in the quality of their water. One resident, Bethany Hazard, said that the water coming out of her tap was "murky and foamy."<sup>205</sup> A cancer survivor with limited income, her water and sewer bill amounted to \$90 a month, but she started buying bottled water when she noticed the changes in the water coming from her faucet.<sup>206</sup> The councilman who had toasted the water at the ceremony to shut off Detroit water, Joshua Freeman, had noticed a stronger chlorine

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<sup>201</sup> Devitt, "Michigan Deal Finances Flint Breakaway from Detroit Water."

<sup>202</sup> Pauli, *Flint Fights Back*, 1.

<sup>203</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 13-14.

<sup>204</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 33-38.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*



smell from the water in his home but was otherwise confident that the water was safe to drink.<sup>207</sup>

The state's response to the concern of Flint residents was to tell them that the river water had a higher hardness quality than the lake water they had used previously, and that the hardness of the water might require more use of soap and detergent for water-based chores.<sup>208</sup> An engineer from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), Michael Prsyby, stated that while the initial reports from the first five days of using the river showed residual levels of chlorine and bacteria, the levels found were well within the standards of the state.<sup>209</sup>

By June 2014, multiple residents had come forward with complaints about the water, especially about the discoloration of the water.<sup>210</sup> In response to those complaints, Flint flushed fire hydrants in an attempt to force the discolored water out of the system.<sup>211</sup> Mike Prsyby stated in an email that "the discoloration appears to have been caused by unauthorized drafting of water from fire hydrants in these areas for street sweeping activities," and assured Flint residents that Flint and the Department of Public Works in the city would stop using that method for street sweeping.<sup>212</sup> Flint officials also said that while residents might see

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<sup>207</sup> Ron Fonger, "State Says Flint River Water Meets All Standards but More than Twice the Hardness of Lake Water," *MLive*, May 23, 2014.

<sup>208</sup> Fonger, "State Says Flint River Water Meets All Standards." The hardness of water is dependent upon the type of minerals found in the water and is usually caused by the presence of compounds of calcium, magnesium, and a variety of metals. While hard water can require a bit more soap to form a lather, it does not require tons more soap than soft water. Hazard's comments in this article about needing to use tons more soap to create a lather should have served as a warning sign to water officials especially when difficulty with getting soap to lather combined with murky water coming from her tap. Her early decision to switch to bottled water may have saved her life or at the very least prevented further health complications in an individual who had already survived cancer.

<sup>209</sup> Fonger, "State Says Flint River Water Meets All Standards."

<sup>210</sup> Ryan Felton, "Flint Residents Raise Concerns over Discolored Water," *Detroit Metro Times*, August 13, 2014.

<sup>211</sup> Ron Fonger, "Flint Starting to Flush Out 'Discolored' Drinking Water with Hydrant Releases," *MLive*, July 30, 2014.

<sup>212</sup> Mike Prsyby as quoted in Felton, "Flint Residents Raise Concerns over Discolored Water."

increased cloudiness in their water due to the discoloration they claimed was caused by unauthorized hydrant use, the water was safe to drink.<sup>213</sup> These official statements silenced the voices of Flint residents clamoring for answers for why their water smelled and tasted wrong, but it would take several more months for the city to acknowledge that the water was deadly.

Before the government delivered official notice of the poisonous water to Flint residents, there were several worrisome events concerning the water. By the end of September in 2014, Flint had issued three boil advisory notices in the span of three weeks.<sup>214</sup> The first notice, delivered on August 14, informed residents in the western side of Flint that *E. coli*, a fecal coliform bacteria, had been detected in the water and advised all residents to either boil water for one minute before using it or purchase bottled water until the issue was resolved.<sup>215</sup> Because *E. coli* is a bacteria that enters water when animal or human feces contaminates the water, it is not unusual for *E. coli* to appear in drinking water about three times in any given year.<sup>216</sup> A boil advisory is standard procedure when the presence of *E. coli* is detected in drinking water, and follow-up tests are performed until the water tests negative for the bacteria. Flint performed these tests and the results showed that the water was negative for *E. coli* but positive for total coliforms (which can include *E. coli*), so the city kept the boil advisory in place for four days.<sup>217</sup>

The second boil advisory notice appeared on September 5th in a different area of the city that included Civic Park and the campus of Kettering University.<sup>218</sup> The cause, again,

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<sup>213</sup> Fonger, “Flint Starting to Flush Out ‘Discolored’ Drinking Water with Hydrant Releases.”

<sup>214</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 40-41.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

was the presence of total coliform bacteria.<sup>219</sup> The third boil advisory, issued on September 6th, covered both Civic Park and part of the west side of the city; the cause was total coliform bacteria.<sup>220</sup> At this point, the fact the city had a problem with bacteria in the water was evident, as three advisories issued over three weeks reached further and further into the city of Flint, indicating a structural weakness.<sup>221</sup> The EFM, Darnell Earley, stated that the problem was solely structural and that there was no threat to the safety of Flint residents.<sup>222</sup>

Despite the city's assurance that the water was fine, GM announced in October 2014 that they had negotiated a switch away from the Flint River back to the DWSD through the Flint Township suburb who planned to stay with the DWSD until the KWA reached completion.<sup>223</sup> The decision to switch off the Flint River followed GM's discovery that the river water was rusting engine parts. Before GM made the switch back to the DWSD, they tried several methods to engineer harm caused by the water away from the parts. GM tried a costly reverse osmosis technique; they also tried to dilute it with Detroit water. Neither method worked, and the company's daily need of 75,000 gallons of water forced them to negotiate a switch to the DWSD to ensure operations could continue.<sup>224</sup>

The news of GM's decision to switch from the Flint River to the DWSD triggered alarm in Flint citizens. One resident, a sixty-year old blind homeowner named Jan Burgess, filed a complaint through the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) website. In that complaint, she explained that people in Flint were being forced to rely on bottled water or purification systems because the water coming from the tap was not safe for daily chores,

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

drinking, or giving to pets. Burgess also mentioned the reality of the economic depression of Flint, explaining that many of the poorest people of Flint could not afford to rely on bottled water and thus had no choice but to rely on the unsafe river water. Individuals living in the denser areas of Flint and those with higher incomes living in the better kept neighborhoods rarely saw anything but clear water emerge from their tap. Conversely, individuals who lived in the most dilapidated sections of the city were the first to notice the murky quality of the water, and they were the first people exposed to the toxins found within the water.<sup>225</sup>

The illegal actions of the Flint government, MDEQ, and the EPA may have gone unnoticed and unchecked if not for the actions of concerned mothers. Two women, Melissa Mays and LeAnne Walters, on separate sides of the Flint, began seeing adverse health effects of the river water on their children.<sup>226</sup> In July 2014, Melissa Mays noticed that the water quality of her tap water had changed. Her three sons would often run screaming through the house to alert her that the water in the bathtub had turned yellow. In addition to the odd color, the smell of “rotten eggs, dirt, or bleach,” often emanated from the water.<sup>227</sup> Mays thought that the odd days with the water would disappear as the government fully adjusted to using the new water system. She trusted the government to tell her the truth about her water, and she and her children paid the price for the government’s illegal actions.<sup>228</sup>

In an interview with Pauli, the author of *Flint Fights Back*, Mays explained that the mild concern she had over the water escalated into pure alarm when her and her family started developing weird health problems. She told Pauli that just making contact with the water often caused their skin to break out in rashes “that felt ‘like a chemical burn’ and were

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>226</sup> Pauli, *Flint Fights Back*, 127-131.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

‘unresponsive to eczema cream.’”<sup>229</sup> In addition to the rashes, Mays watched her sons hair degrade in quality from silky smooth to “‘rough and wiry;” her own hair started falling out in the shower as well.<sup>230</sup> The family cat also dealt with ramifications from the water, as the cat often lost chunks of fur whenever anyone petted it.<sup>231</sup>

By September, Mays’s family no longer drank the water from the tap, but they still used it for cooking and showering. Like all Flint residents at the time, Mays had no idea that lead in the water was slowly poisoning her family or that boiling the water actually exacerbated the problem.<sup>232</sup> She did, however, know that the water was the culprit of the weird health issues she and her family experienced. The following excerpt from Pauli’s *Flint Fights Back* underscores the health problems that plagued the Mays family even after they stopped drinking the water:

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 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. 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.<sup>233</sup>

Health concerns like these became a common refrain among Flint residents, and the city continued to refuse to take the concerns of their citizens seriously.

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<sup>229</sup> Melissa Mays as quoted in Pauli, *Flint Fights Back*, 127.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 127.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 128. Quotes come from Pauli’s interview with Mays.

Like Mays, Walter became aware that the water was a problem when it began affecting her family. Several members of the Walters family experienced health problems. Kaylie lost clumps of hair in the shower, while LeAnne lost all her eyelashes. Her fourteen-year-old son, J.D., became so ill in November 2014 that he missed a month of school. The medical tests all proved inconclusive, though doctors speculated he had some type of cancer. J.D. eventually began to recover, but as his symptoms receded, the tap water at the Walters house turned brown.<sup>234</sup> The filtration system she and her husband installed during a 2011 home renovation stopped working. Even switching out filter cartridges failed to improve the water's color, and the pipes, installed in 2011, did not explain the discoloration. At the point, the Walters knew the water was the problem, and they switched to using bottled water in December 2014.<sup>235</sup>

In January 2015, Flint released a notice informing residents that they had detected levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHMs) that exceeded federal limits.<sup>236</sup> Excess TTHMs in the water violated the Safe Water Drinking Act, so Flint officials legally had to inform the residents about the presence of excess TTHMs in the water (TTHMs are known carcinogens). Even then, the city downplayed the threat level, claiming that elevated TTHM levels did not constitute an emergency and that they were taking the necessary steps to resolve the issue.<sup>237</sup> After the announcement of elevated TTHM levels, Councilman Eric Mays called a meeting to discuss the water problem at the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 65. TTHMs “is a group of four colorless, odorless chemical compounds that are a by-product of the chlorine disinfectant process.”

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 67.

LeAnne Walters attended the meeting. Her family brought bottles of water collected from their kitchen sink to demonstrate the discoloration of the water. She showed the water to EFM Jerry Ambrose. Ambrose accused Walters of lying about where the water had come from, saying that it could not be water from her house. He refused to inspect the water samples, as did Mike Prsyby of the MDEQ, who was also in attendance. Although Walters lodged a formal complaint, no one from the city appeared at her house to investigate until February 2015, when the compromised nature of her son's immune system bumped her up the waiting list. At that point, Michael Glasgow came to her house to investigate her complaint.<sup>239</sup>

Michael Glasgow tested the water and provided Walters with the results. Her water had such elevated levels of iron in it that the testing instruments could not adequately measure the amount. The iron levels had turned the water brown, and the presence of iron in the water led to Glasgow's decision to have Walters collect samples that he then tested for lead and copper. As soon as the results of those tests were available, he made a frantic phone call to Walters and instructed her to keep her family from drinking the water. She visited his office the next day, and he walked her through the lab report which showed that her water contained lead levels of 104 parts of lead per billion parts of water (ppb). Glasgow explained the federal Lead and Copper Rule, a regulation that prohibits the level of lead in water from rising above 15 ppb.<sup>240</sup>

Upon learning this, Walters reached out to Miguel Del Toral, a regulations manager in the drinking water division of the EPA. In response to Walters's concerns, Del Toral's office contacted the MDEQ to ascertain that Flint had optimal corrosion control treatments in

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

place – treatments mandated by the EPA. Stephen Busch of MDEQ replied to that email, and he stated that Flint had corrosion control, but he failed to outline what corrosion treatments the water plant in Flint was using. Busch informed both Del Toral and Jennifer Crooks, another EPA employee, that the high levels of lead in Walters’s home were caused by issues with indoor plumbing. This, in turn, implied that the elevated level of lead was only an issue in a single Flint residence.<sup>241</sup>

Del Toral eventually traveled to Flint in person to test Walters’s water, as Walters’s plumbing – installed in 2011 – could not be the source of the high lead levels. As Del Toral turned to trying to convince the EPA a problem existed in Flint, Walters turned to Marc Edwards.<sup>242</sup> LeAnne Walters followed his instructions and collected thirty water samples from her home using the methods he outlined.<sup>243</sup> The results came a week later, and Walters learned the average lead level in her home was 2000 ppb with the lowest sample containing a level of 300 ppb and the highest sample containing a sample of 13,000 ppb – anything above 5,000 ppb the EPA regards as toxic waste. These results informed both Marc Edwards and Miguel Del Toral that Flint was not using corrosion control, Pat Cook of MDEQ confirmed; he told Del Toral that the last time Flint had used corrosion control pre-dated the switch to the Flint River.<sup>244</sup>

Through tests conducted at the Walters’s residence and a few other homes in Flint, Del Toral became convinced that enough evidence existed to draft an interim report and send it to the upper management of the EPA. He documented the water difficulties Flint had faced since the switch to the Flint River, including the boil advisories issued for the presence of *E.*

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.



*coli* and the level of excess TTHMs in the water. He also included the results of the lead contamination found in the Walters's home. In the report, Del Toral outright stated that Flint failed to provide necessary mitigation measures for lead and copper in the water, neatly sidestepping the contradictory information he had received about the presence of corrosion control treatment at the Flint water plant.

Del Toral sent the report to several individuals. Though he originally addressed it to Tom Poy, the head of the Chicago branch of the groundwater and drinking water division of the EPA, he also copied seven others on the report. Those seven included four MDEQ employees – Pat Cook, Stephen Busch, Mike Prsyby, and Liane Shekter-Smith (the head of the drinking water division) – two water experts employed by the EPA, and Marc Edwards. Del Toral also provided Walters with a copy of the report when she requested one, and she shared that report with journalist Curt Guyette, who broke the story about the presence of lead in Flint's water.<sup>245</sup>

Even after Guyette broke the story, Flint officials worked hard to deny any wrongdoing. It was not until Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a Flint pediatrician, initiated investigation into the blood lead levels of the children of Flint that the city would eventually be forced to acknowledge the truth of the crisis and their role in creating it. Her peer-reviewed research into the blood lead levels of Flint's children provided the final piece of incontrovertible evidence Flint residents needed to force the city into telling them the truth about their water.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 110-112.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha first learned of the lead present in Flint tap water through her high school friend and environmental engineer, Elin Betanzo.<sup>246</sup> During a barbecue get-together at Dr. Hanna-Attisha's home, Elin initiated a conversation about Flint's water. At the time, Dr. Hanna-Attisha was under the impression that the state of Michigan was in compliance with environmental regulations. She had even reassured patients that came into the clinic where she worked that the water was safe to drink, safe to mix with powdered formula for infants.<sup>247</sup>

When Erin informed Dr. Hanna-Attisha of Miguel Del Toral's report, explaining that the report confirmed high levels of lead present in Flint's water, she was immediately horrified at both the state's neglect of its citizenry and the role she had inadvertently played in exacerbating that harm through the medical advice she had offered parents. Dr. Hanna-Attisha expressed her horror at the reality of lead in the water by discussing her knowledge of the impact of lead in this excerpt from her memoir of the early days of the crisis:

I know lead. All pediatricians know lead. It's a powerful, well-studied neurotoxin that disrupts brain development. There is truly no safe level (40). Lead exposure is known as a silent epidemic because there are no immediate signs of it...A significant amount of lead exposure can cause swelling of the brain, headaches, lethargy, anemia, dizziness, muscular paralysis, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and abdominal pain. It can affect vision and hearing, and in extreme cases, it can cause kidney failure, coma, and death.... Brain scans show that lead exposure in children causes an erosion of gray matter that makes it harder to pay attention, regulate emotions, and control impulses. It also affects the white matter of a child's brain, which acts as a conduit for signals within the central nervous system. As lead-poisoned kids reach their teens, they have a much harder time in school and are more likely to drop out. As they reach their twenties, research suggests, they may be more likely to commit violent crime. Lead is even suspected to have an epigenetic or multigenerational impact by changing a child's DNA. It's really science-fiction comic-book stuff, like the X-Men, except the victims aren't getting superpowers. Their powers are being taken away.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Mona Hanna-Attisha, *What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance and Hope in an American City*, (New York: One World, 2018), 37.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-41.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-42.

Once Dr. Hanna-Attisha learned about the lead in Flint's water, she undertook the responsibility of proving that the city of Flint had poisoned its residents.

After months of avoidance from the Genesee County Health Department, Dr. Hanna-Attisha gathered information about the blood lead levels of children from the Hurley Children's Clinic both prior to and after the switch to the Flint River, and she submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) request to obtain information from other Hurley clinics.<sup>249</sup> The approval of that form provided the vital information she needed to conduct a county-wide study of the blood lead levels (bbls) present in the children of Flint under five years of age.<sup>250</sup> The findings of the study indicated that the significant level of increase in bbls in children could only be attributed to the switch to the Flint River water and the lack of corrosion control at Flint's water plant.<sup>251</sup> The results of the study were released at a press conference that alerted Flint residents to the presence of lead in the water and advised mothers to stop mixing infant formula with the tap water and pregnant mothers not to drink Flint's water.<sup>252</sup>

The day after the press conference, on September 25, 2015 (over a year after the switch to the Flint River), Flint officials issued a lead advisory warning to Flint residents.<sup>253</sup> Even after issuing the lead advisory, however, Flint officials claimed that the city was not in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act. They also said they released the lead advisory "as

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 141-143. Because Dr. Hanna-Attisha was the director of the residency program at the Hurley Children's Clinic, she did not need IRB approval to look at data from her own patients.

<sup>250</sup> Mona Hanna-Attisha, Jenny LaChance, Richard Casey Sadler, and Allison Champney Schnepf, "Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Children Associated with the Flint Drinking Water Crisis: A Spatial Analysis of Risk and Public Health Response," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (February 2016): 283-290.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>252</sup> Ron Fonger, "Elevated Lead Found in More Flint Kids After Water Switch, Study Says," *MLive*, September 24, 2015.

<sup>253</sup> Ron Fonger, "Flint Makes Lead Advisory Official, Suggests Water Filters and Flushing," *MLive*, September 25, 2015.

part of a public awareness campaign to ensure that everyone takes note that no level of lead is considered safe.”<sup>254</sup> Flint officials also informed residents that they could have their water tested free of charge for lead, since at least 50% of the homes in Flint contained lead service lines.<sup>255</sup> They made no mention of the lack of corrosion control treatment at the Flint water plant, which shored up the narrative they had already built of admitting to the existence of a problem and then downplaying its threat level.

In 2017, the MCRC issued a report entitled, “The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Eyes of Flint,” that definitively proved that environmental injustice had occurred. As the MCRC explained, environmental justice “requires that all people and communities receive the equal protection of environmental and public health laws, and should have an equal and meaningful voice in decisions related to their environment.”<sup>256</sup> According to the findings of the report, the citizens of Flint did not have a voice in decisions made about their environment, and they were not afforded equal protection of environmental and public health laws. The MCRC stated outright that race was a factor in the Flint Water Crisis due to the racialized structure of public policy that forced undue hardship on a community whose population primarily consists of People of Color.<sup>257</sup>

The MCRC report contains a section that discusses structural racism and how it differs from personal racism; it is more insidious and difficult to pinpoint because it is often both invisible and imbedded in institutions that feature prominently in everyday life.<sup>258</sup> One of those institutions is the media, which the MCRC stated provided only minimal coverage of

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<sup>254</sup> As quoted in Fonger, “Flint Makes Lead Advisory Official.”

<sup>255</sup> Fonger, “Flint Makes Lead Advisory Official.”

<sup>256</sup> Michigan Civil Rights Commission, *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Eyes of Flint*, (MCRC 2017), 4.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

the Flint Water crisis and asked if the coverage of the event would have differed if the crisis had occurred in a different city.<sup>259</sup> The MCRC also acknowledged that the media workers who provided coverage of the event would “doubtlessly insist that race played no part in their decision making.”<sup>260</sup>

As the MCRC report states, “Research into how the human brain works suggests that race played a role in the Flint Water Crisis precisely *because* it was never considered. That it is so deeply entrenched in the very fiber of society that we have normalized what occurs in communities that are ‘primarily of color’ and poor.”<sup>261</sup> Media professionals are not immune to the racism that undergirds the structures of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. For that reason, understanding how the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis reinforces white dominance through the colorblind paradigm is imperative for unmasking the deeper hegemonic racial structures embedded within U.S. social institutions, particularly the institution of media.

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 14.

## Chapter Three

### The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to the Flint Water Crisis

The institution of media is pervasive in the United States, and every American receives their news from some form of media outlet. A report released by the Pew Research Center in 2016, “The Modern News Consumer,” found that 46% of American adults preferred to receive their news through television, while 35% prefer to read news and 17% prefer to listen to it.<sup>262</sup> Of those who prefer to read the news, 38% of them read the news online – 28% of readers use websites or news apps, while 18% of them receive their news from social media platforms.<sup>263</sup> However people choose to receive their news, the reality is that the majority of Americans watch, read, or listen to the news on a daily basis.

Because virtually everyone has access to the news media, the way that the media covers events is crucial to understanding how the events unfolded, and the coverage also provides insight into the cultural stereotypes and norms of the time period examined. Few scholars have examined the news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis, a task that is made more difficult because the crisis itself has not fully been resolved.<sup>264</sup> To help offset that difficulty, I only analyzed coverage of the event for the period from April 2014 to January 2016. I chose that period because politicians vying for the White House in 2016 began using the crisis in attempts to sway citizens to their platforms. The political use of crises bears further investigation, but it is beyond the scope of this work.

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<sup>262</sup> Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Elisa Shearer, “The Modern News Consumer: News Attitudes and Practices in the Digital Era,” *The Pew Research Center* (2016): 6.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>264</sup> Derrick Z. Jackson, “Environmental Justice? Unjust Coverage of the Flint Water Crisis,” *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy* (2017). Jackson’s work was the only scholarly analysis of media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis that I found during my research process.

The coverage of the Flint Water Crisis between April 2014 and January 2014 demonstrates how news media perpetuates and reinforces colorblind racism and thus serves as a mechanism that ensures the continuation of white racial hegemony in the United States. Using the three theories that, together, comprise the colorblind paradigm, illustrates that. Analyzing media coverage through any one of the three theories - Feagin's white racial frame, Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism, Clark's stages of media representation - provides a powerful analysis. It is, however, only in applying all three theories that the true strength of white racial hegemony within the media of the United States becomes so blatantly expressed that its reality cannot be ignored.

Feagin's conception of the white racial frame is especially relevant to the study of media, as his theory was formulated on an understanding of frames and how people use frames to shape the reality around them. The media uses frames to shape the stories they tell, and the frames used by the journalists and reporters who covered the Flint Water Crisis painted a narrative of the event that seamlessly used Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism to reinforce the white racial frame. Although it is impossible to determine whether or not the media workers intentionally used the frames of colorblind racism as they reported on the Flint Water Crisis, the reality is that those frames shaped the narrative that emerged from their coverage, regardless of their intentions.

The frames of colorblind racism, according to Bonilla-Silva, are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism detracts from issues of systemic racism by emphasizing individual responsibility to the point that individualism crowds out the concepts of collectivism and societally reproduced inequalities. The frame of naturalization works by suggesting that racial natural differences that exist

between racial groups are the cause of racial inequalities, while the frame of cultural racism suggests that the distinct characteristics of specific groups explain the standing those groups have in the social hierarchy. Finally, the frame of the minimization of racism posits that discrimination is a relic of the past and that racism no longer serves to disenfranchise minorities.<sup>265</sup>

Out of the four frames of colorblind racism that Bonilla-Silva describes, the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis from April 2014 through January 2016 primarily used the frames of abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism.<sup>266</sup> Where the frame of naturalization occurred, it occurred within articles where the cultural racism frame was predominant. The primary focus of the news media during these two years was the determination of who was to blame for the crisis. The focus on finding individuals to blame for the poisoning of an entire city evinced the presence of the frame of abstract liberalism. Within the frame of abstract liberalism, the focus on individual actions is so intense that collective and societally reproduced inequalities often go ignored.<sup>267</sup>

In the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis, there were a few specific individuals and organizations blamed for the crisis. The intense focus of the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis on where to assign blame and on the technical nature of how to fix the problem served as a reinforcement of the abstract liberalism frame of colorblind racism. The intensity of this narrative in the coverage of the crisis reinforced Feagin's white racial frame, as the white racial frame itself is an umbrella for all of the subframes that constitute a white

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<sup>265</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 12.

<sup>266</sup> April 2014 was the month that Flint switched from the Detroit Water Supply to the Flint River. The decision to only examine the media coverage of the crisis until the end of January 2016 was made because the focus shifted from the crisis itself to how the presidential candidates could use the crisis to fuel their campaign platforms. In addition, the city did not issue an official lead advisory until September 2015 despite the switch being made in April 2014.

<sup>267</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 74.



worldview of society that ignores the realities of systemic racism.<sup>268</sup> The consistent search for individuals and organizations to blame for the crisis detracted from the reality that systemic racism allowed circumstances to arise that resulted in the poisoning of Flint's water supply.

Several news articles featured calls for the resignation of individuals viewed as most responsible for the creation of the crisis. In October 2015, the Michigan Democratic Party issued a statement demanding the termination of Emergency Manager, Darnell Earley, the man who was in charge when the decision to switch to the Flint River as the town's water source was made.<sup>269</sup> The advocacy group Progress Michigan called for the termination of Dan Wyant, the Director of Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), in response to reports that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had warned both Wyant and the MDEQ about lead leaching into Flint's water pipes in February of 2015.<sup>270</sup> When confronted about the problem, Wyant claimed that the staff of the MDEQ applied the wrong standards of the Lead and Copper Rule, which in turn resulted in the lack of proper corrosion controls in the treatment of the water from the Flint River.<sup>271</sup> According to Wyant, the state used the standards of the Lead and Copper Rule for a city with populations of 50,000 or less instead of a city with a population of 100,000.<sup>272</sup>

Synder defended Dan Wyant and Liane Shekter Smith, the chief of MDEQ's Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance, by claiming that "the staff made a mistake in

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<sup>268</sup> Feagin, "The White Racial Frame," 12.

<sup>269</sup> Targeted News Service, "Michigan Dems: MDP Statement: Those Responsible for Flint Water Crisis Must Be Held Accountable," *Targeted News Service*, October 13, 2015.

<sup>270</sup> Progress Michigan, "Progress Michigan: MDEQ's Wyant Needs to Go," *Progress Michigan*, October 20, 2015.

<sup>271</sup> Melissa Nann Burke, "Congressman calls for EPA investigation into Flint water crisis," *The Detroit News*, October 22, 2015.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

terms of some of the classifications that really put a different set of criteria on it.”<sup>273</sup> To address the mistake made by MDEQ staff, Wyant reassigned Liane Shekter Smith and replaced her with the chief deputy of MDEQ’s Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance, Jim Sygo.<sup>274</sup> In contrast to Snyder’s defense of MDEQ staff, Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich said that the records that contained information about the MDEQ staff were ones that he found troubling, and he said it appeared that the MDEQ staff were more concerned about keeping their jobs than keeping the people of Flint safe.<sup>275</sup>

In response to Wyant’s statement that the MDEQ failed to use the correct standards for Flint in regards to the Lead and Copper Rule, The Michigan Democratic Party issued a statement calling for the immediate termination of Wyant and all other MDEQ employees.<sup>276</sup>

Brandon Dillon, the Chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, issued a scathing reprimand:

This was not an issue of experience and protocol. It is a question of competency and judgment. DEQ employees were not provided with the leadership and training necessary to do their jobs in this situation, and Mr. Wyant clearly lacks the judgment needed to do his.

You don’t get to learn on the job when it comes to the well-being of Michigan’s children and families. You may be able to fix the problem of Flint’s drinking water going forward, but the damage done to the health of thousands of Flint’s children is irreversible. For months, warnings from the EPA about the safety of Flint’s water system, sent directly to the DEQ, were repeatedly ignored. That’s not just a glitch in the system, it’s an institutional failure caused by incompetence and a lack of leadership.

Making sure things are done correctly from now on does not erase the negative effects from mistakes that were already made. If you put the lives of children of risk, you don’t get a do-over, and you certainly don’t get a second chance to do it again. Mr. Wyant, and everyone involved in the catastrophic decision-making involving Flint’s drinking water, should be removed from their jobs immediately. Governor Snyder has the power to do that and the responsibility to protect the citizens of Michigan. The questions of competency and judgement are now his to answer.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Chad Livengood and Jim Lynch. "Snyder defends staff on Flint crisis," *The Detroit News*, October 20, 2015.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> "Michigan: MDP Response to MDEQ Director Dan Wyant's Statement on Flint Water Crisis," *US Official News*, October 31, 2015.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

Eventually, in December of 2015, Dan Wyant resigned from his position.<sup>278</sup>

In October 2015, The Michigan Democratic Party had issued a second news release calling for the termination of Emergency Manager Darnell Earley in response to the statement he published that blamed “the victims of the Flint Water Crisis for his own poor decisions as emergency manager of Flint from September 2013 to January 2015.”<sup>279</sup> Earley wrote an op-ed for *The Detroit News*, where he stated, “[The switch to the Flint River] was a local decision that was made by local civic leaders. Anyone who says otherwise is being disingenuous for whatever reason.”<sup>280</sup>

The most adamant demand from Flint residents was the demand that Governor Rick Snyder resign from his position due to his mismanagement of the crisis. At one point, the political columnist Ron Fournier outlined how Governor Snyder’s liberal opponents had compared Snyder’s handling of the Flint water crisis to George W. Bush’s handling of Katrina in 2004.<sup>281</sup> When asked if he thought that the comparison was unfair, Governor Snyder’s response was, “No. It’s a disaster.”<sup>282</sup> When pressed to describe the leadership parallels between his handling of the Flint Water Crisis and George W. Bush’s handling of Hurricane Katrina, Governor Snyder refused to answer that question due to his lack of knowledge of all of the actions Bush had taken in response to the crisis caused by Hurricane Katrina.<sup>283</sup> In addition to his refusal to discuss the parallels between his management of the

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<sup>278</sup> The Technician, “Environmental Injustice Tastes Like Flint’s Water.” *The Technician: North Carolina State University, University Wire*. January 19, 2016.

<sup>279</sup> Targeted News Service, “Michigan Dems: MDP Chair Slams Earley Op/Ed; Reiterates Call for Snyder to Fire Former Flint EM,” *Targeted News Service*, October 27, 2015.

<sup>280</sup> Darnell Earley, “Column: Don’t Blame Emergency Manager for Flint Water Disaster,” *The Detroit News*, October 26, 2015.

<sup>281</sup> Newsbusters, “CBS: Gov. Snyder ‘Admits’ Flint Water Crisis ‘His Hurricane Katrina,” *Newsbusters*, January 19, 2016.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

Flint Water Crisis and George W. Bush's management of Hurricane Katrina, Governor Snyder also refused to resign as governor despite protestors who gathered outside his house on January 18, 2016 demanding his resignation.<sup>284</sup>

One MSNBC reporter asked Governor Snyder in a live interview if environmental racism had played a factor in the lead crisis, and Snyder's response was "Absolutely not."<sup>285</sup> The Governor instead said that the state was entirely to blame, and that was the reason he had taken responsibility and was working towards fixing the problem. In the 273 pages of emails related to the crisis, race and class are never mentioned. Despite the civil rights advocates and Flint residents linking the crisis to environmental racism, the government refused to acknowledge the role that racial disparity played in the creation of the crisis.<sup>286</sup> Like the government, the media shifted away from exploring the implications of systemic racial disparity in Flint and instead focused on trying to find specific individuals and organizations to blame. The narrow focus of the media coverage in determining who the culprits responsible for the crisis were illustrates the way the media used the frame of abstract liberalism to reinforce white racial hegemony.

In addition to the frame of abstract liberalism, the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis also demonstrates the frame of cultural racism, where a specific cultural group is blamed for societal inequities based on group characteristics. The op-ed that Earley wrote for *The Detroit News* blamed the city of Flint for the lead crisis. So did the 273 emails that Governor Rick Snyder eventually released after continual pressure from Flint residents that he release them under the Freedom of Information Act. When he finally did release the

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<sup>284</sup> "CBS: Gov. Snyder 'Admits' Flint Water Crisis 'His Hurricane Katrina.'"

<sup>285</sup> Bixby, Scott. "Michigan Governor Says Environmental Racism Not to Blame for Flint Water Crisis." *The Guardian*. January 22, 2016.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

emails in January 2016, the content of some of those emails proved that government officials viewed the crisis as a problem specific to Flint.<sup>287</sup>

One particular official, Synder's chief of staff Dennis Muchmore, wrote an email to Synder informing him that there were several officials in two agencies who believed that there were people in Flint trying to turn the crisis into "political football."<sup>288</sup> Muchmore claimed that the real responsibility for the crisis lay with Flint and the water delivery system within the city, as well as claiming that there were people in Flint purposefully looking to blame people for the water crisis instead of working to reduce anxiety among residents.<sup>289</sup> He also said that the departments involved were trying to shift responsibility for the crisis from the city of Flint to the state of Michigan.<sup>290</sup>

Perhaps the best example of a news article that illustrates the frame of cultural racism was the one released by *Dayton Daily News* on January 24, 2016, entitled, "Democrats in Michigan, D.C. Caused This Problem; FROM THE RIGHT."<sup>291</sup> The article reads as an acerbic attack on Democrats, and the Pew Research Center's report, "A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation (2015)" underscored that Democrats had an 80% advantage with African Americans over an 11% advantage held by the Republican party.<sup>292</sup> The scathing attack launched by the *Dayton Daily News* reporter (unnamed) is thus a politically disguised version of cultural racism. The summation at the end of the article reads as follows:

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<sup>287</sup> Mark Berman, "Michigan Authorities Debated 'The Real Responsibility' for Flint Water Crisis, Governor's Emails Show: Hundreds of Pages of Newly-Released Emails Show State Officials Debating Who is to Blame for the Flint, Mich., Water Crisis," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2016.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> Dana Ford, "5 Striking Emails on the Flint Water Crisis," *CNN*, January 20, 2016.

<sup>291</sup> "Democrats in Michigan, D.C. Caused This Problem: FROM THE RIGHT," *Dayton Daily News*, January 24, 2016.

<sup>292</sup> Pew Research Center, "A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education," *Pew Research Center*, April 7, 2015.

If you've followed Flint's history of nearly criminal misgovernance, you know that what was needed was more iron first and less velvet glove....Flint is a mess made by Democrats, made worse by the Democrats in Detroit, and ignored by the Democrats in the White House. The worst that can be said of the Republican [Governor Rick Snyder] on the scene is that he failed to save the local Democrats from the worst effects of their own excesses. But that is the Democrats' approach to calculating the chain of responsibility: Go up the ladder or down, as needed, until a Republican is located, or a private firm, in which case capitalism can be blamed. The Democratic monopolies in Flint, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Newark? Somehow, somewhere, there's a Republican responsible for that, even if he has to be brought in on an overnight flight from Oklahoma. Flint is nothing more than a miniature Detroit. And Detroit is what Democrats do.<sup>293</sup>

Notice that the five cities named in that excerpt are all cities with populations that contain a majority of African American residents. By a subtle rhetorical trick, the reporter disguised racial contempt under a veneer of political rhetoric. In this way, the reporter achieved a level of plausible deniability; the reporter cannot be accused of racism because the manner in the information was presented suggests a distaste for Democrats rather than a distaste for African American citizens.

While the presence of cultural racism is harder to see in articles like that, as the rhetoric used to blame the victims of Flint for their own water crisis is cleverly couched in language that makes it difficult to pinpoint the presence of racism, one story delivered by Fox News was very explicitly racist in its coverage of the lead crisis. The toxicity of the article is high because the racism within it is very blatant. To put that in perspective, one exchange in the transcript (this was delivered on national television) reads as follows:

**Gregg Jarrett:** Sixty percent of the residents of Flint, Michigan are black. Forty-one percent live below the poverty line. They're going to the White House because they want a federal emergency disaster declaration to get federal funds but they're likely not going to get it.

**Heather Nauert:** Well this is a way they could potentially get more black votes in the coming election. Typical of the Blacks. 'Oh my body is full of lead and I'm so thirsty!' Why can't they just use their Pull Up By Bootstraps app on their Obamaphones to fix it themselves, huh? Flint is a big faker, the shit vomit poison

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<sup>293</sup> "Democrats in Michigan Caused This Problem; FROM THE RIGHT."

water is FINE. Now, if you're a dedicated read of the mouth-breathing jizz-sicles at National Review, you might be under the impression that the water in Flint is bad because of the Democrats. And if you are a wingnut, you need to remember that that's still VERY TRUE, but also at the same time, you need to understand that the problem DOESN'T EVEN EXIST, except when you need to blame it on somebody.<sup>294</sup>

The entire transcript holds the same acerbic racist tone throughout, and it ends with Nauert, the host of the program, claiming that African Americans are going to “keep whining about how [they're] getting poisoned and having to pay for it,” and calling it “typical” of both African Americans and Democrats.<sup>295</sup>

Of all the news coverage examined (of which a full list can be found in Appendix A), the above transcript was the only evidence of outright racism rather than colorblind racism in the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. The majority of the articles make no mention of race whatsoever, which recalls Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's fourth frame of colorblind racism, the minimization of racism. While the majority of article *titles* indicate the frame of abstract liberalism at work, the *content* of all but a handful of articles are illustrative of the frame of the minimization of racism, as race is rarely ever mentioned.<sup>296</sup> This makes sense, given that the new racial regime that originated with the election of Barack Obama, the first African American U.S. President, has led to both “the avoidance of any clear public connection to black leaders and the black community” and “the careful retreat from any controversy that tastes of race.”<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Evan Hurst, “Fox News: Barack Obama Wants to Unpoison Flint's Water Because He is Racist, Q.E.D.,” Transcript from *Wonkette*, January 21, 2016. Capitalization in original.

<sup>295</sup> Heather Nauert as quoted in Hurst, “Fox News,” transcript.

<sup>296</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>297</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Austin Ashe, “The End of Racism? Colorblind Racism and Popular Media” in *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*, ed. Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 58.

The lack of portrayal of race in the news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis between April 2014 and January 2016 denotes Cedric Clark's four stages of media representation. According to Clark, the media representation of every social group occurs in the four stages of nonrecognition, ridicule, protectors, and respect.<sup>298</sup> In the stage of nonrecognition, there is no mention of the social group in the media coverage whatsoever. In the majority of the news articles examined, this is the stage of representation that African Americans experienced in the coverage of the Flint Water Crisis, as the media made no mention of race. It is especially telling that the 273 emails released by Governor Snyder concerning the Flint Water Crisis made no mention of race.<sup>299</sup> Considering Flint is a city with a population that primarily consists of African American individuals, it is demonstrative of the force of systemic racism within the media of the United States that few media workers or politicians mentioned the demographics of Flint in their coverage of the lead crisis.

In addition, Keith Schnabel's article in *The Valley Vanguard*, "Time for (Purely Metaphorical) Torches, Pitchforks," begins with a satire that places blame for the Flint Water Crisis on Hilary Clinton, then abruptly shift tracks and lays that blame squarely on Governor Snyder instead.<sup>300</sup> Schnabel emphasizes the role that Governor Snyder played in the creation of the crisis as well as how the decision to switch to the Flint River as the town's water supply was not made by local politicians but enacted by the Emergency Financial Managers installed by the State of Michigan. While Schnabel does not emphasize the role of race in his column, he does argue against blaming Flint residents for the decisions that led to the

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<sup>298</sup> Cedric C. Clark, "Television and Social Controls: Some Observations on the Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities," *Television Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1969): 18-32.

<sup>299</sup> John Eligon, "A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>300</sup> Keith Schnabel, "Time for (Purely Metaphorical) Torches, Pitchforks," *The Valley Vanguard*, Saginaw Valley State University, January 20, 2016.



poisoning of their city. In this way, Schnabel maintains the racial hegemony by refusing to acknowledge the impact that the racial disparity in Flint had on the events that led to the water crisis.

After learning about the Flint Water Crisis, 2016 presidential candidate Hilary Clinton said that Governor Snyder had behaved as if he held no concern for “Flint’s poor, largely black population.”<sup>301</sup> Governor Snyder ignored Hilary Clinton’s criticism of his management of the Flint Water Crisis, as he claimed that she was using the crisis for political reasons.<sup>302</sup> While Clinton denied that, her closing statement at the Democratic debate in South Carolina focused on the Flint Water Crisis, a debate that occurred on the evening before the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in a state where the Democratic primary would be decided by a largely African American demographic.<sup>303</sup> Both Governor Snyder and Hilary Clinton took stances that disempowered African Americans—Snyder by refusing to acknowledge the role of race in the Flint Water Crisis and Clinton by using the crisis as a political tool to win voters.

In a column in North Carolina State University’s paper, *The Technician*, the only mention of race that the writer makes (the writer’s name is unknown) is a reference to statistics produced by the organization State of Working America which states that African Americans have “the highest poverty rate” and “45.8 percent of black children below the age of six live in poverty.”<sup>304</sup> The columnist concludes by stating that the actions of the officials in Flint that caused the crisis represent the way that the poor are regarded; the writer moves

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<sup>301</sup> Nick Wing and Arthur Delaney, “Ben Carson Becomes First GOP Candidate to Weigh in on Flint Water Crisis,” *The Huffington Post*, January 19, 2016.

<sup>302</sup> “CBS: Gov. Snyder ‘Admits’ Flint Water Crisis ‘His Hurricane Katrina.’”

<sup>303</sup> Anne Gearan, “Clinton Seizes on Water Crisis in Flint, Mich., as a Lesson in Leadership: The Democratic Front-Runner Takes Credit for Shaming the State’s Republican Governor into Action,” *Washington Post*, January 18, 2016.

<sup>304</sup> *The Technician*, “Environmental Injustice Tastes Like Flint’s Water.”

away from race entirely and chooses to focus on socioeconomic class.<sup>305</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, race is often displaced by class in conversations about inequality to disguise the impact of racial disparity.

Perhaps the best example of how the impact of race is displaced by class comes from Lindsay Whipp's article, "Flint Water Crisis Leaves Toxic Legacy of Suspicion," published January 22, 2016 in *The Financial Times*. The comments that Whipp obtained from Flint residents highlights the impact of socioeconomic class but does not mention the impact of structural or environmental racism. One Flint resident, Jerin Sage, stated, "This would not have happened if they gave a damn about us. It would not have happened in the suburbs. It is because this community is poor. This water crisis is symbolic of all the other problems we have been poisoned by."<sup>306</sup> It is unclear what other problems Sage is referencing, as Whipp turns her attention to explaining Washington's response to the crisis.

Whipp points out that Clinton's attention to the water crisis raised concern among voters that Clinton was attempting to solicit African American votes, but Whipp contests that idea by including a statement from a Democratic strategist, Donna Brazile, in the article. Brazile states, "It's really about poor people. If this was an upper middle-class community, you wouldn't have seen the slow reaction to this crisis. It plays to the larger narrative that unless you have means, unless you are connected, you get ignored."<sup>307</sup> Whipp's inclusion of Brazile's statement in the article underscores how discussion of race is displaced by class. It is easy to overlook the reality that in the U.S., most upper middle-class communities are composed mostly of white individuals. The idea that Brazile puts forward, that the response

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<sup>305</sup> The Technician, "Environmental Injustice Tastes Like Flint's Water."

<sup>306</sup> Lindsay Whipp, "Flint Water Crisis Leaves Toxic Legacy of Suspicion," *The Financial Times*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>307</sup> Donna Brazile, as quoted in Whipp, "Flint Water Crisis Leaves Toxic Legacy of Suspicion."

would have been quicker in such a community, helps disguise the racialized element that slowed the response to the crisis in Flint because Brazile's statement disguises racial disparity as class disparity.<sup>308</sup>

Even in an editorial column published in *Michigan Daily*, "In Flint, Lead Contamination Spurs Fight for Clean Water" (2015), the unnamed reporter only mentioned race in passing, regurgitating the same knowledge of Flint being a city with primarily African American residents and an impoverished one as well. Instead of exploring the implications of that, the journalist instead focused on the interviews conducted with the activists that played a role in bringing the problem to the attention of the public and on how they perceived the government's role in the creation of the lead crisis. The journalist emphasized the problems that lead poisoning had caused (and will continue to cause) the residents of Flint.<sup>309</sup> While the article itself could be considered subversive because the experiences of Flint residents form the central narrative of the piece, the lack of any real engagement with the role that race played in the crisis demonstrates the insidious nature of systemic racism. When given a chance to explore the systemic issues caused by racial disparity, the journalist instead chose to focus on trying to discern who was to blame. By doing so, the article falls squarely into Bonilla-Silva's frame of abstract liberalism as well as into Clarke's first stage of media representation, that of nonrecognition.

In the majority of articles concerning the Flint Water Crisis, reporters focus overwhelmingly on providing information that pertains to the technical aspects of the lead crisis and how several government agencies worked to hide the reality that they had broken

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<sup>308</sup> Whipp, "Flint Water Crisis Leaves Toxic Legacy of Suspicion."

<sup>309</sup> Michigan Daily. "In Flint, Lead Contamination Spurs Fight for Clean Water." *Michigan Daily*. December 2, 2015.

important environmental laws that led to the poisoning of Flint. When media workers did mention race, it was to inform news consumers both that Flint was a city that contained a population primarily composed of African Americans and that Flint was one of the most impoverished cities in the United States. Because the information was generally provided as a statistical reference, few media workers went into detail about the structural racism present in Flint or gave any indication that racism itself had played a role in the creation of the crisis. The majority of the news coverage concerning the Flint Water Crisis made no mention of race, relegating the news coverage of the crisis squarely into Clark's first stage of media representation, nonrecognition.

In Clark's second stage, that of ridicule, the media representation of a specific social group includes only stereotypical images of that social group.<sup>310</sup> In a handful of articles where the media specifically mentioned African Americans, they did so by referencing the impoverished nature of Flint as a city with a majority minority population, thus reinforcing the stereotype of African Americans as impoverished. David Murray, Synder's spokesperson, deflected when asked about the role race had played in the state's response to the Flint Water Crisis and instead focused on the work that Governor Synder had done to expand Medicaid in the city of Detroit, another city in Michigan that is predominantly African American.<sup>311</sup>

The third and fourth stage of Clark's four stages of media representation have less relevance to the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. The third stage, that of protectors, is when the media representation of a social group expands to include images of individuals of that particular group in positions of authority. Technically, this stage of representation was present in the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis due to the demographics of the city

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<sup>310</sup> Cedric C. Clark, "Television and Social Controls," 18-32.

<sup>311</sup> John Eligon, "A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint."

itself. The African American officials who bore a share of blame for the crisis, while represented in the media as leaders, were also represented as corrupt and ineffective leaders, which actually places them in Clark's second stage of representation, that of ridicule. The reason for the placement of the African American officials of Flint that were involved in the Flint Water Crisis in the stage of ridicule is that the image of an inept African American official recalls a stereotype of African Americans as inferior and inadequate members of society. Thus, while it is technically true that the media representation of African Americans during the crisis reached Clark's stage of protectors, in that they were depicted in positions of authority, it is difficult to argue that their depiction as officials belongs in the stage of protectors rather than the stage of ridicule due to the damage their actions caused to the residents of Flint.<sup>312</sup>

Clark's fourth stage, that of respect, is a stage of media representation where members of a social group from a variety of personal backgrounds are represented in the media in a positive light. Of Clark's four stages of media representation, this stage is never reached in the news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. In actuality, the only racial group that has achieved this status in media representation are whites, as scholars argue that no minority racial group has achieved stage four.<sup>313</sup> The fact that the media representation of minority racial groups has never reached stage four is emblematic of the systemic racism underpinning the media institutions of the United States. That none of the examined media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis ever reached the fourth stage of Clark's stages of media representation demonstrates the way that the media reinforces systematic racism.

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<sup>312</sup> Cedric C. Clark, "Television and Social Controls," 18-32.

<sup>313</sup> Christopher Steven Josey, "Race and Stereotypes in News Media: An Examination of How Internet News Frames Persons of Color," PhD. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015, 10.

Of Clark's four stages of media representation—nonrecognition, ridicule, protectors, and respect—the media news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis falls overwhelmingly into the stage of nonrecognition. A few articles fall into the stage of ridicule; the transcript of the Fox News broadcast containing blatantly racist commentary underscores the fact that the old racial paradigm exists alongside the subtler colorblind racism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. None of the news coverage examined fall into Clark's third or fourth stages of protectors or respect, as the few articles that feature African American leaders in Flint contain content that ridicules those leaders for the actions they took (or did not take) that led to the crisis. The fact that African Americans were rarely mentioned in the news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis demonstrates that white racial hegemony still undergirds the societal structures of the United States.

The white racial hegemony of the United States has shifted from blatant racism (although that still happens on occasion, as the Fox News article indicates) to colorblind racism. Bonilla-Silva's four frames of colorblind racism – abstract liberalism, cultural racism, naturalization, and the minimization of racism – were present in the news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. The frame of abstract liberalism moved the focus of media workers away from the structural racism that led to the crisis to the search for someone to blame.

Many blamed the government; others blamed specific political parties. The blame of the Democratic party served to disguise cultural racism that ascribed characteristics to Democrats that historically have been ascribed to African Americans. It is an ingenious use of rhetoric because it is impossible to prove that blaming Democrats for the Flint Water Crisis is equitable to blaming the African American residents of Flint for the crisis. However, there are certain discrepancies in the rhetoric that suggest the media workers who blamed the

Democrats for the crisis were blaming the residents of Flint for their own problems. Some political officials and media workers stated outright that the problem was one created by Flint, but that was far less common than those who blamed Democrats.

While media workers can both reinforce and contest dominant cultural narratives, most media workers who covered the Flint Water Crisis helped reinforce the white racial hegemony of the United States. A rare few journalists and reporters offered contesting narratives which are discussed in the conclusion, but the overwhelming reinforcement of white racial dominance served to drown out their voices. The media's augmentation of the white hegemony of the United States seen through Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism and Clark's stages of media representation demonstrates the powerful presence of Feagin's white racial frame and the way it is used to make the reality of systemic racism invisible to white individuals. It is only by examining the media coverage of an event like the Flint Water Crisis, one which systemic racism and environmental injustice caused, that it becomes possible to use the colorblind paradigm to reveal the mechanisms that perpetuate and reinforce white racial dominance in the social institution of the media of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

## Conclusion

The Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) established in 2017 that the Flint Water Crisis fit the criteria of an event caused by environmental racism.<sup>314</sup> Environmental consultant, Derrick Z. Jackson, demonstrated in “Environmental Justice? Unjust Coverage of the Flint Water Crisis” (2016) that the national media failed to raise awareness of the environmental problems in Flint because of its demographic composition.<sup>315</sup> At the time of this study, no scholar except Jackson had conducted a media analysis of the Flint Water Crisis. This thesis thus builds off Jackson’s work, demonstrating how the national mainstream media not only fails to bring attention to environmental problems faced in majority minority cities but also perpetuates and exacerbates colorblind racism through the application of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism and Cedric C. Clark’s stages of media representation in order to maintain the white worldview espoused in Feagin’s conception of the white racial frame.

The combination of the work of Bonilla-Silva, Feagin, and Clark, becomes an analytical model referred to as the colorblind paradigm throughout this work. The colorblind paradigm, when applied, illustrates how the mechanisms of colorblind racism serve as a reinforcement of the white racial hegemony of the United States, especially in the institution of the mainstream media. To illustrate the effectiveness of the colorblind paradigm as an analytical tool, Chapter One, “The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to Media Analyses,” features an in-depth examination of analyses conducted by other scholars on four different types of media – advertisement media, sports media, reality television, and news media.

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<sup>314</sup> Michigan Civil Rights Commission, *The Flint Water Crisis*, 4.

<sup>315</sup> Jackson, “Environmental Injustice.”



Before applying the colorblind paradigm to those media analyses, Chapter One begins with a sketch of the three theories contained within the model. Joe R. Feagin's white racial frame, defined by Feagin, is "an overarching white worldview that encompasses *a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations, narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate.*"<sup>316</sup> The white racial frame consists of a large number of elements, though Feagin claims the most important are "(1) the recurring use of certain physical characteristics, such as skin color and facial features, to differentiate social groups; (2) the constant linking of physical characteristics to cultural characteristics; and (3) the regular use of physical and cultural distinctions to differentiate socially 'superior' and 'inferior' [social groups]." <sup>317</sup>

Alongside these elements are the narrative subframes that the white racial frame engenders. Two of those narrative subframes are the Horatio Alger myth, otherwise known as the Protestant ethic, American Dream, or "rags-to-riches" narrative, which is invoked by the concept of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps," and the heroic narrative engendered in the concepts of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny.<sup>318</sup> The Horatio Alger myth claims that anyone who works hard enough can become rich, which is a societal fiction that serves to redirect focus away from societally created inequalities and places the blame for the societal disenfranchisement of individuals, especially People of Color, onto the people themselves.<sup>319</sup> The heroic narrative, on the other hand, serves to silence the historical reality of genocidal expansion that occurred as colonizers moved westward across the American

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<sup>316</sup> Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 3. Emphasis in original.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

continent, displacing indigenous tribes by either forcing them onto reservations or committing outright massacres.<sup>320</sup> Engaging in the rhetoric of the heroic narrative disenfranchises indigenous tribes throughout the nation, as it privileges the concept of Manifest Destiny – the idea that the westward expansion of early American colonialists was granted by Divine Providence to claim a fabricated land devoid of people.<sup>321</sup>

In addition to the narrative subframes embedded in the white racial frame, colorblind racism pervades society. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in his 2014 monograph, *Racism without Racists*, outlines the frames of colorblind racism, which, when added to Feagin’s conception of the white racial frame, augments understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate white racial hegemony within the United States. The definition of colorblind racism, used throughout this work, is that of Bonilla-Silva’s, who defines colorblind racism as “a set of frames, styles, and scripts that are used to explain and justify the racial status quo without sounding racist.”<sup>322</sup> The four frames of colorblind racism that Bonilla-Silva identifies are those of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism.

In the frame of abstract liberalism, individualism is prioritized over societal reproduced inequalities, making invisible the lived disenfranchised realities inflicted on People of Color.<sup>323</sup> The second frame, that of naturalization, allows whites to use the concept of natural differences between races to explain societally caused racial inequalities, such as those present in residential segregation.<sup>324</sup> Cultural racism, the third frame, suggests that the characteristics of a specific group explain their standing within society; this frame is evoked

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Pratt, “The Origins of Manifest Destiny,” 1-17.

<sup>322</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 26.

<sup>323</sup><sup>323</sup> Ibid., 74-77.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

in phrases such as “Mexicans place no value on education” or “Blacks have too many babies.”<sup>325</sup> Finally, the frame of minimization of racism, allows societally reproduced inequalities and discrimination to be explained as a relic of the past, phenomena that once affected minorities but no longer serves to disenfranchise them.<sup>326</sup>

Societally reproduced inequality becomes, through the frames of colorblind racism, a product of illusion and individual folly. These frames pervade the mainstream media, serving as the mechanisms the media uses to reinforce and perpetuate the white racial hegemony required by the overarching white racial frame. In addition to the frames of colorblind racism, Cedric C. Clark’s stages of media representation illustrate the effectiveness of the media in perpetuating the white racial frame, as no social group other than whites have ever managed to achieve stage four within media representation, the stage of respect.

In Clark’s first stage of media representation, nonrecognition, there is little to no representation of a specific social group. Within the mainstream media, it is rare to see Native Americans featured on news stories, in screen media, or in literature. When Native Americans are featured, it is usually in a stereotypical way, which is demonstrative of Clark’s second stage of media representation, that of ridicule.<sup>327</sup> Stereotypical portrayals of African American females tend to lend toward Sapphires (independent, stubborn, emotional), and Jezebels (sexually aggressive and promiscuous), while African American males are often portrayed as sports stars or criminals.<sup>328</sup> In the third stage of media representation, the media begins to portray members of a social group as protectors or regulators of society. This is seen in media depictions of African American women as strong, matriarchal figures

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 74-77.

<sup>327</sup> Clark, “Television and Social Controls,” 18-32.

<sup>328</sup> Josey, “Race and Stereotypes,” 10; Amondo R. Collins, “The Media Assault on the Black Male,” 512.

reminiscent of historical African American women like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks.<sup>329</sup> Conversely, the media often depicts African American men as judges, police officers, and heads of state.<sup>330</sup> In the final stage of representation, members of a social group enjoy media depictions of them in diverse and varied social roles.<sup>331</sup>

While Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism demonstrate the mechanisms of colorblind racism that function within the dominant white racial frame, Clark's four stages of media representation direct the focus of the colorblind paradigm to the institution of the mainstream media. After sketching an overview of the colorblind paradigm, Chapter One then proceeds to the in-depth analysis aforementioned of the four types of media – advertisements, sports media, reality television, and news media. The analysis of those four media types demonstrate the prevalence of colorblind racism within the media, illustrating the presence of the white racial frame within American mainstream media that serves to reinforce white racial hegemony.

In the realm of advertisement media, the colorblind paradigm applied to Vanessa Hazell and Juane Clark's 2008 article, "Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines," revealed that mechanisms of colorblind racism that ensure white racial dominance exist even within content intended for African American audiences. The continued persistence of European beauty ideals elevates white beauty standards over African American conceptions of beauty, which the different depiction of white and African American models illustrates.<sup>332</sup> In their analysis of the advertisements of *Essence* and *Jet* magazines, Hazell and Clark found that advertisements

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<sup>329</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman*, 3.

<sup>330</sup> Josey, "Race and Stereotypes," 10.

<sup>331</sup> Clark, "Television and Social Controls," 18-32.

<sup>332</sup> Hazell and Clark, "Race and Gender in the Media," 6.

featuring African American females often portrayed them in matriarchal and dominant roles, while ads featuring white females tended to portray them in submissive roles.<sup>333</sup> In addition to assigning opposing dynamics, advertisements tended to objectify African American models with the featured products yet portrayed white models as consumers of featured products.<sup>334</sup>

While Hazell and Clark also discuss how advertisements featuring African American men tend to depict them as overly hostile and aggressive or as basketball players, it is the analysis of sports media conducted by Armondo R. Collins in his chapter, “The Media Assault on Black Males: Echoes of Public Lynching and Killing the Modern Terror of Jack Johnson” (2019) that demonstrates the problematic criminalization of African American men within the mainstream media.<sup>335</sup> Collins argues that the media’s portrayal of African American men as violent criminals can be traced back to their coverage of Jack Johnson, the first African American man to win the world heavyweight boxing champion on December 26, 1908.<sup>336</sup> An overnight success, the media thrust Johnson into the spotlight of fame and codified him as the quintessential African American everyman.<sup>337</sup> However, when Johnson refused to abide by the racial status quo and married a white woman, the media was quick to transform his positive public image into a negative one, portraying him as “a depraved savage intent on inflicting social damage to the sanctity of white womanhood.”<sup>338</sup> Once the media portrayed Jack Johnson, a man they had originally codified as the African American everyman, as a threat to whiteness, every African American male was inscribed with the

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 6-10.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.; Collins, “The Media Assault on Black Males,” 507.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 507-508.

potential of becoming the next Jack Johnson, the next threat to whiteness and the white racial hegemony of the United States.<sup>339</sup>

While advertisement media and sports media both reinforced the racial status quo in ways predicted by the colorblind paradigm, Katrina E. Bell-Jordan's 2008 analysis, "*Black.White. And a Survivor of the Real World: Constructions of Race on Reality TV*," demonstrated that even media that attempted to be subversive failed and subsequently reinforced white racial dominance. Bell-Jordan analyzed MTV's *The Real World: Denver*, CBS's *Survivor*, and FX network's *Black-White* miniseries and discovered five traits of racial depiction shared between the three shows.<sup>340</sup> All three shows 1) purposefully portrayed race in juxtaposition, 2) promoted inter- and intra-racial conflict, 3) presented African Americans as violent and angry individuals, 4) privileged individual racism over systemic racism, and 5) failed to offer solutions to racial conflicts portrayed on the shows.<sup>341</sup>

Each of the three reality television shows attempted to subvert the dominant narrative about race and failed, all in different ways. The FX miniseries *Black-White* conducted a social experiment wherein an African American family and white family switched lives so that they could experience the social reality of race from a different perspective.<sup>342</sup> From the beginning, the African American family was more aware of racial issues than the white family, so the white family had no idea how to navigate a racialized society.<sup>343</sup> In addition, it was clear to critics that the producers purposefully sent the families into situations designed to cause conflict, which automatically undermined the value of the social experiment.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>340</sup> Bell-Jordan, "*Black.White. and a Survivor of The Real World*," 353-357.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

Rather than attempt to conduct a social experiment with two families, the 2006 season of *Survivor: Cook Island* on CBS tried to demonstrate that assumed differences between races were non-existent by dividing the teams of *Survivor* into tribes based on their racial identities.<sup>345</sup> African Americans became the “Hiki” tribe, while Asian Americans became the “Puka,” tribe, Latinx Americans became the “Aitu” tribe, and white Americans became the “Raro” tribe.<sup>346</sup> While producer Mark Burnett may have intended to demonstrate the lack of differences between the four races, his decision to divide the *Survivor* cast into tribes based on their racial identities instead worked to reinforce racial stereotypes.<sup>347</sup>

The last show Bell-Jordan considered, the 2006 season of *The Real World: Denver* on MTV also reinforced racial stereotypes through the portrayal of two African American men, who, respectively, represented the “ideal” African American man and the “undesirable” African American male.<sup>348</sup> Stephen is cast as the “ideal” African American male, while Tyrie is presented as “undesirable,” suggesting that only African American men who act “proper” like Stephen and not “too hood” like Tyrie will ever find acceptance in mainstream society.<sup>349</sup> The contrast between Stephen and Tyrie, whose acceptance into the house is supposed to represent racial inclusivity, does exactly the opposite. Instead of promoting racial inclusivity, 2006 season of *The Real World: Denver* suggests that there is only one socially acceptable way for African American men to behave if they do not wish to imitate Tyrie, who is arrested and held in jail overnight because he urinated on the sidewalk in front of two police officers.<sup>350</sup> In the episode before Tyrie’s arrest, he is shown arguing with his

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 364.

girlfriend so that viewers are left with the impression that he was arrested for becoming violent with his girlfriend instead of urinating on the sidewalk.<sup>351</sup> Associating Tyrie with a violent crime he did not commit reinforced the white dominant racial structure of the United States, and reality television proved to be just as racially divisive as sports and advertisement media.

So does news media, as an examination of the analyses conducted by Hemant Shah and Samuel R. Sommers (and his team) of the media coverage of the Hurricane Katrina disaster of 2005. In his 2009 article, “Legitimizing Neglect: Race and Rationality in Conservative News Commentary about Hurricane Katrina,” Hemant Shah’s textual analysis of conservative news commentary revealed that the media created a narrative of irrationality about African American behavior.<sup>352</sup> That narrative portrayed the African Americans who were physically or fiscally unable to evacuate before Hurricane Katrina made landfall refused to evacuate because they were irresponsible, irrational, and incapable of making intelligent decisions.<sup>353</sup> Shah also found that the rhetoric used in conservative news commentary depicted African Americans as inferior to whites by referring to them as “a different breed,” “creatures,” and “primitive.”<sup>354</sup>

Shah’s findings echoed the 2006 study conducted by Samuel R. Sommers et. al, “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions.” Sommers et al. found that the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina disproportionately linked African Americans with crime and used the term “refugee” to refer to African American residents of New Orleans instead of the word “evacuee” to create a

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Shah, “Legitimizing Neglect,” 3.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.



sense that the African American residents were outsiders to the city and did not belong.<sup>355</sup> In addition, two photographs released at almost the exact same time featured two different captions. While both photographs featured images of New Orleans' residents wading through waist-deep floodwater, the photo of an African American man carrying soft drinks and a garbage bag garnered the caption of "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store."<sup>356</sup> In contrast, the photo of a white couple carrying food and drinks was followed by the caption, "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store."<sup>357</sup> The contrasting captions captured perfectly the mechanisms of systemic racism within the media.

All four media types – advertisement media, sports media, reality television, and news media – perpetuate and reinforce white racial hegemony, and using the colorblind paradigm as an analytical tool helps pinpoint the mechanisms that operate within the media to maintain white racial dominance. Having demonstrated the applicability of the colorblind paradigm to general media analyses, Chapter Two, "The Racial History of Flint and the Flint Water Crisis," offers a historical overview of the racial history of Flint and the events that led to the Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014.

Flint, Michigan, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a thriving metropolis, home to General Motors and a booming economy thanks to the expansion of the automobile industry.<sup>358</sup> People from all over the United States migrated to Flint to find work, pulled by the promise of potential wealth. Working-class whites and African Americans moved to Flint searching for jobs, but the large influx of African Americans strained race relations in the

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<sup>355</sup>Sommers et. al, "Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina," 39-41.

<sup>356</sup> As quoted in Ibid., 42.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Flinn, *The Hidden History of Flint*, 60-62.

city.<sup>359</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, the ratio of in-migration of white workers to African American workers was 1:2, and the African American population within Flint increased by 5,000 individuals in that time span.<sup>360</sup> The trend of northern migration of African American laborers continued into the 1940s and 1950s, at the end of the Great Depression, resulting in a doubling of the African American population in Flint in the 1940s, followed by a second doubling of the African American population in Flint in the 1950s.<sup>361</sup>

Flint's rapid population growth and increasing rate of African American residents strained the city's race relations. To contend with rising numbers of African Americans, white residents introduced several measures intended to control and suppress what they viewed as an undesirable element in their community.<sup>362</sup> Three of those methods were restrictive covenants, blockbusting, and redlining. Restrictive covenants, used throughout the United States until the Fair Housing Act of 1968 passed, were restrictions inserted into property deeds claiming that only white individuals could buy or occupy the property.<sup>363</sup>

Many realtors became blockbusters, buying homes from white middle-class urbanites and reselling the homes at highly inflated prices to African Americans.<sup>364</sup> The American public despised blockbusting realtors, though the reasons differed.<sup>365</sup> White homeowners hated them because they believed blockbusting was the primary culprit behind the "dismantling of their cozy neighborhoods."<sup>366</sup> Progressives loathed blockbusting realtors

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<sup>359</sup> Lewis, "Impact of Negro Migration on the Electoral Geography of Flint, Michigan, 1932-1962: A Cartographic Analysis," 3.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing, and Spatial-Structural Racism."

<sup>363</sup> Richard R. W. Brooks and Carol M. Rose, "Racial Covenants and Segregation, Yesterday and Today," *Straus Institute Working Paper*, No. 8 (2010): 4.

<sup>364</sup> Melhorn, "A Requiem for Blockbusting," 1145.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

because of the harm blockbusting caused to African American citizens, while the national government resented blockbusting realtors and blamed them for destroying neighborhoods throughout the country and exacerbating racial tensions.<sup>367</sup>

Redlining, defined by Amy C. Kantor and John D. Nystuen in their 1982 article, “De Facto Redlining: A Geographic View,” is “the practice of withholding mortgage credit from an entire neighborhood.”<sup>368</sup> The Home Owners Loan Corporation, or HOLC, was the first program the federal government launched 1933 as one of its initiatives to make home ownership more widely available to American citizens.<sup>369</sup> The HOLC implemented the process of redlining by establishing four categories of neighborhood quality.<sup>370</sup> Those categories automatically disenfranchised African Americans by assigning neighborhoods with a large African American population to the fourth and lowest tier of neighborhood quality, redlining them from the beginning of the program’s implementation.<sup>371</sup> Since African American homeowners were unable to obtain mortgage credits, the neighborhoods where they resided deteriorated, resulting in white flight as white homeowners sold off their properties before they could depreciate in value.<sup>372</sup>

The phenomenon of white flight caused large-scale demographic change in the neighborhoods white homeowners fled, and the practices of restrictive covenants, blockbusting, and redlining transformed thriving metropolises into dilapidated and deteriorating urban ghettos.<sup>373</sup> In Flint, Michigan, the transformation from a thriving

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Kantor and Nystuen, “De Facto Redlining,” 309.

<sup>369</sup> Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 1998, 51.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>373</sup> For a fuller account of the construction of urban ghettos within the United States, consult the second chapter, “The Making of the Ghetto,” in Massey and Denton’s *American Apartheid*, p. 17-59.

metropolis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to one of the most impoverished cities in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>374</sup> That transformation is visible through the three eras of racial history in the Vehicle City – the era between the 1920s and 1950s, the era between the 1960s and 1970s, and the era between the 1980s and the present day.<sup>375</sup>

Between the 1920s and 1950s, Flint existed in almost complete residential segregation between white and African American citizens.<sup>376</sup> The city of Flint enforced racial containment by isolating African Americans in the two neighborhoods of Floral Park and St. John.<sup>377</sup> While Floral Park, a downtown neighborhood that had originally housed slaves and free People of Color, was home to the wealthier African American residents, the St. John neighborhood, bounded by Buick factories, held the highest proportion of impoverished African American residents.<sup>378</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this work, it may be beneficial for future historians and/or sociologists to conduct an intersectional analysis of class and race on Flint during the era of almost complete residential segregation of the era running from the 1920s to the 1930s.

During the second era of Flint’s racial history, the era spanning the 1940s to the 1960s, came the breach of racial containment, the rise of racialized panic, the practice of blockbusting amongst realtors, and an increasing level of white flight.<sup>379</sup> In the 1960s, Flint attempted to solve issues of spatial racism through clearance projects of both the St. John and Floral Park neighborhoods.<sup>380</sup> The Floral Park clearance project resulted in the creation of the

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<sup>374</sup> Julie Mack, “Flint and Detroit among Nation’s Top 5 Poorest Cities, New Census Data Shows,” *MLive*, September 26, 2019.

<sup>375</sup> Hammer, “The Flint Water Crisis: History, Housing, and Spatial-Structural Racism.”

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

475 freeway exchange, while the clearance of St. John saw the creation of an industrial park that largely went unused.<sup>381</sup> Flint also attempted to relocate the residents displaced by these clearance projects, but those relocation attempts only exacerbated racial tensions and escalated the problem of white flight.<sup>382</sup>

The third era of racial history in Flint, Michigan, began in the 1980s and continues into the present day, and the spatial racism of the current era originated with the white flight that began in the 1960s, escalated in the 1970s, and transformed the city into a majority minority city by the 1980s.<sup>383</sup> That transformation led to drastic revenue reduction in the city of Flint in every area, but especially problematic were the revenue reductions in property tax, tax revenue, and state revenue sharing.<sup>384</sup> The drastic reduction in revenue was a direct cause of the decision made by Governor Synder to appoint an Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) to the city of Flint in 2011.<sup>385</sup>

A series of disastrous decisions catalyzed by the EFM law in Michigan and the EFMs in Flint led to the Flint Water Crisis that began in 2014 when the city decided to switch from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River as its water source as a “cost-saving” measure while the city awaited the completion of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA).<sup>386</sup> The city of Flint neglected the required enforcement of a critical Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) law, failing to ensure the presence of a proper corrosion control procedure at the Flint water plant.<sup>387</sup> Due to the lack of corrosion control, the water from the Flint River poured through lead pipes, stripping the lead away from the

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Wang and Cosby, “Emergency Managers in Flint,” 3.

<sup>386</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 14-15.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 33-38.

pipes and depositing that led in the water supply.<sup>388</sup> The exposure to lead, which is a powerful neurotoxin that can interfere with proper brain development, is known within the medical field as a “silent epidemic,” because signs of lead exposure do not immediately appear after the incident of exposure.<sup>389</sup> No exposure to lead is safe, and the lack of corrosion control at the Flint water treatment plant led to a city-wide exposure to lead; the entire city of Flint poisoned due to the failure to adhere to critical environmental law.<sup>390</sup>

While Derrick Z. Jackson focused on examining the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis for environmental racism, this thesis examined the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis for evidence of colorblind racism. Applying the colorblind paradigm led to the understanding that the media coverage of the crisis reflected four frames of colorblind racism and Cedric Clark’s four stages of media representation, which, in turn, evoked the overarching white worldview evinced by Feagin’s white racial frame. An examination of the mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis in Chapter Three, “The Colorblind Paradigm Applied to the Flint Water Crisis,” revealed the underlying mechanisms of colorblind racism embedded within the institution of the media that continue to perpetuate and reinforce white racial hegemony in the United States.

The mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis evoked Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of colorblind racism. The frame of abstract liberalism, which privileges individual responsibility over the societal creation of inequality, ran through most of the articles. For example, one article in *Targeted News Service* contained a statement issued by the Michigan Democratic Party in October 2015 that called for the immediate resignation of EFM Darnell

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Hanna-Attisha, *What the Eyes Don’t See*, 37.

<sup>390</sup> Clark, *The Poisoned City*, 33-38.

Earley, the EFM who had been in charge when the decision to use the Flint River as the city's water source was made.<sup>391</sup> The Director of Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), Dan Wyant, was the individual that advocacy group Progress Michigan believed was responsible for the crisis, and they focused their efforts on calling for his termination.<sup>392</sup> The person most Flint residents blamed for the crisis, however, was Governor Snyder, who admitted that his handling of the water crisis was equally as bad as President George W. Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>393</sup> Despite that acknowledgment, Governor Snyder refused to resign even amongst waves of protestors who gathered outside his house to demand his resignation, and he was also adamant that race had played no role in the creation of the crisis.<sup>394</sup>

Rather than acknowledge the role that racism played in causing the Flint Water Crisis, many government officials blamed the city of Flint for poisoning themselves. In an opinion editorial piece Darnell Earley wrote for *The Detroit News*, he reflected the accusations he faced from groups like the Michigan Democratic Party back onto the civic leaders in Flint, claiming that “[The switch to the Flint River] was a local decision that was made by local civic leaders. Anyone who says otherwise is being disingenuous for whatever reason.”<sup>395</sup> Earley's deflection of blame back to Flint residents echoed the 273 emails of Rick Snyder, especially one written to Snyder by his chief of staff, Dennis Muchmore, who claimed that people in Flint were trying to turn the crisis into a “political football” in an effort to shift the blame for the crisis away from the city of Flint to the state of Michigan.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Targeted News Service, “Michigan Dems: MDP Statement: Those Responsible for the Flint Water Crisis Must Be Held Accountable.”

<sup>392</sup> Progress Michigan, “Progress Michigan: MDEQ's Wyant Needs to Go.”

<sup>393</sup> Newsbusters, “CBS: Gov. Snyder ‘Admits’ Flint Water Crisis ‘His Hurricane Katrina.’”

<sup>394</sup> Ibid; Bixby, “Michigan Governor Says Environmental Racism Not to Blame for Flint Water Crisis.”

<sup>395</sup> Earley, “Column: Don't Blame Emergency Manager for Flint Water Disaster.”

<sup>396</sup> Ford, “5 Striking Emails on the Flint Water Crisis.”

While Flint and Michigan officials traded blame, ingenious – and horrifying – rhetoric evoked the frame of cultural racism, where the characteristics of a specific group are used to explain that group’s social standing. Several news articles used the term “Democrat” as a euphemism for the term “African American,” which provided an unassailable level of plausible deniability. The most emblematic article of this rhetorical sleight-of-hand was the attack launched at Democrats in the *Dayton Daily News* report released in January 2016. The article ends with this acerbic attack:

If you’ve followed Flint’s history of nearly criminal misgovernance, you know that what was needed was more iron first and less velvet glove....Flint is a mess made by Democrats, made worse by the Democrats in Detroit, and ignored by the Democrats in the White House. The worst that can be said of the Republican [Governor Rick Snyder] on the scene is that he failed to save the local Democrats from the worst effects of their own excesses. But that is the Democrats’ approach to calculating the chain of responsibility: Go up the ladder or down, as needed, until a Republican is located, or a private firm, in which case capitalism can be blamed. The Democratic monopolies in Flint, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Newark? Somehow, somewhere, there’s a Republican responsible for that, even if he has to be brought in on an overnight flight from Oklahoma. Flint is nothing more than a miniature Detroit. And Detroit is what Democrats do.<sup>397</sup>

The use of “Democrat” as a euphemism for “African American” finds support in the 2015 Pew Research Center data that indicated that the Democratic Party had an 80% advantage with African Americans over the 11% advantage held by the Republican Party.<sup>398</sup> Another indication that “Democrat” is indeed a euphemism for “African American” is the fact that all five cities named – Flint, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Newark – are majority minority cities where the majority of the residents are African American.

While it is hard to say with certainty that “Democrat” is indeed rhetorical coding for “African American” because of the high level of plausible deniability from those issuing

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<sup>397</sup> “Democrats in Michigan Caused This Problem; FROM THE RIGHT.”

<sup>398</sup> Pew Research Center, “A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education.”



such statements, a story delivered on national television by Fox News was blatantly racist. In the transcript of the story, host Heather Nauert and guest commentator Gregg Jarrett exchange comments about the Flint Water Crisis:

**Gregg Jarrett:** Sixty percent of the residents of Flint, Michigan are black. Forty-one percent live below the poverty line. They're going to the White House because they want a federal emergency disaster declaration to get federal funds but they're likely not going to get it.

**Heather Nauert:** Well this is a way they could potentially get more black votes in the coming election. Typical of the Blacks. 'Oh my body is full of lead and I'm so thirsty!' Why can't they just use their Pull Up By Bootstraps app on their Obamaphones to fix it themselves, huh? Flint is a big faker, the shit vomit poison water is FINE. Now, if you're a dedicated read of the mouth-breathing jizz-sicles at National Review, you might be under the impression that the water in Flint is bad because of the Democrats. And if you are a wingnut, you need to remember that that's still VERY TRUE, but also at the same time, you need to understand that the problem DOESN'T EVEN EXIST, except when you need to blame it on somebody.<sup>399</sup>

The entire transcript holds the same acerbic racist tone throughout, and it ends with Nauert, the host of the program, claiming that African Americans are going to "keep whining about how [they're] getting poisoned and having to pay for it," and calling it "typical" of both African Americans and Democrats.<sup>400</sup>

Nauert's ending commentary suggests that "Democrat" has become a euphemism for "African American," serving as a tool to hide the pervasive reality of systemic racism. While the transcript of the Fox News broadcast illustrates environmental racism in Jarrett's comments about how unlikely it is for Flint to get federal funding because its residents are mostly African Americans, Nauert's commentary evokes the frame of cultural racism as soon as she says, "typical of the Blacks."<sup>401</sup> Nauert's commentary is the only explicit racist content

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<sup>399</sup> Evan Hurst, "Fox News: Barack Obama Wants to Unpoison Flint's Water Because He is Racist, Q.E.D.," Transcript from *Wonkette*, January 21, 2016. Capitalization in original.

<sup>400</sup> Heather Nauert as quoted in Hurst, "Fox News," transcript.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

in mainstream media coverage found during the course of this study, but its explicitly racist tone helped pinpoint the kind of rhetoric used to both disparage the African American residents of Flint and blame the residents of the city for poisoning themselves. The knowledge of that rhetorical subterfuge helped reveal the methods used by the mainstream media to enforce the frame of cultural racism.

Alongside the frames of cultural racism and abstract liberalism, the frame of the minimization of racism pervaded the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. The majority of the mainstream media sources analyzed did one of three things – 1) never mentioned race; 2) only mentioned race to explain the demographics of Flint, Michigan; 3) denied that race or racism played any role in the creation of the crisis. The fact that race is mentioned so infrequently within the mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis is characteristics of Cedric C. Clark’s first stage of media representation, that of nonrecognition – the stage in which little to no representation within the media occurs.

When race is mentioned, it is often only mentioned as an explanation of Flint, Michigan’s demographics. Those articles were often representative of Clark’s second stage of media representation, that of ridicule, as the articles often reinforced racial stereotypes of African Americans. A column written in North Carolina State University’s paper, *The Technician*, is demonstrative of that with its reference to statistics produced by the organization State of Working America which states that African Americans have “the highest poverty rate” and “45.8 percent of black children below the age of six live in poverty.”<sup>402</sup> The column concludes that Flint’s official response to the crisis is emblematic of how the poor are regarded.<sup>403</sup> This column, on its own, does not necessarily reflect the stage

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<sup>402</sup> The Technician, “Environmental Injustice Tastes Like Flint’s Water.”

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

of ridicule. However, the fact that most of the mainstream media coverage only discusses race in Flint, Michigan, in terms of its demographic composition and impoverished nature reinforce stereotypes of African Americans as impoverished, perpetuating the myth that the majority of African Americans are impoverished.<sup>404</sup> Finally, the few times that the question was raised as to whether racism played a role in the crisis, government officials were quick to respond in the negative. Governor Snyder explicitly stated that racism played no role in the crisis.<sup>405</sup>

Moving from Clark's first and second stages of media representation to his third and fourth stages, respectively those of protectors and respect, the mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis did not evince those two stages. While there were African American officials in Flint depicted in the media, suggestive of Clark's third stage of protectors, those leaders often bore the brunt of the blame for the water crisis. Despite their roles as Flint officials, African American leaders in Flint portrayed through the media fall into the second stage of ridicule, as – through no fault of their own – their presence in the media portrayal of the crisis automatically reinforced stereotypes of ineffective and corrupt leaders.<sup>406</sup>

The media often reinforces stereotypes, and it also reinforces cultural narratives. That said, the media can also provide a critical reframing that contests the dominant narrative.<sup>407</sup>

That held true in the media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis. Although the majority of

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<sup>404</sup> While it is true that there is a higher poverty rate among African Americans than whites, it is false that the poverty rate among African Americans is over 50%. In a 2020 study, the overall poverty rate for African Americans is 20.8% while it is 8.1% for white Americans. See Bonilla-Silva *Racism without Racists* for a more in-depth discussion as well as U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *The Economic State of Black America*, prepared by Don Beyer, February 14, 2020, 11.

<sup>405</sup> Bixby, "Michigan Governor Says Environmental Racism Not to Blame for Flint Water Crisis."

<sup>406</sup> See Feagin's *White Racial Frame* for a more in-depth understanding of how African Americans are often stereotyped as ineffective and immoral.

<sup>407</sup> For more information on narrative production, consult Donileen R. Loseke, *Narrative Productions of Meanings: Exploring the Work of Stories in Social Life* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019), 1-126.

media news coverage of the Flint Water Crisis reinforced the colorblind paradigm, there were a handful of media workers whose work served as a critical reframing of the dominant narrative. One of those articles, written by John Eligon, was published in the *New York Times* in January 2016, entitled, “A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint,” and it reflects the way that media workers can reframe dominant narratives in their coverage of events. Eligon states,

For civil rights advocates, the health crisis in Flint smacks of what has become known as environmental racism. Coined in the 1980s, the term refers to the disproportionate exposure of blacks to polluted air, water and soil. It is considered the result of poverty and segregation that has relegated many blacks and other racial minorities to some of the most industrialized or dilapidated environments.<sup>408</sup>

When David Murray, one of Governor Snyder’s spokesmen, was directly asked whether the racial demographic of Flint had factored into the state’s response to the water crisis, Murray deflected the question and instead praised Governor Snyder for the work he had done in Detroit, including his expansion of Medicaid for low-income families.<sup>409</sup> In contrast, the Democratic Representative of Flint, Dan Kildee, said both that race was “the single greatest determinant of what happened in Flint,” and that the state officials had treated the water crisis more as a public relations problem rather than a problem for the residents of Flint.<sup>410</sup>

Governor Snyder’s chief of staff, Dennis Muchmore, said that he could not figure out why people were trying to hold the state responsible but conceded that perhaps it was because state treasurer, Andy Dillon, made fund allocation decisions; Muchmore also said that the state’s responsibility in the crisis was overstated.<sup>411</sup> Scott Lemieux, a writer for *Lawyers, Guns, and Money*, provided a satirical response to the Snyder administration’s lack

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<sup>408</sup> John Eligon, “A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>409</sup> John Eligon, “A Question of Environmental Racism in Flint.”

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Scott Lemieux, “Don’t Look at Us, We Didn’t Do It!” *CNN*, January 21, 2016.

of accountability for the crisis as well as to the claims that Democrats were responsible for the lead crisis.

Lemieux also explained in his article, “Don’t Look at Us, We Didn’t Do It!” that the structural problems present in the city of Flint made correcting the structural deficits impossible for anyone, thus rendering the use of Emergency Financial Managers to stabilize Flint’s finances an indefensible position.<sup>412</sup> Lemieux ends the article with criticism of the Synder administration that highlights the efforts made by the state to shift the blame elsewhere. The conclusion of Lemieux’s article reads as follows:

Anytime Republican politicians do stuff like, say poisoning entire cities, the entire conservative-industrial complex starts screeching about how wrong it is to politicize politics! The meta-point is that it’s actually the fault of liberals! If only they wouldn’t politicize politics, conservatives wouldn’t have to poison everybody!!! And it will be the citizens of Flint and Michigan taxpayers on the hook for this. Republican accountability is exemplified by the manager in Wall Street: “Somebody’s got to pay. Ain’t gonna be me.”<sup>413</sup>

Lemieux’s response to the Synder administration and the GOP pointing the blame at the residents of Flint and the Democrats acts as a media reframe because it contests the narrative of those in power.

The articles by Eligon and Lemieux show that media workers can craft frames that counter the dominant narrative, and these reframes provide insight into how the media itself is a site for contested meaning.<sup>414</sup> One potential avenue for future research on the Flint Water Crisis regarding its media coverage is pursuing the sources like the two preceding articles that illustrate how media workers contested the dominant narrative and fought against the paradigm of colorblind racism.

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Lemieux, “Don’t Look at Us, We Didn’t Do It!”

<sup>414</sup> For more information on narrative production, consult Donileen R. Loseke, *Narrative Productions of Meanings: Exploring the Work of Stories in Social Life* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019), 1-126.

Another area that bears further research by scholars is the effectiveness of social media communication. Social movements across the globe have demonstrated the power of social media in raising awareness and protesting. Thus far, scholars have done minimal research into the effectiveness of social media in raising awareness of the Flint Water Crisis. The one study that has been done, performed by communication scholars Ashleigh M. Day, Sydney O'Shay-Wallace, Matthew W. Seeger and Shawn P. McElmurry focused on determining the type of media communication that African American residents of Flint favored for receiving news about the water crisis.<sup>415</sup>

In the study, they determined that African American residents were not more likely to receive information about the lead crisis from Twitter than other racial groups, only slightly more likely to receive information from Twitter, and more likely to receive information from Instagram.<sup>416</sup> They did not examine Instagram sources any further, leaving that to future scholars to investigate. The one study that has been done on the usage of social media during the Flint Water Crisis focused on the sources a particular racial demographic was more likely to use, but there has as yet not been any studies done into the role social media played in bringing the crisis to light.

Because there has been very little research conducted on the Flint Water Crisis (as previously discussed), there are several avenues of research open to historians, sociologists, and media communications scholars. Historians could collect and compile oral history interviews about the crisis from the residents of Flint, Michigan to create a more comprehensive overview of the events that led to the crisis. Those same oral history

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<sup>415</sup> Ashleigh M. Day, Sydney O'Shay-Wallace, Matthew W. Seeger, and Shawn P. McElmurry, "Informational Sources, Social Media Use, and Race in the Flint, Michigan, Water Crisis," *Communication Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (2019): 353.

<sup>416</sup> Day et al, "Informational Sources," 362.

interviews may also provide critical insight into the activist work performed by Flint residents to bring the water crisis to the attention of the city of Flint and the state of Michigan. Another potential use of those oral histories may be to compare and contrast the experiences that residents in different parts of Flint had, which may lead to a intersectional analysis of race and class and the impact of both on the residents of Flint. That, in turn, could lead to an application of the colorblind paradigm on peer communities to see how individuals reinforced white racial hegemony with the invisible framework underlying colorblind racism.

Sociologists may be interested in contrasting the narratives of the Flint Water Crisis found in the mainstream media with subversive narratives of the event found in African American, Native American, Latin American, and Asian American media. Using the colorblind paradigm as a comparative tool has the potential to highlight the mechanisms of colorblind racism that are consistent within all five types of media. Similarly, media communications scholars may be interested in performing rhetorical analysis on the mainstream media coverage of the Flint Water Crisis to pinpoint what rhetorical tools are used to reinforce white dominance.

The colorblind paradigm can also be applied to the media coverage of any other event. Applying the colorblind paradigm to a media analysis of events like the fight over the location Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock of 2016 or the Covid19 global pandemic of 2020 (after its conclusion) may be particularly fruitful angles for scholars to consider. Because the meta-goal of this thesis is to provide an analytical tool that allows for the invisible the mechanisms of systemic racism to be made visible, the potential future avenues of research using the colorblind paradigm are virtually endless.

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## **Vita**

Kelly “Ky” Greene was born November 27, 1987 to Arvil Dean Greene, son of Arvil Clayton Greene and Barbara Elizabeth Townsend Greene, and Theresa Lynn Greer Greene, daughter of Richard Jackson Greer and Edna Ruth Greer Greer. She has one sister, Krista Leigh Greene, who was born in 1991.

Ky graduated from Watauga High School in 2006, then entered the generalized labor workforce. She decided to return to school in 2014 and enrolled in Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute, Watauga Campus. She obtained her Associate of Arts degree from Caldwell in 2016, then transferred to Appalachian State University, where she obtained her BA in History in 2018. She applied to the graduate program at Appalachian and obtained her MA in History in August 2020. Moving forward, she will be pursuing a Ph.D. in History at Arizona State University, where she has been offered a position as a teaching assistant.