

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

—James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” 1962<sup>1</sup>

In early 2016, I was commissioned by *Elle* and Hearst Corporation to produce a photo essay about the ongoing water crisis in Flint, Michigan—known as “Vehicle City”—for the magazine’s September issue. The Flint water crisis began on April 25, 2014, when, in the midst of a financial crisis, then Michigan governor Rick Snyder, with the support of government officials, switched the city’s water supply from a Detroit treatment facility to the contaminated Flint River in an effort to cut costs and save money. The decision went against local residents’ vote and in defiance of a democratic process. Once the contract with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department was terminated, Flint’s water supply no longer came from Lake Huron, a water source treated with corrosion controls before being piped to Flint. Instead, it came from the local Flint River, piped through the defunct Flint Water Treatment Plant as an interim source. A crucial detail buried by Governor Snyder’s office, the Genesee County Drain Commissioner’s Office, and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) was that the city of Flint does not provide corrosion-control treatment to prevent lead from leaching into pipes.<sup>2</sup> By the time I arrived in Flint two years later, lead had leached into the water infrastructure, into businesses, homes, and the bodies of Flint residents; thousands of children under the age of six were believed to have been affected by elevated lead levels.<sup>3</sup> The decision to switch Flint’s water source had done irreparable damage to the lives of residents, and the water crisis was far from over.

My telling of the Flint water crisis begins with a portrait of Shea Cobb, who was born and raised in Flint. In an aerial photograph she is seen on a trail bridge that crosses the Flint River. She steadfastly stands above the river water that has poisoned her body and her city. The first time I showed Shea this portrait of her looking defiant in the face of a systemic injustice, she recalled what her uncle Rodney told her as a child: “If you ever fall in the Flint River you go straight to the hospital, because you don’t know what’s in there.” She paused and went on to describe the river’s contents: “Fecal matter in the Flint River. Toxic chemicals and waste dumped in the river. The Flint River downstream has always been toxic.” In 2014, the city’s failure to maintain sufficient chlorine in its water mains for disinfecting led to fecal coliform bacteria growth in the drinking water. When the city later overcompensated for this, the additional chlorine brought elevated levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHMs), cancer-causing chemicals that are by-products of the chlorination of water.<sup>4</sup>

The reality of living with bacteria-contaminated water, toxic waste, and industrial pollution was all too familiar to me. I was born and raised in Braddock, Pennsylvania, a steel mill suburb nine miles outside Pittsburgh along the Monongahela River, in the Mon Valley. Because of deregulated chemical emissions from the United States Steel Corporation, Braddock has had some of the highest asthma and infant mortality rates in the country. My

grandmother Ruby, my mother, Cynthia, and I all struggle with terminal illnesses like cancer and autoimmune disorders such as lupus. This experience led to my fourteen-year photographic collaboration with my grandmother and my mother, *The Notion Of Family* (2001–14), which documented our struggle to survive environmental racism and health care inequity.

At first, I did not want to accept the *Elle* commission. I was skeptical that a lifestyle, fashion, beauty, health, and entertainment magazine could adequately allow me to create and produce a photo essay that tackled political and social issues. This was also the first time that such a political essay would appear in *Elle*’s September issue, typically devoted to forecasting style trends for the year ahead. My decision to move forward was spurred by two serendipitous encounters around the same time the commission was offered: In 2016, I met Genevieve Young, Gordon Parks’s editor, executor, and widow. I asked Gene for her advice about proceeding with the *Elle* assignment, and how best to negotiate contract terms in order to ensure that the final edit of the assignment would protect the integrity of my work as well as the family I would collaborate with. Gene encouraged me to take the commission, and gave me insight as to how Parks worked with photo editors and picked his battles with magazine editors. A few weeks later, I met Michal Raz-Russo, then a photography curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, who invited me to participate in a public program with her for the opening of the exhibition she curated *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem*. When Michal generously shared her research about the collaboration between Parks and Ellison in the 1940 and 1950s—photographs, letters, transcripts, contact sheets, and magazine spreads—the necessary approach and method for taking on the *Elle* assignment became apparent: I would resituate the “Pictorial Problem” that Ellison posed to Parks in 1940s Harlem sixty-eight years later in Flint, Michigan: I would “present scenes that are at once both document and symbol; both reality and (for the reader) psychologically disturbing ‘image.’”<sup>5</sup> If I could create and produce a photo essay between two women—a photographer and a poet—addressing a man-made water crisis in the twenty-first century, it would be an important extension of Ellison’s and Parks’s legacies. It would also serve as a rebuttal to the fact that their 1948 collaboration, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” which consisted of an essay with accompanying photographs and captions, was never published as intended in the July issue of *48: The Magazine of the Year*.<sup>6</sup>

On April 19, 2016, I arrived in Flint with a plan to photograph three generations of women who dealt with the water crisis on a day-to-day basis. The magazine arranged for me to meet with two well-known Flint poets, writers, recording artists, mothers, and best friends—Amber Hasan and Shea Cobb. The two would be my guides to Flint, and I spent six months earning their trust. Amber, who at the time was Shea’s manager, felt that it would be more beneficial for Shea to collaborate with me on the

- 1 James Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” in *Creative America* (New York: Ridge Press, 1962).
- 2 Jennifer Dixon, “How Flint’s Water Crisis Unfolded,” *Detroit Free Press*, <https://www.freep.com/pages/interactives/flint-water-crisis-timeline/>.
- 3 Abby Goodnough, “Flint Weighs Scope of Harm to Children Cause by Lead in Water,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/us/flint-weighs-scope-of-harm-to-children-caused-by-lead-in-water.html>. See also Madeline Sturgeon, “True Grit: Pediatrician Proves Michigan Community’s Water Was Poisoning Children,” *American Academy of Pediatrics News*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.aappublication.org/news/2015/11/11/Water11115>.
- 4 Melissa Denchak, “Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know,” Natural Resources Defense Council, November 8, 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know>.
- 5 Ralph Ellison, “Pictorial Problem,” in Michal Raz-Russo, ed., *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, The Gordon Parks Foundation, and Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), 44.
- 6 See Raz-Russo, *Invisible Man, Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison In Harlem*.

photo essay. Shea, who earned some of her income as a school bus driver in Flint, became the central figure in the photographs. Shea's mother, Ms. Reneé, who worked for a General Motors supply company, and Shea's then eight-year-old daughter, Zion, who attended the International Academy of Flint, represented the previous and future generations, respectively, of this story. They lived together at Ms. Reneé's house on Sheffield Street, not far from Hurley Medical Center, where it had been determined that the increase in lead poisoning in children was linked to the contamination of the Flint River.

In order to learn and understand the social landscape of Flint, I obsessively followed Shea's school bus number 38, route 45. I followed her intense daily schedule as a standby bus driver on a split shift that started at six a.m. and ended at six p.m. If Shea wasn't driving a bus, she would be in the recording studio working on her album or booking an appointment to do someone's hair. She was also always protecting and watching over Zion, making sure that she was studying, keeping her safe from the poisoned water. I embedded myself into intimate facets of Shea's life—from her busy work schedule to the mornings when she would treat herself to buttermilk pancakes at Captain Coty's and work on her poetry. Sometimes I'd sit across from her and indulge myself with the buttermilk pancakes too.

One weekday evening I was kneeling beside a bathtub in a tight, low-lit bathroom, holding my camera steady to capture Zion, her head tilted back and her mouth drawn wide-open as Shea slowly waterfalled bottled water into her mouth to brush her teeth—a daily routine. It was important for me to capture the bottled-water droplet just before it landed on Zion's tongue as a way of bringing attention to the horrifying and troubling fact that water from bottles made of plastic—in itself an unhealthy material—is the only good option left. Children are particularly susceptible to the toxic effects of lead, as their bodies absorb it more easily once it is ingested, affecting their developing brain and bones. Children with elevated lead levels are more likely to have behavior problems and attention deficit and reading disabilities, and eventually to fail to graduate from high school.<sup>7</sup>

One afternoon when I went with Shea to pick Zion up, I saw school water fountains covered with signs that read: "Don't Drink / Poisoned Water." I couldn't lift my camera to photograph them. It rocked me to my core to know that in America in less than a hundred years we can go from segregated water fountains that read "White" and "Colored" to school water fountains that read "Contaminated—Do Not Drink." Somehow this is acceptable?

This image and others are an homage to Gordon Parks's photo essay "A Harlem Family," which was published in the March 8, 1968, issue of *Life* magazine. It chronicled the daily life of the impoverished Fontenelle family, whom Parks photographed as part of a feature about race and poverty in American cities. When I photographed Shea brushing Zion's teeth, the cover photograph of Ellen Fontenelle came to mind—a portrait that depicts the youngest member of the Fontenelle family crying. When I photographed Zion doing her math homework, I thought about Parks's photograph of Kenneth reclining on his bed and doing his homework. Both Zion and Kenneth affirm concentration and determination. In homage to Parks's work, I intentionally depicted Zion persisting—doing her math homework in order to succeed, in spite of the toxic corrosion inflicted on her body, home, and family life by this man-made water crisis.

On May 4, 2016, President Barack Obama arrived in Flint. I attended a demonstration by students and residents outside Northwestern High School. While there, I encountered a beautiful Black student firmly holding a sign that read "Stop the Violence / Increase the Education & Peace". His gaze into my lens was determined—he, like others, was unfazed by the police barricades or the snipers with their guns trained on us from the rooftop of the high school building. Beside him more residents and students came together on Carpenter Road, lifting their voices in unison and harmony over beating drums: "*Flint Lives Matter! . . . No bottled water! . . . Obama, Obama, can't you see, this dirty water is killing me!*" Later that day, when the president met with Governor Snyder at Northwestern High School and took a sip of

Flint water live on national television, Americans were deceived into thinking the water crisis was over. Over the coming days and months the nation forgot about the poisoned men, women, and children of Flint.

I documented this media ploy in the living room of Shea's aunt Denise and uncle Rodney as a way to memorialize this historic moment of amnesia. If this photograph had a sound track, it would be Amber Hasan's hip-hop single "No Filter":

They'll kill you and say that you paid for it, had a  
Master Plan and you slaved for it  
Got our babies bathing in contamination and  
they'll cut you off if you're late for it  
The city trying to blame the State for it, and the  
State they ain't gon ever pay for it  
Give us band-aids for our bullet wounds, they kill  
us without making a bullet boom  
Even thugs stressin', got babies at the doctor  
getting blood tested, I got tons of questions  
Googling symptoms for Legionnaires' this is  
much worse than our deepest fears  
We get apologies for the policies that poisoned  
our whole city  
No warrants issued no charges filed Snyder still at  
the crib sitting pretty

What the media failed to properly report throughout the water crisis was that without the necessary treatment to protect water pipes from corrosion, not only did lead leach into residents' drinking water, but also the pipes became a breeding ground for *Legionella* bacteria—which triggered a deadly form of pneumonia that led to one of the biggest outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease in U.S. history. Janet Stout, Ph.D., president of the Special Pathogens Laboratory in Pittsburgh, told investigators from the PBS program *Frontline* in 2019: "Everybody that knows anything about Legionnaires' disease knows it's in the water, so you go and test the water, and then you disinfect the water, that's what's been done virtually everywhere else, except in Flint."<sup>8</sup> When the Genesee County Health Department (which encompasses Flint) reached out to Dr. Stout, she referred them to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which wanted to do a full investigation to prevent further outbreak. However, Michigan state health officials told the CDC that it didn't need help, and then buried the information for nearly two years, until January 13, 2016, when Governor Snyder publicly announced it in a press conference.

Michigan health officials claimed there was no evidence that the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease was linked to the Flint River. The state's attorney general, Bill Schuette, launched an investigation, led by special prosecutor Todd Flood, who would eventually present evidence against city and state officials. During the criminal and scientific investigations, a top aide to Governor Snyder and members of state government delayed, interfered, and threatened the investigation, and created a cover-up to withhold evidence, data, and information from investigators. With the state's delay in authorizing scientists to start a search for the outbreak, and the health department's delay

- 7 Children under the age of six years are more likely than adults to have lead pass into their brain, and are at risk when they are most vulnerable to developmental effects. Lead levels tend to peak in the age range of one to three years. Further, children living in urban areas in older housing with lead-containing paint or soil and those at or below the poverty line are at greatest risk. Elevated blood-lead levels in children are defined as those above the CDC "reference level" of 5 micrograms per deciliter. See David C. Bellinger, "Lead," *Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, April 2004, 113 (Supplement 3) 1016–22. Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "State Blood Lead Level Testing Laws Requiring 5 ug/dL & CDC Reference Rule," March 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/php/docs/laws-bll.pdf>.
- 8 "Flint's Deadly Water," *Frontline*, PBS, Season 2019, Episode 12, originally aired September 10, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/video/flints-deadly-water-pwsjzm/>.

in allowing scientists access to residents' homes to test water filters and tap water for Legionella bacteria, *Frontline* spearheaded its own investigation and analyzed death records from 2014 and 2015. That inquiry revealed there were approximately seventy more pneumonia deaths in Genesee County than normal in years prior—all believed to be undiagnosed or misclassified cases of Legionnaires' disease.<sup>9</sup> When presented with this evidence, Snyder and the state health department refused to comment. To this day, the Flint River has never been tested for Legionella bacteria, and mass media stuck to reports that there were only twelve deaths from Legionnaires' disease.

Judge Nathaniel Perry III was the first Genesee County district court judge to preside over the criminal case against former city and state employees.<sup>10</sup> Shea refers to the judge as "Coach Perry," describing him as a "very loving, friendly, and upstanding man who cares." He coached basketball at Shea's high school, and her aunt Andrea worked with him at the courthouse. On May 16, 2016, I photographed Judge Perry officiating at the marriage of Andrea's daughter Nephrititi, and her soon-to-be husband, Dominik, at the Floyd J. McCree Courts and Human Services Center. This image shows communal love between a public official and Shea's family—it proclaims visual justice, as the family chose to have a courthouse wedding in the midst of the Flint water crisis. "Nobody thinks about a water crisis in marriage, all you think about is the bride and the groom," Shea emphatically declared later, as she proudly reveled at the photograph in her hands.

I was eight years old in 1990—the same age as Shea's daughter when I began photographing her—when Braddock's public water pipes were switched from lead to PVC, but only from pump to curb, leaving landlords and residents in one of the most financially distressed municipalities responsible for replacing lead pipes in their homes. In recent years, drinking water samples in Braddock have shown lead levels as high as 23 parts per billion (ppb). Flint's levels, by comparison, measure at 20 ppb. Both readings exceed the Environmental Protection Agency's "action level" for lead, which is 15 ppb.<sup>11</sup> A 2001 report, "Fecal Indicator Bacteria in Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers near Pittsburgh Pennsylvania," prepared by the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), revealed that water samples collected at sites along the Monongahela River at Braddock contained fecal coliform bacteria measured at 14,000 coliform bacteria per 100 milliliters, far exceeding the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) water quality standard. At the Monongahela River subbasin at Braddock, the maximum concentration for fecal coliform bacteria was 23,000 col/100 mL. These elevated concentrations were attributed to land use, distributions of sanitary sewer overflow (SSOs), combined sewer overflow (CSOs), high stream flows, and resuspension of sediments.<sup>12</sup> When high concentrations of fecal-indicator bacteria are found, more harmful pathogens such as viruses and protozoans may coexist in the body of water, representing increased risk of gastrointestinal, respiratory, eye, ear, throat, and skin diseases.<sup>13</sup> Further, A 2019 report by the organization Clean Water Action detailed the history of violations of federal Clean Air Act standards in the Mon Valley, which includes Braddock, by United States Steel Corporation. Among the key findings of the study was that the site had 402 instances of exceeding federal standards for sulfur dioxide and fine particles, representing 91 percent of the exceedances in Allegheny County. Mon Valley residents are older, poorer, and more likely to be African American than residents of other parts of Allegheny County, and are therefore considered more vulnerable to the health effects of breathing contaminated air.

General Motors (GM) was founded in Flint in 1908, and by 1966 the company maintained eight plants in the city.<sup>14</sup> Numerous times over the decades, the company has been cited for releasing pollutant chemicals into the Flint River. Already in 1966, the Department of the Interior released a report, "Water Pollution in the Lake Huron Basin: Flint River," itemizing GM's record of pollution: The company's AC Spark Plug Division, located on Dort Highway in Flint, had a waste flow of

approximately 1.5 million gallons per day (mgd), which included waste constituents such as cyanide, hexavalent chromium, nickel, oil, and suspended solids. The GM Buick Division, on Industrial Avenue in Flint, discharged approximately 2.2 mgd of manufacturing and plating waste into the Flint River; the Chevrolet Division, on Chevrolet Avenue in Flint, discharged about 2 mgd of solids and oils into the river; the GM Fisher Body Division discharged 0.08 mgd of oils and suspended solids into a tributary connected to a creek that emptied into the river; the Ternstedt Division, on Coldwater Road in Flint, discharged a waste flow of 1.5 mgd of oils, suspended solids, cyanide, hexavalent chromium, and copper into a tributary of the Flint River. The Parts Division discharged 0.4 mgd of treated waste, oils, and suspended solids into a tributary of the river; the Chevrolet Assembly Plant, on Van Slyke Road in Flint, discharged a waste flow of 1.4 mgd of oils and solids into the Flint River; the Chevrolet Engine and Stamping Plant, also on Van Slyke, discharged 0.72 mgd of waste, oils, and suspended solids into a tributary of the river; and Vogt Packing Company, located in Grand Blanc, a suburb of Flint, discharged 0.06 mgd of biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), suspended solids, and suspended volatile solids into a tributary of the Flint River. In total, the report calculated, GM dumped 9.86 million gallons of chemical waste into the Flint River every day.

In 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois delivered a speech about the contamination of the Housatonic River in Massachusetts, which held personal significance to him. For Du Bois, the health of the river represented the health of the community. His words echo when I think of both the Monongahela River and the Flint River: "The thing that has happened in this valley has happened in hundreds of others. The town, the whole valley, has turned its back upon the river. They have sought to get away from it. They have neglected it. They have used it as a sewer, a drain, a place for throwing their waste and their offal. Mills, homes, and farms have poured their dirt and refuse into it."<sup>15</sup>

Shea's childhood home, lovingly referred to as the "Big Blue House" by Zion, is located on Mary Street in Flint's Fifth Ward, a historically Black neighborhood. The house is photographed from the air—I chartered an open-side helicopter and directed the pilot to fly above the house and slowly spiral outward from it. I used a medium-format camera with a film capacity of ten frames per roll, which meant I had to change film often and work quickly to capture images of the entire neighborhood. In the Fifth Ward in 2015, after the switch from Lake Huron to Flint River water, the amount of lead in drinking water, at 15 ppb,

- 9 In order to determine this, *Frontline* reporters took their data to a team of independent epidemiologists at Emory University, who built a statistical model revealing that when the water was switched to the Flint River in Genesee County, the pneumonia death count spiked. They determined that there were seventy more pneumonia deaths than normal, leading them to conclude that there were Legionnaires' cases misdiagnosed as pneumonia. "Flint's Deadly Water."
- 10 Ron Fonger, "Judge Moves Flint Water Cases Ahead, Says Dec. 5 Exam Date 'Etched in Stone,'" *MLive*, August 28, 2017, [https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2017/08/judge\\_moves\\_flint\\_water\\_cases.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2017/08/judge_moves_flint_water_cases.html).
- 11 Margaret J. Krauss, "Braddock Already Replaced Its Public Water Lines, So What Can It Do About Lead Levels?," *WESA*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.wesa.fm/post/braddock-already-replaced-its-public-water-lines-so-what-can-it-do-about-lead-levels#stream/o>.
- 12 John W. Fulton and Theodore F. Buckwalter, "Fecal-Indicator Bacteria in the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, July–September 2001," *Scientific Investigations Report 2004–5009*, U.S. Geological Survey, 2004.
- 13 Fulton and Buckwalter, "Fecal-Indicator Bacteria."
- 14 Dustin Renwick, "Five Years On, the Flint Water Crisis Is Nowhere near Over," *National Geographic*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/flint-water-crisis-fifth-anniversary-flint-river-pollution>.
- 15 "W.E.B. Du Bois: Reflections upon the Housatonic River," speech given on July 21, 1930, reprinted in *The Berkshire Edge*, <https://theberkshireedge.com/w-e-b-du-bois-reflections-upon-housatonic-river/>.

exceeded the federal standard limit by 26 to 32 percent, and elevated blood-lead levels in children increased from 4.9 to 15.7 percent.<sup>16</sup> The Cobb family home with its property sits 2.5 miles southwest of GM's former Buick City site, and 2.1 miles northeast of GM's former Chevy in the Hole site. Investigation at these sites revealed, among other things, contamination with fifteen light non-aqueous phase liquids (LNAPLs) and polychlorinated biphenyls, soils on-site contaminated with metals, and groundwater contaminated with volatile organic compounds (VOCs), semi-volatile organic compounds (SVOCs), dissolved metals, and various petroleum products.<sup>17</sup> Shea's mother, Ms. Renéé, currently owns the Cobb family home and has meticulously repainted and renovated the Big Blue House. She even added a deck out back. When I asked Ms. Renéé about her motivations to maintain and own her parents' home, she calmly and matter-of-factly broke it down: "For the last few years I believe the intent was to destroy the North Side of Flint. They took away the grocery stores, all the things people need in order to survive. Their goal is to push us out. But I've been here since 1967. I'm not going to go nowhere, because this is where my family is. This is where I was raised. This is my home."

On October 13, 2014, six months after the Flint water crisis began, GM reached a temporary agreement to buy Lake Huron water from Flint Township for its Flint Engine Operations on West Bristol Road—which uses approximately 75,000 gallons of water a day—out of a growing concern that the higher chloride content in the Flint River would corrode GM engine parts.<sup>18</sup> The Genesee County Drain Commissioner's Office approved GM's transition to Flint Township's water distribution system, but the same consideration was never offered to smaller local businesses or residents. GM officially switched to Flint Township water on December 27, 2014.

When I circled the Big Blue House in a helicopter, Shea and Zion were on the ground. I directed them via cell phone on where to stand on their family's property for an aerial portrait that symbolized my concerns about generational inheritance, dispossession, and property value. Shea and I, both born in the 1980s, lived in households with grandparents who worked in the automotive and steel industries. Our families had hopes and aspirations to provide their children and grandchildren with opportunity for upward mobility, a better education, home ownership, and land. These hopes and dreams would never fully materialize, in part because of the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s and 1980s in Pennsylvania, and GM's departure from Flint in the late 1990s, as the company sought to evade environmental cleanup costs, prevent the growth of organized and unionized Black workers, and find cheaper labor. GM's actions highlighted one of the most pervasive problems affecting current conditions in the United States' industrial heartland: corporate welfare. Companies like GM are rewarded with tax breaks, tax incentives, and financial bailouts, while its workers—the same people who created the company's prosperity—are left with declining property values as the city it once called home falls deeper into debt, without tax revenue from the corporation that left. The increased presence of corporate welfare marked the emergence of neoliberalism, as Robin D. G. Kelley, professor of American history at UCLA, explains: "To come out of debt the city turns to the privatization of public assets in order to attract investment capital, so public lands are sold off to developers, water rates increase, and there's a push to privatize water; downtown redevelopment schemes are encouraged, using public funding, public debt, and substantial tax breaks to private firms to finance new buildings, skyscrapers, and parking lots."<sup>19</sup> Citizens, however, are increasingly left behind by their government.

On August 8, 2016, my ten-page photo essay "Flint Is Family" was released, in the September issue of *Elle*. It served as a reminder that although Flint was no longer headline news in the United States, the water crisis was far from over. In addition to the print edition, there was an online version of the article composed of five parts, two of which I edited: Part 2 is my short film *Flint Is Family*, an homage to Gordon Parks's film *Diary of a Harlem Family* (1968), and Part 4 is my edit of thirty-six photographs from *Flint Is Family*. I commend the former editor in

chief Robbie Myers for her unwavering support and trust, and her generosity to run the ten-page photo essay without ads in the print edition. Yet I remain concerned about the cultural insensitivity, use of stereotypical and stereotyping language, and victim blaming that were both consciously and subconsciously present among the staff of all white women who worked on this piece, and I hold myself accountable for the results. I subsequently fought hard with the editors at *Elle* to make certain that Shea Cobb would get the last word. It was important that her voice rise above

Hearst Corporation, *Elle*, and its contributing journalists and editors, as well as the photographs I made. As I am a firm believer in the Frankfurt School philosophy that artists should not play a subordinate role but rather, they should work within culture and transform it in order to enact positive social change, it was only logical for me to lock myself in an *Elle* office with an independent film editor to ensure that Shea's perspective on the water crisis would be heard. The result is a short film—a montage of my photographs, narrated by Shea—that is not sanitized, neutralized, or trivialized by liberal and conservative media.

Hearst Corporation was founded by William Randolph Hearst in San Francisco on March 4, 1887, after he became the proprietor of the *San Francisco Examiner*. The company is now a worldwide leader in diversified media, information, and services, with more than 360 constituent businesses. Its major interests include ownership in cable television networks such as A&E, History, Lifetime, and ESPN; thirty-three television stations such as WCVB in Boston and KCRA in Sacramento; global financial services firm Fitch Group; Hearst Health, a group of medical information and services businesses; and more than three hundred magazines around the world, including *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Men's Health*.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that most of American mass media—including print, television, film, radio, music, and internet—are owned by only a handful of media corporations. Among the most powerful of them are National Amusements, Disney, WarnerMedia, Comcast, News Corp, and Sony. These companies are the ones deciding what is news, what is newsworthy, and what is not. This fact demonstrates the idea that American mass media is by design a form of social control that serves the interest of the elite, not the poor or working class, in America.<sup>21</sup>

On August 12, 2016, four days after my photo essay *Flint Is Family* appeared online and on newsstands, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's presidential order to supply Flint residents with water filters, replacement cartridges, bottled water, and home water testing kits expired.<sup>22</sup> I knew then that it would take more than a series of photographs on my part to bring relief to the people of Flint. During the six months it took to produce *Flint Is Family*, Shea and I bonded over our grandmothers and mothers—Hazel and Ruby, Renéé and Cynthia. Amber and I bonded over our battles with lupus and discussions about our integrity as women artists. We decided to remain in one another's lives and keep our collaborative efforts going. The morning after the courthouse wedding, I took a portrait of Amber

16 Renwick, "Five Years On."

17 United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Hazardous Waste Cleanup: Buick City Facility—Flint, Michigan," <https://www.epa.gov/hwcorrectiveactionsites/hazardous-waste-cleanup-buick-city-facility-flint-michigan#Contaminants>.

18 Ron Fonger, "General Motors Shutting Off Flint River Water at Engine Plant over Corrosion Worries," MLive, October 13, 2014, [https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2014/10/general\\_motors\\_wont\\_use\\_flint.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2014/10/general_motors_wont_use_flint.html).

19 Robin D. G. Kelley, "What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?," talk delivered at University of Washington, Seattle, November 7, 2017, [https://youtube.be/REo\\_gHlpvJc](https://youtube.be/REo_gHlpvJc).

20 "About," Hearst, <https://www.hearst.com/about>.

21 Jean-Philippe Tremblay, *Shadows of Liberty*, documentary film (DocFactory, UK), 2012.

22 Brady Dennis, "Federal Emergency Aid Is Ending in Flint. State Officials Vow to Pay for Water," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/health-science/wp/2016/08/12/federal-emergency-aid-is-ending-in-flint-state-officials-vow-to-pay-for-water/>.

and Shea before they briefly parted ways—Shea traveling to Mississippi and Amber to Puerto Rico, in search of respite from the water crisis for themselves and their families. The photograph is a visual anchor that underscored our beliefs as women artists and activists, and it represents our collective energy and relationships to one another. Shea tenderly said of this portrait, “This is an image of sisterhood. Black women are so much more than the individual—there are so many Black women behind Black women, and these types of images are never published.” In 2017, Shea and Amber co-founded the Flint-based artist collective The Sister Tour, whose mission is to offer women artists a creative, safe, and supportive environment and the resources and platforms to grow as independent artists, and to empower women to start their own creative businesses. My presence and role in their lives has shifted over the years from artist, photographer, and storyteller to advocate, patron, mentor, sister, and dear friend to The Sister Tour.

While still in Flint, Shea showed me a very special family photograph that contained within it a hidden narrative, a story that is never told about Black life in America. It was sent to her by her father, Mr. Douglas R. Smiley, and it depicted a young Shea in 1997, drinking spring water from the ground on family-owned land in Newton, Mississippi. Mr. Smiley had sent her the picture as a way to encourage his daughter to return to Mississippi, and it worked—Shea hoped to find a better, safer life for herself and Zion there. The photograph inspired me to follow Shea and Zion to Mississippi, and I had hoped to publish what would become Act II of *Flint Is Family* in *Elle*. But the magazine declined. I was determined to produce this story so the country could see a different truth, a different reality, one that counters Shea’s life in northern industrial America. Shea and Zion made the reverse migration, a correction to the “fatal error of judgement” that Ralph Ellison warned us about in “Harlem Is Nowhere,” where he equates the migration of Black families from the South to the North as the action of “a people which aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain . . . and fell into a great chasm of maze-like passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end ever against a wall.”<sup>23</sup>

On July 14, 2017, I reunited with Shea and Zion in the Jackson–Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport for a four-day visit with Mr. Smiley on his property in Newton, Mississippi. That day marked the beginning of the making of *Flint Is Family Act II*, a two-year endeavor. By that summer, Mr. Smiley was teaching his daughter and granddaughter how to take care of the family land. I hadn’t seen Shea and Zion since four a.m. on June 25, 2016, when they left Flint and headed to Mississippi for safety and relief from the corrosive water that had been exposing Zion, by then nine years old, to high levels of lead contamination. We arrived at Mr. Smiley’s spacious three-bedroom, double-wide mobile home, sixty-seven miles east of Jackson. Zion jumped out of the car and ran into her Paw-paw’s arms. Mr. Smiley’s infectious laugh, beautiful smile, and loving eyes made me feel like I was meeting long-lost family.

Born in 1951, Mr. Smiley remembers picking cotton at age seven or eight. “I was dragging my little sack behind me, I’m picking cotton too, like I was doing something,” he told me, bursting into laughter. “I was oblivious to the past history of slavery because I was protected by my grandfather. It was his cotton. It was his land. He planted the cotton. It’s his field. So when he got it picked he took it to the cotton gin and they paid him what it was worth.” At age four or five he had been “dragged to Chicago, screaming and kicking,” and after graduating from high school he moved to Flint. In his late forties, by then an army veteran and retired from GM after suffering a stroke, Mr. Smiley returned to Mississippi.

During my visit, Mr. Smiley would get up at five thirty daily to make breakfast for Shea and Zion—grits, eggs, cheese toast with deer sausage. He then had a cup of coffee, listened to smooth jazz in his truck, and said hello to the morning. By seven thirty, Shea, Zion, and Mr. Smiley were tending to his Tennessee Walking Horses—one stallion and three mares. Jackson (I Am Jackson Jones), PT (PT’s Miss One Of A Kind) Dolly (Secretly) and Blue (Blue’s Royal Threat). One evening, we looked through

family photo albums, certificates of registration for each of the horses, horse magazines, and Mr. Smiley’s favorite history book about the Tennessee Walking Horse, *The Echo of Hoofbeats*. As Zion held each object for me to photograph, Mr. Smiley taught me about his horses’ bloodlines and how they got their names. He also talked about how during slavery Tennessee Walking Horses purpose, due to their smooth and easy gait, was to carry overseers through plowed fields in order to keep watch over slaves working the fields. It is therefore important to understand the horses as symbols of the Deep South. And it was important to create images of Shea and Zion carrying out daily chores with the horses—feeding them; cleaning their stalls; putting medicine in their eyes; checking for gnats, ticks, and cuts; and letting them out into the field to eat grass and roam. At other times, Mr. Smiley, Shea and Zion would leisurely walk among trees and bushes where plums, persimmons, blackberries, and pecans grow. The final portrait of Mr. Smiley, Shea, and Zion, looking regal, powerful, and dignified, as they sit atop their horses, acts as visual justice and cultural retribution for the history they and their ancestors have endured.

When I asked Mr. Smiley why he had sent Shea the photograph of her as a child drinking water, and why he had taken it in the first place, he lovingly explained: “That picture is worth a thousand words. And so I texted the picture and simply wrote, “This water won’t kill you. Come home.”” Back in 1997, when they were still living in Flint, Mr. Smiley brought Shea down to Mississippi with him to pick up a pony. He took her to the spot where pure water was bubbling from the ground. He drank from the water first, and then instructed her to scoop a handful and drink it; when she did, he took the picture. Shea was surprised by how sweet it tasted. “It’s never been dry, the whole time I’ve been down here. No matter what droughts we’ve had, the springhead is always running,” he softly stated. To record this history for nine-year-old Zion, we walked over to the exact spot Mr. Smiley had shown Shea twenty years before; Shea dug a trench for the spring water to collect and called Zion over to kneel down with her. I prepared my camera, and Mr. Smiley proudly looked on as his daughter and granddaughter cupped the spring water in their hands. As the water slowly trickled down Zion’s tiny wrists, I quietly documented the moment.

The series of images from my trip to Mississippi would not be seen in mass media or by the general public until fall 2019, when they were shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in the exhibition *SOFT POWER*, curated by Eungie Joo, curator of contemporary art. Mr. Smiley and Shea attended the opening. Later, when I asked Mr. Smiley how he felt about seeing portraits of himself teaching his daughter and granddaughter how to care for his land and horses that one day they’ll inherit, he delightedly replied, “I felt really honored, like I couldn’t believe it was happening, it felt like I had achieved immortality like Van Gogh, it just doesn’t get any better than that.” That exhibition focused on the ways in which artists deploy art to explore their roles as citizens and social actors, an idea that also informed my first solo gallery exhibition, the year before, at Gavin Brown’s enterprise in Harlem, New York.<sup>24</sup> That survey exhibition opened on January 14, 2018, and featured photographs from what would become Act I of *Flint Is Family* alongside other bodies of work. Accompanying the exhibition was a thirty-foot billboard mounted on the building’s facade, which featured three photographs I took of a chain-link fence at Sussex Drive and West Pierson Road in Flint. Across the fence the message “Water Is Life” (a phrase used by indigenous people) is spelled out with Nestlé water bottles—a public artwork in Flint made by Shea, Amber, and members of The Sister Tour, brought to Harlem in a new form.

According to reporting by the independent news organization Democracy Now!, in 2001 and 2002 the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality “issued permits to Nestlé, the largest water bottling company in the world, to pump up to

23 Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” in Raz-Russo, 51.

24 Eungie Joo, *Soft Power*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, October 26, 2019–February 17, 2020, <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/soft-power/>.

400 gallons of water per minute from aquifers that feed Lake Michigan.” Further, Nestlé “is not really required to pay anything to extract the water besides a small permitting fee to the state and the cost of a lease to a private landowner. In fact, the company received \$13 million in tax breaks from the state of Michigan to locate the plant there.” The Michigan spokesperson for Nestlé, it turns out, is Deborah Muchmore, wife of Dennis Muchmore—former Governor Snyder’s chief of staff, who retired and registered to become a lobbyist.<sup>25</sup> Nestlé also extracts 3.6 million liters of water daily from First Nations reserves in Canada, home to 60 percent of the world’s lakes and one-fifth of the world’s fresh water.<sup>26</sup> Corporations have the same rights as citizens, and thanks to such legal practices as the “rule of capture” and the “law of the biggest pump,” they can secure control over underground aquifers and streams.<sup>27</sup>

The day we finished making the *Water Is Life* installation on the fence, I made a portrait of Shea, Amber, Macana Roxie (another member of The Sister Tour), and me. I then made limited-edition fundraiser prints of that photograph, sales of which raised money to send The Sister Tour around the country to museums and schools where programs were held to educate individuals and groups about the ongoing water crisis in Flint. Wherever my photographs are on view, The Sister Tour members and I travel there and host public programs that aim to bring more inclusive, culturally diverse perspectives to predominantly white institutional spaces. At the *SOFT POWER* exhibition, for example, Shea led a gallery talk about *Flint Is Family Act II* with me and the curator. We organized a workshop led by Amber, Shea, and Nicole Middleton (Big Juicy) titled “Power of Voice,” which included local community organizers, housing advocates, and poets. Also featured in the programming, among others, were Oakland rap artist, performer, and filmmaker Queens D.Light, DJ On.Mommas, and Bay Area poet, writer, and environmental justice advocate Nia McAllister. Our collective goal is to democratize the arts by occupying, teaching, preaching, educating, and activating spaces such as museums and galleries, where these conversations don’t take place often or at all. For the culmination of my exhibition at Gavin Brown’s enterprise, we held a day of public programming and performances with The Sister Tour that included artists, musicians, singers, poets, comedians, and activists from Flint—Shea, Amber, Macana Roxie, Big Juicy, Tuklor, Liberty Bell, Jia Brittny Ireland, and others. During a two-hour conversation among Shea, Amber, me, and Fred Moten, professor in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, audience members heard candid firsthand accounts of what it means to be a woman artist, activist, poet, and mother from Flint; what truly happened on the ground in the midst of the water crisis; and how Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and segregation in Mississippi’s education system forced Amber and Shea to return to Flint.<sup>28</sup> A 2018 public art project titled *Flint 1,462 Days And Counting Man-Made Water Crisis* was created through a commission from the nonprofit arts organization Creative Time to commemorate the American national holiday, Flag Day. My flag noted the number of days that Flint residents were still without new pipes and access to free clean water. This flag continues to be raised at museums, schools, arts organizations, and cultural institutions across the country.

On June 13, 2019, Amber Hasan emailed me with news that the Michigan Attorney General’s Office had dismissed all criminal charges—which included involuntary manslaughter—against eight of the fifteen state and city employees named in the Flint water crisis investigations. An accusation that special prosecutor Todd Flood allowed private law firms representing former Governor Snyder to have “a role in deciding what information would be turned over to law enforcement” led to the decision for dismissal. Democratic attorney general Dana Nessel noted at the time that “justice delayed is not always justice denied,” and told Flint citizens that “a fearless and dedicated team of career prosecutors and investigators are hard at work to ensure [that] those who harmed you are held accountable.”<sup>29</sup> By 2017, a total of fifteen state and city employees had been criminally charged in the Flint water crisis. The charges included obstruction of justice, misconduct in office, conspiracy, willful neglect of duty, and involuntary manslaughter. These individuals

could have prevented one of the worst man-made environmental crisis in U.S. history, but all charges were eventually dismissed and all the individuals walked free.<sup>30</sup>

With these criminal charges dismissed, Flint residents lost what little faith remained in the American justice system. Even though the water supply was switched back to Lake Huron under a contract with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department after October 16, 2015, many still did not trust the water coming out of their faucets and continued to use bottled water while paying some of the highest water bills in the country. In 2021, the former governor was finally indicted; Snyder faced two charges of willful neglect of duty, a misdemeanor, to which he pleaded not guilty.<sup>31</sup> This history of class-based injustice, and white, male privilege led Shea and Amber to take matters into their own hands, to make it their responsibility to get their families and their community free, clean water. Their steadfast devotion to the safety of their children and fellow residents in the face of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism brings to mind Angela Davis’s declaration:

- 25 “Michigan’s Water Wars: Nestlé Pumps Millions of Gallons for Free While Flint Pays for Poisoned Water” (part of “Thirsty for Democracy: The Poisoning of an American City”: Special Report on Flint’s Water Crisis”), *Democracy Now!*, February 17, 2016, [https://www.democracynow.org/2016/2/17/michigans\\_water\\_wars\\_nestle\\_pumps\\_millions](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/2/17/michigans_water_wars_nestle_pumps_millions).
- 26 Alexandra Shimo, “While Nestlé Extracts Millions of Litres from Their Land, Residents Have No Drinking Water,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/04/ontario-six-nations-nestle-running-water>.
- 27 Sam Bozzo, *Blue Gold: World Water Wars*, documentary film (PBS), 2008.
- 28 LaToya Ruby Frazier, Shea Cobb, Amber Hasan, and Fred Moten, “In Conversation: Frazier, Cobb, Hasan, and Moten,” Gavin Brown’s enterprise, New York City, February 24, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/257956196>.
- 29 Paul Egan, “All Flint Water Crisis Criminal Charges Dismissed by Attorney General’s Office—for Now,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/06/13/flint-water-crisis-criminal-charges-dismissed/1445849001/>.
- 30 The full list of individuals and charges stemming from the Flint water crisis is as follows: Nick Lyon, director of Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services, charged with involuntary manslaughter and misconduct in office; Dr. Eden Wells, Michigan’s chief medical executive; charged with obstruction of justice and lying to a police officer; Darnell Earley, Flint emergency manager from September 2013 to January 2015, charged with false pretenses and conspiracy, plus misconduct in office, willful neglect of duty, and involuntary manslaughter; Gerald Ambrose, Flint emergency manager from January to April 2015; charged with false pretenses, conspiracy, misconduct in office, and willful neglect of duty; Howard Croft, City of Flint public works superintendent, charged with conspiracy, false pretenses, and involuntary manslaughter; Daugherty Johnson, Flint utilities administrator; charged with conspiracy and false pretenses; Liane Shekter-Smith, head of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality’s drinking water unit, charged with misconduct in office, willful neglect of duty, and involuntary manslaughter; Adam Rosenthal, Michigan DEQ water quality analyst, charged with misconduct in office, tampering with evidence, conspiracy to tamper with evidence, and willful neglect of duty; Patrick Cook, Michigan DEQ specialist for the community drinking water unit, charged with misconduct in office, conspiracy, and willful neglect of duty; Nancy Peeler, director of the Michigan DHHS program for maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting, charged with misconduct in office, conspiracy, and willful neglect of duty; Robert Scott, data manager for Michigan DHHS Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention Program; charged with misconduct in office, conspiracy, and willful neglect of duty; Corinne Miller, director of the Michigan Bureau of Epidemiology and state epidemiologist; charged with misconduct in office, conspiracy, and willful neglect of duty (Miller later pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor on the understanding felony charges would be dropped and agreed to cooperate with the investigation); Mike Glasgow, Flint’s laboratory and water quality supervisor; charged with two counts of tampering with evidence and one count of willful neglect of office (in

Racism is integrally linked to capitalism. And I think it's a mistake to assume that we can combat racism by leaving capitalism in place. As Cedric Robinson pointed out in his book *Black Marxism*, capitalism is racial capitalism. And, of course, to just say for a moment, that Marx pointed out that what he called primitive accumulation, capital doesn't just appear from nowhere. The original capital was provided by the labor of slaves. The Industrial Revolution, which pivoted around the production of capital, was enabled by slave labor in the U.S. So, I am convinced that the ultimate eradication of racism is going to require us to move toward a more socialist organization of our economies, of our other institutions.<sup>32</sup>

I firmly believe that the people of Flint (and everywhere else) should have the right to access water in a self-sufficient manner free from public utilities controlled by the government or state or private corporations. The fact that the Flint water crisis is indeed man-made raises a larger question: What type of blatant and pernicious system enables such state, government, and corporate abuse and "slow violence" against predominantly Black working-class bodies?<sup>33</sup>

We as citizens and residents should not be paying public utilities that are controlled by private corporations. The story of the Flint water crisis is one of neoliberalization and racial capitalism. As Robin D. G. Kelley explained, Governor Snyder's appointment of Darnell Early as emergency manager is a form of corporate-state dictatorship in which Early, served as the Black face of authoritarianism in the name of multiculturalism and diversity, was willingly used in a strategic plan to push the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) into bankruptcy. Paraded as an austerity measure to reduce the city's debt, this was instead a means of privatizing the water supply, making it more attractive for private investors and ensuring that DWSD bondholders would not incur losses because of its massive budget deficits.<sup>34</sup>

In a written testimony titled "The Flint Water Crisis, KWA and Strategic-Structural Racism," submitted to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission in 2016, law professor Peter J. Hammer concluded that the Flint water crisis was racially motivated, with express discrimination, unconscious bias, and spatial, structural, and strategic racism:

The past did not go anywhere. The past is deeply interconnected with the present, and the present to the future. Express racial discrimination embedded in housing discrimination historically ghettoized African American citizens inside Flint into economically and socially segregated neighborhood[s] up until the 1970s. These patterns of spatial racism reproduced themselves at a regional level to produce comparable patterns of regional residential segregation today. This spatial racism has been compounded by decades of structural racism, further producing and reproducing racially desperate [*vic*] outcomes in Genesee County in terms of household wealth, health, education and opportunity. Chronic municipal distress in Flint (and elsewhere) is a legacy of the forces of spatial-structural racism. But the story does not end here. Structural racism creates the vulnerability and strategic racism exploits it. The first form of exploitation for the residents of Flint was the Emergency Manager law itself and the displacement of democracy. The second form of exploitation was the formation of a "united front" consisting of KWA-Flint EMs-Flint Mayor-GCDC-DEQ ready to opportunistically push the KWA agenda, regardless of the real needs of the citizens of Flint. Flint had and continues to have serious issues with its water rate structure, very similar to the deeper problems of municipal distress, driven by the forces of structural racism. Rather than getting to the root causes of [Flint's] spiraling water rates, however, the united front pushed a false frame where the entire problem was reduced to DWSD wholesale water rates. As a

result, Flint residents will continue to see rapidly escalating water rates, even aside from the added costs of the Flint Water Crisis.<sup>35</sup>

I could no longer idly stand by and wait for the government to do its job. Justice was delayed and justice was denied for five years while men, women, and children in Flint continued to suffer. I asked Amber, "What can I do?" She told me about a man named Moses West, whom she had met in Vieques, Puerto Rico. A veteran Army Ranger, Moses had developed a 26,000-pound atmospheric water generator (AWG), which Amber thought could be brought to Flint to supply residents with free, clean water. Moses visited Flint to meet with local elected officials. His presentation on the machine met with lack of interest and dismissiveness. This negligent, careless inaction from Black local elected officials in Flint recalls what Kelley cautioned as "the rise of a Black political class that serves as junior partners in these forms of authoritarian governance."<sup>36</sup>

Unhindered, Amber began seeking resources to transport the atmospheric water generator from a military base in Texas to Flint, and to pay for its setup and operational costs. At that point, I made the decision to support her mission with proceeds from my exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise and a generous matching grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. I would also return to Flint to photograph what would become Act III. On July 29, 2019, Moses West and his atmospheric water generation technology arrived on North Saginaw Street between East Marengo and East Pulaski avenues, three miles north of downtown Flint. This neighborhood has been systemically, institutionally, and economically oppressed; has had its school system destroyed; has been deprived of access to proper grocery stores and healthy food, and clean water. Although it was perceived as a violent poor neighborhood, I witnessed the complete opposite—a community of beautiful, warm, friendly residents who live and own local businesses, who saw the AWG as an integral, uniting

May 2016, Glasgow pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor and agreed to cooperate, with the understanding felony charges would be dropped); Mike Prysby, Michigan DEQ drinking water official; charged with two counts of misconduct in office and one count each of conspiracy to tamper with evidence, tampering with evidence, engaging in a treatment violation that violates the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act, and engaging in a monitoring violation that violates the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act; Stephen Busch, Lansing district coordinator for the Michigan DEQ's Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance, charged with misconduct in office, conspiracy to tamper with evidence, tampering with evidence, involuntary manslaughter, and engaging in a treatment violation that violates the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act and engaging in a monitoring violation that violates the Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act. Paul Egan, "These Are the 15 People Criminally Charged in the Flint Water Crisis," *Detroit Free Press*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/06/14/flint-water-crisis-charges/397425001/>.

31 Joe Guillen, Christine MacDonald, Jennifer Dixon, "Ex-Gov. Rick Snyder Pleads Not Guilty As Nine Face Charges in Flint Water Crisis," *Detroit Free Press*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2021/01/14/rick-snyder-not-guilty-flint-water/4156962001/>.

32 Angela Davis, in conversation with Amy Goodman, "Angela Davis on Abolition, Calls to Defund Police, Toppled Racist Statues and Voting in 2020 Election," *Democracy Now!*, June 12, 2020, [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/angela\\_davis\\_on\\_abolition\\_calls\\_to](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/angela_davis_on_abolition_calls_to).

33 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

34 Kelley, "What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?"

35 Peter J. Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis, KWA and Strategic-Structural Racism: A Reply to Jeff Wright, Genesee County Drain Commissioner and CEO Karegnondi Water Authority," written testimony submitted to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, Hearings on the Flint Water Crisis, December 31, 2016, 27. [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcr/Hammer\\_Reply\\_Flint\\_MCRC\\_Testimony\\_123116\\_552226\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcr/Hammer_Reply_Flint_MCRC_Testimony_123116_552226_7.pdf).

36 Kelley, "What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?"

element of their neighborhood. The machine's site was chosen because it belonged to the family of Tuklor, Amber Hasan's husband. His mother's salon and beauticians' school once stood on this lot. I made a portrait of Tuklor's beloved mother, Ms. Mary A. Williams, depicting her in a victory stance recalling the Statue of Liberty, holding in her hand the solution to free, clean water for her people.

Amber, Shea, and The Sister Tour oversaw the operation of the AWG, as well as water distribution from it throughout Flint. Their mission echoed Moses's own: Bring relief with free, clean, safe water to Flint's residents; teach them how to use the machine, how to take care of it and to take ownership; and spread the word so that everyone in the city could stock up on water for the winter season. The machine doesn't extract moisture when the air temperature is forty-five degrees Fahrenheit or lower. The AWG was engineered to produce up to 8,400 liters, or 2,200 gallons, of clean water a day. The technology pulls air through a high-volume filter, and mechanically creates condensation, resulting in large amounts of water, which is then filtered through a water purification system. The water produced exceeds the most stringent EPA and World Health Organization (WHO) standards. The machine can be powered with either electricity or diesel, and is also compatible with solar photovoltaic (PV) and battery storage systems. Residents are free to walk up to the machine anytime between nine a.m. and eight p.m. daily and may take as much water as they need, in containers they bring, sparing them from having to stand in long lines for bottled water. Moses encouraged them to use BPA-free containers, and would supply them periodically.<sup>37</sup>

The first night after we got the AWG up and running, Amber's and Tuklor's beautiful children—Zaria, Oliser, DJ, and Yusuf—marched up and down the sidewalk on North Saginaw holding signs that read "Free Clean Water" and chanting, "Free clean water here! Come and get your free clean water! There's free clean water in Flint!" Cars pulled over, folks stopped by on their bicycles, and residents walked up with all sorts of containers. Some were in disbelief or shock, others suspicious or amazed. They asked us questions about the technology, and were ready to taste the water. I looked on with a big grin, noticing the splendid diversity of individuals. My eyes lingered on the majestic hues and shades of black, brown, and white skin tones against the military-green twenty-foot machine bathed in warm golden summer sunlight.

That moment, I had a realization. I ran over to Amber and asked, "Where's the nearest camera store? I must switch to color film!" Amber's mother, Ms. Lynette, a lawyer and a photographer, told me that the closest camera store that sold medium-format color film was forty-three miles away. I sped down the interstate to purchase as much 120 film as was available there. When I returned, I began talking to individuals who were retrieving water from the AWG. I asked whether they were comfortable speaking with me about how the ongoing water crisis had affected their health, about the cost of their water bills, and whether I could make their portraits. As I interviewed and photographed residents, some chose to remain nameless, while others, many pillars of the neighborhood, provided testimonies that counter the stereotyping language used to describe their community.

Alita Richie recounted that before the machine arrived, the local water gave her a headache and made her so sick she couldn't eat. Tina Reed told me that before, she often felt weak and lightheaded, but the water from the machine gave her energy, speed, and strength. David Burton let me know that this water tasted "the way God intended." He brought three seven-gallon water containers to fill up and use at his famous barbecue stand, World Class Bar-B-Q, one block over on the corner of North Saginaw Street and East Pierson Road. His business sits near other Black-owned businesses within this two-block radius, including Melvin's Saginaw Street Bargain Lot, Miko's Balcony Beauty Shop, Tuklor's The Oil Shop, and Amber's Mama's Healing Hands business. These business owners and their neighbors watched over the machine, day and night. On August 24, 2019, the AWG's compressor stopped working after a sabotage attack. Local media were quick to report that it was vandalism,

and placed blame on neighborhood residents. Moses, Amber, Tuklor, and I had known that Moses had been followed and harassed by people from another company who wanted access to his technology and patents. He and I were both followed and watched on multiple occasions. We knew it had been a calculated and sophisticated attack by an outsider, a person who was familiar with the technology. Moses enlisted help from community residents to repair the damage. A backup compressor arrived from Vieques, Puerto Rico, and I provided additional funding to ensure that the water mission would continue.

Here's the story that mass media neglected to tell: In the Fifth Ward of Flint, Michigan, local residents and outsiders—Black, White, Latinx, South Asian, Christian, Catholic, Muslim, atheist, queer, heterosexual, scientists, inventors, artists, veterans—came together to work toward a common basic human right, and distributed 2,200 gallons of safe, free, clean, water daily across the city of Flint.

One afternoon, two kindhearted beautiful Black men pulled up to the machine in a burgundy pickup truck with approximately thirty empty five-gallon jugs, each inscribed with residents' names. I climbed atop the twenty-foot machine, crouched to reload my camera, and began to quietly photograph Tuklor and Moses assisting these lovely gentlemen in filling jugs that would be delivered to elderly and disabled residents who couldn't leave their homes. By the time all of the jugs were full, the bed of the truck nearly touched the ground. Another evening, at the golden hour, Moses grabbed the hose and began spraying water from the machine. Children gathered to run and play in the spray. I stood watching, overwhelmed with the kinds of emotions that emerge when truth and justice prevails—it occurred to me that in the five years I had been coming to Flint, I had never seen children playing freely in water. I'd never seen Shea and Amber so carefree. I watched over them and waited for an energetic decisive moment, what would be the opening image of *Flint Is Family Act III*.

The people in the city of Flint deserve access to free, safe, clean water. Water is life. It is the spirit that binds us, keeping us from sickness, death, and destruction. Imagine the millions of lives we could save, from Newark, New Jersey, to Cape Town, South Africa, to Maharashtra, India, to First Nation reserves in Canada, with this technology, in cases of water pollution or drought. If we could act with compassion instead of profit motives and privatization.

I reloaded my camera, locked focus, and pressed my finger on the shutter release when Shea and Zion took their first sip of clean water. As the shutter clicked, I was overcome with a deep sense of joy and righteousness. After Shea saw the photograph, she wrote, "Thank you again for the light that you bring to my city." I replied, "The light was already there within you." For the first time in five years photographing in Flint, I finally rendered poetic justice. No matter how dark a situation may be, a camera can extract the light, and turn a negative into a positive. In creating *Flint Is Family In Three Acts*, I see the role of photographs as empowering and enacting visible change: in Act I, the photographs bear witness and reclaim history; in Act II, the photographs reveal a hidden narrative; in Act III, the photographs are a catalyst for obtaining resources. Let it be visually written, *Flint Is Family In Three Acts* is a collective act of trust, unity, solidarity, action, and selfless love.

37 BPA, a man-made industrial chemical, is a key building block in polycarbonate (no. 7) plastic, which is used to make a wide variety of products: water and juice bottles, food containers, CDs, DVDs, eyeglass lenses, and more. BPA is also an endocrine disruptor, a chemical not naturally produced in our bodies that can mimic or block the action of our own natural hormones. BPA has been shown to mimic the female hormone estrogen. It upsets the normal processes of development for growing babies and young children and the functions necessary for maintaining an adult body. See Perrin Ireland, "4 Ways to Avoid Toxic Chemicals in Food Packaging," Natural Resources Defense Council, August 12, 2015, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/4-ways-avoid-toxic-chemicals-food-packaging>.