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## Inequality or (Social) Death

Sabine Broeck

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### **40% of Detroit's population is having their water shut off**

The Detroit Water and Sewage Department is conducting mass water shutoffs in Detroit, Michigan targeting over 120,000 accounts: over 40% of the city. This has been called a 'human rights violation' by the United Nations. 70,000 of those accounts are residential accounts, or over 300,000 people directly affected.

### **Without water..**

... dehydration becomes an immediate threat to Detroit residents. A lack of clean and drinkable water on a scale of this size can affect not only a family but the entire city almost immediately. The onset of dehydration is 1-2 days which, if left untreated, can result in death in as little as 5-14 days from onset. Making sure Detroit residents have a supply of clean drinkable water is our top priority.

Sanitation is the second concern. With lack of water for basic things like waste removal, food preparation and cleanliness of food preparation tools, disease can become a threat factor in a matter of weeks. If left unchecked, disease can spread in 2 months time.

Without water, the threat to the health and safety of Detroit residents becomes immediate, the resulting negative effects of mass water shutoffs begin just 2 days after shutoff and can become endemic in just 60 days time. When taking the scope into account (120,000 water accounts or 300,000+ people ) the implications become clear: this is a disaster zone—and immediate relief and preparation is needed.

— *Detroit Water Brigade*, <http://detroitwaterbrigade.org/>, visited Dec. 16, 2015.

[1] I begin with a story. When I was telling one American Studies colleague of my research, the first response was a questioning pause on the other end of the phone line, as in "Detroit water, what?" I launched into a short description of those Detroit metropolitan Black neighborhoods, as many as 40,000 households in one go, being shut off from public water supplies for months on end. (See <http://detroitwaterbrigade.org/detroit-water-shutoffs-here-we-go-again/>) The deprivation of Detroit's Black neighborhoods of running water has not made national, let alone international headlines at all. Information about these shut offs must instead be collected from proactively searching the web for Black activist blogs, sites and feeds, referring sometimes to the local Michigan press. Thus, the audible intake of breath on the other side, followed by: "Really? I hadn't heard any of this." The factual bare bones, according to the material available on activist blogs and websites, are contained in the epigraph. More details would not change the picture. To compound this crisis, there have also been recent political considerations and negotiations between Detroit officials and drought states such as California, which has repeatedly suffered dramatic water shortages in the last years, to *sell* water from the Lake Erie region to the West. I have this information from African American Studies professor (Wayne State) and poet, Melba Boyd, a long-term Detroit resident and activist in Black urban politics.<sup>[1]</sup> This makes a clear

case against any arguments putting forward a potential lack of water supply for Detroit's vast metropolitan space. So, Detroit communities are facing a triple blow: first, the city administration decides to shut off water in cases of unpaid water bills, which a large majority of Black and poor residents cannot pay because they are unemployed. Second, those communities stand to witness the preferential treatment of white and powerful stakeholders at the hands of city government, who—as is public knowledge in media and on the level of government—in many cases have years-long backlogs of unpaid water bills, but still receive water. And third, the regional water supply of the Great Lakes, one of the vastest and most inexhaustible in the entire country, has become a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder, including another state—California—plagued by artificially-created water shortages. Only the pragmatic and political interventions of Black and Black led activist self-help groups like the *Detroit Water Brigade*, who—based on an analysis of the anti-Black violence involved in the "crisis"—have been trying their level best to keep poor Black people minimally served with drinking water through the worst summer months of communities' waterless-ness.

[2] This radically aggravated deprivation of the Black urban poor has received only very select attention, as suggested by the response of my German colleague. One immediate reason for his "not having heard" might lie in the eclipse of the so-called "water crisis" by the media spectacle of the immediately lethal, anti-Black violence of street killings that has, due to the public impact of Black social media activism, captivated global attention in the last several years, and has subsequently been turned into a pornotroping spectacle of death by international white press attention. I am using the term "crisis" here by way of citation of the—however spare and scattered -white US media coverage. The scattered reports about Detroit have repeatedly framed those particular substantiations of ongoing structural anti-Black social policy, which could be spotlighted for their apparent excessiveness, as a "crisis."

[3] Thus, the reason for the widespread lack of awareness, I suspect, lies in the pervasive human disinterest, brokered by transnational media and political, social and cultural institutions, in the imminent killing and devastation—in this case by purposeful water withdrawal—of Black being: a disinterest that renders Black being dispensable to and by human society. This human disinterest in Black life has created a kind of proactive, aggressive ethical void, which keeps attracting the spectacularization of Black suffering and death. This concerted pattern of Black absence and Black hypervisibility is a factor of anti-blackness that Black resistance has had to come up against in the long afterlife of slavery—in full awareness of the fact that Black resistance, in forms of spectacular threats to what is considered human life, has acquired its own kind of media fungibility.

[4] In pitting "human" against "Black being" here, I am asserting the theoretical urgency to attend to the structural antagonism between human civil society, the "world as we know it," as Fanon had it, and racialised Blackness. In the aftermath of enslavement's thingification of the enslaved beings, Black life has been always already split off from humanness and its post-Enlightenment entitlements, rights, and social claims. With this analysis, I am drawing on decades of Black interventions against white slavist modernity (see Broeck, 2015) and, more specifically, on recent Afro-pessimist radical critiques of the split between white life and Black social death to which this issue is dedicated. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to join the recently revived debate about social inequality in times of rampant neo-liberalism

from an antagonistic and quite an agonizing angle. (For this debate, see paradigmatically Brueggemann (2015), David Grusky and Szonja Szelenyi (2011), Hurst (re-edited 8th edition: 2015), Caliendo (2014), and Brubaker (2015)). Addressing the so-called "water crisis," in one of the oldest, post-industrial, post-modern and socially precarious urban zones in the United States, demands putting these (post)-classical leftist-social Democratic and even Marxist repertoires of reading a late capitalist politics of decay—in which the term and concept of inequality originates and resonates—into sharp critical relief. Any work on the purposeful production of, as Saidiya Hartman called it with a palpable sense of desperation and ire, "collateral damage" (Hartman 2007, 31), Black lives need to be grounded in Black radical intellectual labor. This needs to be stated explicitly, since the theoretical absorption of Black suffering into analogies with other disadvantaged and discriminated against social constituencies has blatantly disregarded the large body of epistemic work pointing towards the impossibility of that analogy. Black being has been singularly contained in and overdetermined by its ongoing abjection from civil and social life, by its aggressively being evacuated and excluded from even the possible status of claimancy to rights and entitlements (Sexton, Wilderson). Only this reorientation of critique could then lead to a new kind of extensive empiricist attention, which cannot be realized in the space of this limited textual intervention, to the *longue durée* historical contours of Black urban populations' suffering "gratuitous violence," in Frank Wilderson's term (Wilderson). Wilderson's term lends itself urgently, in my opinion, to articulate both the ongoing proliferation of white terrorist violence and, as its flipside, state and federal abandonment of Black life.

[5] Wilderson's work, most prominently, has clearly marked a break with theories of various provenances that see Black life staked by economic oppression, political underrepresentation, and social deprivation, even though on the level of experience, so his argument goes, all these facets impact on Black life. In contrast, and pushing Fanon's and Hartman's points, his focus is on the deep structure of anti-Blackness and its function for the very existence of the human. His argument takes off where Fanon left it: the human *is* because the Black *is not*. To him, anti-Blackness is anchored in the human's very sense of self; it is motorized by and within a libidinal economy (his term) that needs Black non-existence to be able to count itself as human, that needs the relegation of Black being to the realm of non-human sentience, in order to even envisage, revise, fight over, rewrite and recast the human's humanity. To Wilderson, the Black being is made to suffer, not because of anything that he or she does, or because of any kind of recognizable claim that could be made in a conflict among humans, as in gender struggle or class struggle; Black being is made to suffer as a structural prerequisite to the human-beingness of white humans. Just because.

[6] For my intervention, I acknowledge specifically the trajectory of Black, post-enclavist epistemic work without which such a paper would not been thinkable. Of course, the agony referred to before harks back to Fanon's notion of "zones of being, and of non-being," which do, respectively, contain human life and never-human Black life forms (a term I owe to Rinaldo Walcott, see Broeck 2015). It has passed through Césaire's indictment of Europe and, by extension, the Western reign of capital and its repeating ideologies, as "rotten to the core"; it has learned from Sylvia Wynter's theoretical critical advances on post-Enlightenment philosophical and political theorems, including Marxism and Feminism, which she

sees defined, still and again, within the parameters of the "human's" regime, which has relegated post-enslavist Black populations the world over to a kind of non-existence (Wynter). Obviously, the deployment of "social death" as a term goes back to Orlando Patterson's work which, by now, has gained such currency that one actually needs to defend the pertinence of this term to analyzing Black (post) enslavement against free-floating analogizing. Without Saidiya Hartman's break-through arguments, first, against enslavement's Black subjection as spectacle, and second, against the white production of Black being as fungibility and accumulation under enslavement and its afterlife (Hartman 1997), something like the so-called Detroit water crisis would remain obscure to analysis, a point that is also true for the still and again pertinent urgency of Hortense Spillers' crucial points about enslavement's legacies. To Spillers, white society, by way of and after the rupture of the Middle Passage, has denied Black being any coherence as subjectivity, any generative capacity of claims tied to specific markers of human-ness, like gender (Spillers). Instead, Black being has remained perceptible to human—that is white—society only as usable "flesh." Accordingly, violence against Blackness cannot be conceptualized as a transgression, I conclude from these arguments, but as the underlying premise of human functioning, including the struggle around rights, social improvement, justice and freedom, and basic material guarantees of life, like water, electricity, access to public health and other services.

[7] This point is driven home in the ostentatious routine legality and juridical legitimacy of the policies of aggressive water denial—as a state response to unpaid bills—by the city government of Detroit, who acts in clear view of the fact that mass Black poverty and non-enfranchisement figures as the existential norm for those Detroit communities, and not an exception which exceeds the social contract. The Detroit case also shores up the implication of the US federal government in the maintenance of this violent naturalization of deprivation: obviously local and state policies in this case did not cause alarm which might have led to federal intervention. This seems all the more scandalous given both the massive local struggle for affordable access to running water for the poor Black residents of Detroit and the devastating indictment of the Human Rights Watch Committee's report which, however, received only massive public agnotologic, that is, willfully ignorant (See Proctor, and Mills) neglect. Reading up on the activists' detailed and intimate reports of suffering and struggle, as documented on numerous websites, most prominently the work of the Detroit Water Brigade, makes visible the enormous duress that those grassroots initiatives have been facing as they navigate between drumming up financial and other support for their activist practices, including the creation of alternative mobile water supplies, and avoiding the trap of repeating the anti-Black use of Black communities' systematic deprivation as fodder for a local greedy white sensationalism that has had neither material nor political interest in changing the situation. This rather limited localized press attention, veering from liberal sentiment in parts of the mainstream press to excessive fascist racist propaganda videos on websites (which I will not cite here!), has been matched with an overall absence of theoretical analysis and critical response.

[8] To restate my point, the reason for this absence seems to me to lie, on the one hand, in a kind of white supremacist indifference towards the specific empiricism of Black suffering, reigned by the theoretical innocence of an assumption that liberal and leftist theory knows all about how the underclass has been oppressed and dispossessed. On the other hand, this active indifference is being mobilized and

confirmed over and over again by the leftist framework of *inequality*, which actually disables any astute analysis of a "crisis" like the one unfolding in Detroit. Thus, in order to understand the overall silence around this issue, both in the US itself and also across the Atlantic, one needs to examine a paradigmatic array of white liberal and leftist commentary on this and similar "events" of urban deterioration, for which the terms "inequality" on the one hand, and "decay" on the other hand have been instrumental.

[9] For example, texts such as *The Inequality Reader, Social Inequality. Forms, Causes, Consequences*, and the recent *Social Inequality and Social Stratification in U.S. Society*, even though they favor the explanatory power of structural causes over and against the assignment of blame to afflicted communities, and even though they address the "continuing significance of race" and are aware of anti-Blackness as a factor (Feagin 2011), maintain as their conceptual reference for inequality research the key terms of "discrimination," "racial hierarchy," unjust and unfair "distribution," the "stratification" of wealth and poverty, the "racialisation of poverty," "social status" distinctions around "white privilege," and the impact of "race relations" (Doob). In *Inequality in America: Race, Poverty and Fulfilling Democracy* (Caliendo) from 2014, terms of a similar register are assembled: the concepts of "disadvantage," "discrimination," "disparities of access," frame the debate, moving the discussion towards "The Space between Power and Powerlessness" (a significant chapter title), and towards possible "amelioration." In all these investigations, an insistence on *differentiation* across a human scale is their arguments' mobilizing machine, creating a repertoire of proactive significations which keep analyses tied to questions of human society's contingencies of class reproduction and obscuring the structural non-existence of Black life forms as human within that social and political frame.

[10] Contrary to these analytic evasions, I suggest that the recurring mobilization of these terms has served to obscure the paradigmatically *afrocidal* core of Detroit's water politics. I propose this term to stress my point that the "collateral damage" of Black life has obviously not been seen by white actors, including leftist and liberal intellectuals, as the violent destruction and dispensation of a US national group. If it had been, a term like mine, referring to the established use of the term genocide, would be applied to white supremacists' willful practices and structures of letting Black life perish. According to standard definitions, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves (See e.g. Lemkin). If human society refuses to recognize anti-Blackness as genocidal, a neologism is inevitably called for to enable conceptual analysis. Therefore I situate my paper as a critique of the recently rekindled academic currency of the term "inequality" as an analytics that cannot grasp the lethal character of anti-Blackness. With due respect to Black epistemic labor, "enslavism"—as a condensed concept contracting the insights gained from the study of Black scholars' work—is thus my own term for that circum-Atlantic modern to postmodern regime, which has abjected Black existence from the world of human subjectivity and sociability. For Black life, enslavism entailed a purposeful absence and denial of interpellation by post-Enlightenment prerogatives of "freedom" and "equality," which have successfully pre-ordained the status

of human-ness for subjects to be able to circulate within conflicting civil and democratic claims at all. Within the framework of this paper, then, the particular angle given by the heuristics of enslavement demands a critique of a concept like inequality, based as it has been in an anti-capitalist conceptual rhetoric, which has not examined its own anti-Blackness. White power's containment of Black being in abjection, fleshiness, usability/dispensability and a state of non-humanness, has overdetermined what Hartman calls the "afterlife" of enslavement.

[11] Consequently, I am reframing the inequality discourse *not* as a useful tool for political and social struggle against the ongoing and structural anti-Blackness on social and political levels, for which the water shut down is but one instantiation but, rather, as an epistemic and political problem. The purposeful water deprivation of Detroit's Black community marks a case in point: it bespeaks a phase of white supremacist neoliberal capitalism which enables or even demands government and administration to dispense with Black population groups whose use value has been exhausted, given the long demise of Detroit's Fordist economy. Accordingly, the analytics of inequality (a term used for description of human difference) cannot grasp the conundrum.

[12] As for the so-called water "crisis" itself, my primary resources have been individual and collective blogs by advocacy groups in Detroit itself, who have tried not only to raise public awareness of the "issue" if one can at all call it that; in my mind, language fails me routinely.<sup>[2]</sup> It is altogether stunning to see how even the most liberal and leftist commentary has framed the months' long denial of water access to large parts of Detroit's Black population as a "crisis" (and not a logical expression) of urban infrastructure, as a "crisis" of distribution of resources, of downright administrative mismanagement, of political ill-will or incompetence on the part of the city's leadership. The prevailing critique of Detroit city politics thus congeals in the notion of "crisis" (in a wide range of vocabulary) which, in fact, frames the perpetration of a massive onslaught on the sheer physical existence, on the sanitation of the lives, let alone on the psychic and mental health, of large parts of the city's poor Black population, as an aberration from normal, as a kind of collapse or erosion of urban conviviality owing to the irresponsibility and incompetence of Detroit's governing elites. The focus has been on "crisis," the semantics of which refer us to a breakdown of an otherwise functioning system, on the deplorable specific incapacity of stewardship on the part of white power, and thus a state of alarm for metropolitan areas' social cohesion because the "crisis" shores up urban inequality to a threatening extent. With the exception, of course, of grassroots action and reporting by Black and Black-led community groups and individuals, the focus has not been on the potentially lethal effects of shutting off water access for up to 40,000 households for months at a time. This policy has created a potential killing zone, in answer to which one might have expected a whole host of widely shared riotous demands that the government of Detroit, and the government of the United States, which are responsible for this large scale destruction of Black lives, be held responsible. I know, of course, that this would be a wildly utopian intervention. I am saying this not because I want to instigate speculation about its possible realization, but because I am struck by the absence of the demand in available commentaries.

[13] In most websites, despite their ostentatious good faith, a stunned response to the apparent

spectacularity and excessiveness of Black suffering abounds and, again, I am loath to quote. Appalled as it is, the commentary is driven by white leftist or liberal empathy against the "senseless" and "overwhelming" and "mean" "unjust" and "inequality-fostering" treatment of Detroit's Black citizens. These sentiments presuppose a Black human, civic and social life to be eroded by capitalism's excess, by specific transgressive events and acts spinning out of all rationality. They suppose, in short, a status of humanness that society has denied to Black life forms. They suppress, in consequence, the givenness of the permanent, structural and proactive "collateral damaging" of Black life, and Black lives, as constitutive of human struggles for fair social distribution and equal treatment, which only function as a defense against the horizon of Black abjection.

[14] Those very sentiments are also always mixed up with pornotroping shudders at the enormity of what passes for "urban decay" in the US. Those shudders mobilize human citizen's fear of social precarity by way of using Black suffering as the limit horizon of potential, but structurally never actual, abjection. Those frightful white ruminations on, as the media have it, the wreck "our cities" will become with capitalism ever more rampant, bespeak, again, the fungibility of Black experience, which signifies the inconceivable extreme of life's deprivation. Thus, the concept of inequality, as it has been re-articulated recently in sociological and political research and debate, is not the necessary analytical lever to understand what is happening in Detroit and, for that matter, in other Black urban spaces. Do give this an extra pause: in one of the major post-industrial cities of the Western world, Black organizing has had to create a donor-funded, ad-hoc, improvised water supply system to tide at least the most needy and poor elderly, Black women and children over the worst, and keep them from government inflicted waterlessness .

[15] The analytical problem is posed by the question of what post-Enlightenment terms like "inequality," with their legacy of Marxist repression or denial of anti-Black racism as a constitutive feature of Western transatlantic societies, allow one to see and *not* to see. The very term inequality carries its own agnotological weight. It positions the economic, social, and cultural lives of citizens on a lateral scale marking differences in access, distribution, beneficiary-ness, and it invites us to think about a politics of re-distribution which would either even out those differences or, at least, shift resources across the scale. However, it does not raise the question of the structural impossibility of Black beings making human claims that would, and could, be realized by and in a white supremacist capitalist superstructure—an impossibility that has entailed an evacuation from that scaling of difference altogether. For the "rule" of inequality to work, properly speaking, some basic social, cultural, and political acceptance of equality on the level of shared humanness needs to exist, from which there then could be various degrees of dissatisfaction with respect to its full realization. In terms of the politics of Detroit, and in terms of the ever-recurring random killings of Black life for that matter, a reading according to the paradigm of difference by degrees, which has dominated the liberal mainstream over the last decades, has not been an option. The Black question has been: live or die. What does the acceptance of this sentence mean for white socio-critical intervention, academic or otherwise? If "live or die" is the Black question, what does that entail for white struggle against enslavement as long as human life, our life, is predicated on the usability and disposability of Black life? I leave myself, and my readers, with these questions.

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## Notes

1. Personal conversation, Bremen spring 2015.
2. Also, I found any number of ultra right-wing to fascist commentary on the Detroit crisis on the net, which I will not go into here, because it is not my topic, and also to speak about this would need extensive quoting, which would result in another spectacular act of anti- Blackness, given the militantly racist character of their commentary.

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