

# – THE STRUCTURAL ORIGINS OF TERRITORIAL STIGMA: Water and Racial Politics in Metropolitan Detroit, 1950s–2010s

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## Abstract

*This article develops the concept of territorial stigma by analyzing how it can be cultivated at the level of political institutions across administrative divides. I consider the case of Detroit's regional water department, which until 2016 was owned and operated by the city and served over 120 suburban regional municipalities. I start by examining the cooperative city–suburban water system expansion in the 1950s and then analyze the rise of Detroit's first black-led administration in 1974, after which the water authority became a key regional institution that provided an opportunity for white suburban leaders to organize against the city. I find that suburban leaders advanced their immediate goal of mitigating rate hikes by declaring the city to be greedy and inept, instead of acknowledging structural conditions that increased operational costs. This had the effect of reproducing racialized stereotypes at the political level, which had enduring effects. The argument builds on the existing literature on territorial stigma by (1) identifying state institutions as sites for the propagation of stigma and (2) considering stigmatized places in relation to their non-stigmatized neighbors. The analysis integrates material-structural and cultural-symbolic factors in order to understand the perpetuation of regional urban inequalities.*

## Introduction

We expect water conflicts to develop in arid regions and in undersupplied cities, or when municipal services are replaced by corporations, but metropolitan Detroit—a region adjacent to the Great Lakes, containing one-fifth of the world's fresh water—enjoys a large infrastructure and has been historically managed by the City of Detroit. Why, then, has water infrastructure become a site of recurring conflict?

Unlike in other areas, water politics in metropolitan Detroit have not been motivated by water scarcity, but are instead the combined result of the legacy costs of an overbuilt infrastructure, and regional balkanization. This situation has led to contests over who should control the flow and shoulder the costs of maintaining these increasingly expensive infrastructural systems. Instead of the typical dynamic of a powerful central city using its regional influence to extract resources from subordinate municipalities (Steinberg and Clark, 1999), by historical circumstance a majority-black, relatively poor and increasingly diminutive city maintained authority over an aging and overbuilt water system that was expanded to serve the suburbs. Thus, an otherwise 'boring' (Star, 1999) utility became the principal site for regional relations and a key site of suburban–city antagonisms.

In the context of Detroit, the primary social cleavages through which water politics have developed are regional boundaries that reflect and reinforce racialized divides. Yet, while urban researchers have documented the continued presence of racial disparities in housing (see, for example, Massey and Denton, 1993; Sugrue, 1996; Turner *et al.*, 2013), employment (Quillian, 2006: 308; Pager *et al.*, 2009) and the location of hazardous waste sites (see Bullard *et al.*, 2008), the racial significance of larger technical systems such as water and sewerage have not been seriously considered.

I am grateful to Eric Seymour, Martin Murray, Frederick Wherry, George Steinmetz, Mathieu Desan, Al Young, Alix Gould-Werth and Jose Bortolucci for their comments and contributions. Mrs. Beal in the Detroit City Clerk's office helped me to locate many relevant records.

Because of water's sacred properties and the fact that pipes frequently penetrate otherwise naturalized boundaries, water infrastructure is an especially fruitful site for elucidating social cleavages embedded in relations of power (see, for example, Gandy, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2004; Kaika, 2005). Yet the processes whereby social divides are (re-)produced through the *administration* of water infrastructures, and the intersection of racial and ethnic cleavages with water, have not been subject to much investigation. Such studies are warranted because US metropolitan areas have experienced increasing levels of inter-municipal segregation since 1950s suburbanization, which requires a regional perspective that infrastructures can help to illuminate. Simultaneously, since the 1960s anti-black racial biases have been expressed in increasingly *laissez-faire* and euphemized ways, which necessitates the study of institutions.

This article demonstrates how the issue of distributing costs across a regional infrastructural system can become the terrain for a broader politics of territorial stigmatization—as rhetoric is disseminated through media, and suburban politicians work through the courts, legislature and local governments to shape how a city is characterized. Specifically, I show how suburban charges against the Detroit water department<sup>1</sup> since the 1970s have served to reinscribe racial biases through an outwardly ‘color-blind’ and *laissez-faire* language (Bobo *et al.*, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; 2009) that nevertheless drew on racialized tropes in order to perpetuate stigma. This article traces how cultural factors such as perceptions and stereotypes produce and reinforce justifications for social inequality in urban areas, thus building on efforts to theorize territorial stigma—the degradation, or stigmatization, of place (Quillian and Pager, 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2007; 2008; Wilson, 2007; Anderson, 2012; Murphy, 2012; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014)—by: (1) locating institutions (such as city administrations and their legalized territories) as mechanisms for the propagation of stigma in municipal administrations; and (2) considering a stigmatized place (here, the City of Detroit) alongside a valorized one (an alliance of majority-white suburbs) in order to situate them relationally.

Why did Detroit's suburbs organize against the city on the matter of water administration, and what have been the effects? To answer these questions, I consider key moments in the history of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD)—particularly when it was expanded in the 1960s and then contested in the 1970s and 2010s—in order to illuminate how white suburban politicians contributed to the city's territorial stigmatization. Empirically, I demonstrate how expansion sanctioned under a white-led Detroit administration in the 1950s and 1960s facilitated suburban growth, producing an overbuilt system. After a black mayor took office for the first time in 1974, suburban politicians joined together in an alliance that accused Detroit's administration of predation and incompetence. By the 2000s, when a financial emergency was declared imminent, I argue that these scripts of self-inflicted urban decline helped to justify the need for outside intervention, while city leaders sought to protect their sovereignty. After reviewing existing contributions to studies of territorial stigma and the dynamics of color-blind racism, I present my evidence in three parts.

### **Racialized institutions and the origins of territorial stigma**

Since the 1960s, when many explicitly racially biased practices were banned by law, racial prejudices in the US have become less explicit, instead rooting themselves in outwardly ‘color-blind’ claims and ideas (Bobo *et al.*, 1996; Lassiter, 2004; Bonilla-Silva,

1 The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department system, which was superseded in 2016 by the regionalized Great Lakes Water Authority, draws water from two sources on the Detroit River and Lake Huron, after which five water treatment plants distribute the water through around 3,400 miles of main pipes using 22 pumping stations and 17 storage reservoirs. Suburban municipalities, which are the department's wholesale customers, receive water from DWSD's mains and send it to individual and commercial users through their own distribution systems (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, 2009).

2009; for a review, see Quillian, 2006). However, despite the declining acceptance of explicitly racist ideas, research shows that racial discrimination continues in areas such as job seeking (Quillian, 2006: 308; Pager *et al.*, 2009), housing (Massey and Denton, 1993; Farley *et al.*, 1994; Turner *et al.*, 2013) and traffic arrests (Bates and Fasenfest, 2005), suggesting that durable mechanisms continue to perpetuate racial inequalities (see Bobo and Charles, 2009, for a review). The persistence of racially biased outcomes prompts us to identify less explicit mechanisms for racially dominant groups to subordinate others in order to maintain their privileged group position (Blumer, 1958). The concepts of ‘color-blind’ and ‘laissez-faire’ racism have been put forward to elaborate types of racial bias that are sustained by shared cultural codes expressing racial domination through references to supposedly apolitical market dynamics, individual preferences, or inherent cultural-behavioral limitations (see, for example, Bobo *et al.*, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

We also know that there are implicit ways of discursively marking territories as inferior through popular media and everyday conversation (Wacquant, 2007; 2008; Jensen and Christensen, 2012; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014). As a mechanism for grafting ideas of disorder and criminality onto particular spaces, territorial stigma associates residents with damaging traits—for example, as criminal, dangerous or dirty—which become dominant through a process of moving from individuals to populations and then finally on to spaces themselves (Quillian and Pager, 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004; Wacquant, 2007; Wilson, 2007; Murphy, 2012). Loïc Wacquant (2007: 68) describes this as follows: as a result of tainting, places that were once thriving can become places of notoriety, where people ‘commonly hide their address, avoid having family and friends visit them at home, and feel compelled to make excuses for residing in an infamous locale’. Once *spaces* instead of *groups* become identified as dangerous, criminal or disorderly, the social origins of the stigma are obfuscated, and euphemisms allowing for claims of color-blindness can proliferate while hiding their origins (*cf.* Lipsitz, 2011).

Wacquant (2007) has argued that territorial stigma is produced and diffused through media, state agencies and ordinary encounters. He describes three stages of territorial stigmatization: the fixing of the territory, the disintegration of communities within the territory, and the subsequent loss of social support systems. Territorial stigma, Wacquant explains, is linked to existing sources of stigma—namely, poverty, race or immigrant status—but it is not reducible to them (*ibid.*: 67). The stigma exerts related but independent effects on residents within the territory, such as when they apply for a job or seek a loan from the bank—in addition to the damaging effects of the process itself, which tends to break down communities and serve as a justification for heightened criminalization.

Studies of territorial stigma have tended to focus on its effects and responses, with most analyses being limited to the scale of the neighborhood (see, for example, the special issue of *Environment and Planning A*, 2014). How might territorial stigma change when it operates at the municipal level, where it is perpetuated across borders? How are these stigmatizing tropes cultivated, and what purpose do they serve?

A key source for the production of territorial stigma, this article argues, lies at the intersection of political and social (that is, racial, ethnic or class-based) antagonisms that allow stereotypes to be applied to state administrations. Locating the origins of territorial stigma is essential because, without specification, the source of the stigma may be attributed to residents’ own behaviors by default, potentially becoming fuel for the indirect expression of racial biases.

From researchers who began identifying the complex roots of territorial stigma, we have learned that areas may be stigmatized as a result of the behaviors associated with them (such as crime, littering, laziness) or based on the physical attributes of a place itself (for example, overcrowded, dirty, graffiti-ridden), and that the sources of

this stigma may be located in the state bureaucracy, in the media and in ordinary perceptions. As Wacquant (2007: 67) suggests, studies of territorial stigma may proceed ‘from below’, through ordinary interactions and perceptions, as well as ‘from above’, through media, state and academic sources. Studies that look for origins ‘from below’ have tended to focus on the physical attributes of neighborhoods. For example, Alexandra Murphy’s (2012) careful ethnographic observations help us to identify the processes whereby poor, black residents of a middle-class US suburb became stigmatized as ‘litterers’ and outsiders, with middle-class residents attributing the litterers’ actions to intrinsic traits rather than structural conditions. Similarly, Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) examined perceptions of disorder and found that whites were more likely to report litter, graffiti, drugs and drinking in public spaces as problems, which exaggerated the amount of physical disorder they recognized compared to their black neighbors. These detailed studies, conducted from the ground up, identify the frames that local residents use in order to interpret signs of physical disorder around them, thereby contributing to the territorial stigmatization of neighborhoods.

By contrast, studies that take a perspective ‘from above’ have sought to locate the social bases and codes through which territorial stigma is cultivated. For example, Larsen (2014) shows how states may propagate territorial stigma through the unintended results of bureaucratic logics and structures, which results in privileging particular values over others. Glasze *et al.* (2012) finds that while public housing estates in Germany, France and Poland were all characterized as threatening in news reports, the threat was conceptualized differently in the three countries. Cohen (2013) shows how the Israeli city of Bat Yam became coded as crowded, noisy, corrupt and dangerous once Mizrahis became the majority. In order to develop the concept of territorial stigma, it is essential to continue to locate the source of the production of the stigma itself, keeping in mind that even though sources may be identified, the stigma continues to wield an autonomous effect even when its origins are less evident or have diminished altogether.

This article advances the concept of territorial stigma by demonstrating how it can be cultivated by politicians across legalized borders in order to discredit administrations. This offers a relational perspective that identifies a key source of stigma production outside the territory itself. Unlike the neighborhood scale, municipal or state boundaries produce more clearly defined objects that can subsequently become saturated with meaning so that it becomes logically possible to make statements about entire cities or nations. Instead of the ‘neighborhoods of exile’ that Wacquant describes (2007: 169), *cities of exile*—of which Detroit is an extreme example—allow stigmatizing associations to become reinforced by state authorities. When a state, ripe with symbolic capital, endorses territorially stigmatizing accusations, those characterizations are more likely to become taken for granted (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1994). Throughout the US, municipalities have a level of autonomy that makes them responsible for their own political authority, revenue-collection practices and credit ratings. This independence suggests important parallels between the reigning market system, which promotes a system of individual meritocracy, and *laissez-faire* racism, for both logics deny racialized sources of inequalities even while they are realized (Bobo *et al.*, 1997; Wilson, 2007; Roberts and Mahtani, 2010; Mele, 2013).

Legalized territories—cities, districts, states or countries—may be characterized in a similar way to stigmatized neighborhood territories (for example, as dirty or disorganized), but there is a set of more relevant tropes that may become grafted onto them. Wacquant argues that the rise of territorial stigma in the latter part of the twentieth century was a product of several key political-economic shifts: the 1973 financial crisis, de-industrialization, urban uprisings, suburbanization and declining federal aid. To this list I add the rise of black urban administrations. The black mayors who

were elected in the mid-1970s and early 1980s across the US may have represented empowerment and hope to their supporters (see, for example, Thompson, 2005), but many white regional and state leaders characterized them as a threat from the beginning. This original distrust, and the characterizations that were subsequently launched, allowed suburban leaders to cultivate legitimacy with their own constituents by discrediting the city.

It is this rhetorical strategy—and its enduring effects—that this article details. I find that suburban leaders focused on stereotypical ideas of administrative (in)competence and unsubstantiated charges of corruption, which allowed them to deflect critical questions of costs and resources. I locate this dynamic in a case that allows us to identify the structural roots of such stereotypes and demonstrate that these can be perpetuated across municipal divides, which situates the process as a relational one (Bourdieu, 1999: 125). For symbolic and material goods concentrate in particular places while becoming noticeably absent in others, effectively marking some areas as valorized and others as stigmatized—but always producing them in tandem (*ibid.*).

In the sections that follow, I ask: Why did water rate hikes become a key source of antagonistic politics between the city and the suburbs of metropolitan Detroit? What motivated this protest, and what were its immediate and longer-term effects? Answering these questions can offer us critical insight to the broader issue of how structural and cultural factors intersect to reproduce regional divisions.

### Sources of evidence

The argument presented here relies on two forms of evidence. The first includes sources that allowed for the narrative construction of events unfolding over the course of several decades in relation to Detroit's water department. For this purpose, I created an archive based on newspaper microfilms from the 1950s through to the 1990s and an electronic database for articles from the year 1999. I compiled a total of 220 relevant articles from *The Detroit News* between the years 1954 and 1999. Of these, 187 articles were from the years 1976 to 1999, which I located by using the newspaper's print index and selecting articles listed under the subject heading 'Detroit Water and Sewerage'. I identified an additional 33 articles available on microfilm for the years 1954 to 1976 using the subject heading card catalogue available from the Detroit Public Library. From the hundreds of articles listed under this heading, I selected those that dealt with issues of rates, administration, regional relations and legal disputes. While the average number of articles per year (around five) in my total sample is relatively low, the articles tended to cluster around particularly notable events: some years had several relevant articles while others had none at all—in effect offering a thick description of particularly controversial events on matters of rates, administration, regional relations and legal cases. For the years 1999 to 2014 I conducted a search for articles under the same heading—'Detroit Water and Sewerage'—in *The Detroit News* holdings in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers digital archive and located more than 750 articles, which I then narrowed using the same criteria as above. These articles were used in order to reconstruct historical events and identify the dominant rhetorical frames.

Although I was not able to access historical records from DWSD directly, I was able to obtain the department's extensive online records and acquire annual reports for every year from 1970 through 2011 by filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the City of Detroit. I was able to locate additional reports, ordinances and financial statements through the Detroit City Clerk's records office. These materials allowed the analysis to take into account how the department's administration and financial accounting intersected with discursive politics. To supplement and substantiate these primary sources, interviews were conducted with two suburban officials and two city officials, and a meeting was held with members of the department's finance team.



### **The structural problem: an overbuilt water system for a changing region (mid-1950s to mid-1970s)**

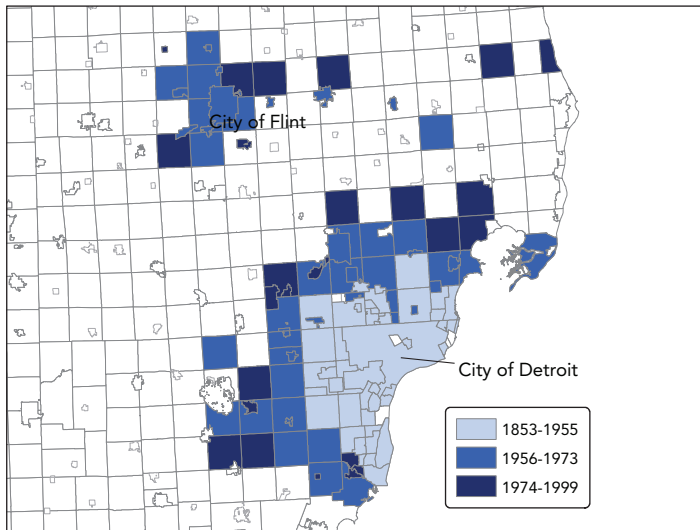
The territorial stigmatization that would be cultivated through political antagonisms in the 1970s had structural roots in an earlier era of suburban expansion, when the Detroit water department expanded its pipes into newly developing suburbs. Because of the region's ensuing economic decline, this eventually resulted in an excessively large system and attendant rising costs—particularly in the abandoned City of Detroit. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s white leaders worked cooperatively across municipal boundaries to provide water to the growing metropolitan area. Detroit leaders planned for population growth that was never realized, and administrators justified the expansion of the water system through a vicious logical circle of expansion that necessitated more revenue, which could only be secured through contracting with additional suburban water customers. These were the structural legacies that would inform regional relations in the decades that followed.

In 1955, the city provided water to 44 suburban municipalities, which were the department's 'wholesale customers', and between 1956 and 1973, when Gerald J. Remus was department director, the system was expanded rapidly in order to serve the sprawling metropolitan region. A key member of Detroit's last white-led administration, Remus was appointed by Republican Mayor Albert E. Cobo, who served from 1950 to 1957 and proclaimed himself to be a protector of white homeowners—having won all of the white-majority city wards in his election but not a single black-majority one (Galster, 2012: 198). Remus's immediate predecessor, Lawrence G. Lenhardt, had called for the suburbs to annex themselves into the city in order to get access to Detroit water, but Mayor Cobo replaced Lenhardt with Remus because he favored infrastructure expansion and continuing city control (Mowitz and Wright, 1962: 189). In order to facilitate expansion, the state legislature consented to lift the limit on the amount of water that could be sold to wholesale customers. This allowed 51 new suburban municipalities to join the Detroit-run system during Remus's 18 years as director, bringing the number of municipalities served to 96 by the time he departed in 1973 (see Figure 1).

To finance this expansion, the department took on significant debt. In 1956, just after Lenhardt's departure, the department introduced a US \$89 million<sup>2</sup> program to build an intake station 60 miles north on Lake Huron and to increase existing capacity at its downriver Springwells station in order to boost the system's projected total capacity to 1.24 billion gallons daily by 1970 (Carlisle, 1956). The expensive upstream Lake Huron project, which would begin to supply the City of Flint in 1967, was justified with promises not only of increased supply and less pollution, but also with symbolic assertions that the water there was more wholesome and pure. The investment was described at the time as 'immense', but *The Detroit News* editorial board rationalized the decision with widely accepted contemporary logic: 'it has been the history of the local water system that such investments pay for themselves' (*ibid.*).

Under Remus's leadership, the department expanded its infrastructure in order to increase revenue and consolidate the city's authority in the region, and this required cooperating with regional municipalities. The department published a development plan in 1959, which argued that the utility would thrive only through centralization and expansion: 'To gain the best reliability at the lowest cost all of the water for the area should be provided by one system. It must be ever-expanding and improving or a system will deteriorate into an antiquated, undependable, and expensive arrangement' (City of Detroit Board of Water Commissioners, 1959: 2). The need for increased water capacity was considered necessary because a series of water shortages had led to lawn-watering restrictions under Lenhardt, which caused a public outcry (Mowitz and

2 This amounts to approximately US \$740 million in 2015 dollar terms, based on the Consumer Price Index Calculator, available at <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.



**FIGURE 1** Detroit water system expansion before, during and after Gerald J. Remus's tenure (by municipality and year joined) (source: Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and National Historic Geographic Information System (NHGIS); map drawn by author, with support from Nicole Scholtz)

Wright, 1962: 171; D'Anieri, 2007: 65). The total cost of the program was estimated to be US \$172 million, to be financed by the city through a combination of income, bonds and federal grant money (City of Detroit Board of Water Commissioners, 1959: 10). Indeed, between 1956 and 1968, city records show that the City of Detroit issued a total of US \$147.5 million in bonds to finance expansion and received at least US \$50 million in federal aid.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of the region's water system was justified and funded under the assumption that the region would continue to grow and serve new residents. However, the 1959 master plan's population projections, which were developed from at least three sources, provide evidence that the city had planned its regional water infrastructure for a much larger future population than was eventually realized. At the time, planners predicted that the city's population would remain stable at just under two million people through the year 2000, but suburban growth—within existing municipalities and in new ones—would be high. If by 1980 the projections were proving inaccurate, with 1.2 million and 2.8 million living in the city and suburbs as opposed to forecasts of two million people in the city and 3.2 million in the suburbs, by the year 2000 this difference was even greater: instead of the projected 7.2 million people, the Detroit metropolitan area was home to only 4.7 million, or 65% of the anticipated population (see Table 1). However, once the pipes had been put in place, the burden was placed on system users to pay for them—a distributional question that would contribute to the resistance from suburban leaders over the next decade.

Under the leadership of Gerald Remus, the Detroit water system was expanded throughout the region in order to serve white residents moving to the suburbs, creating an extensive network owned and operated by the City of Detroit. During this time, when the city was white-led, the city and its suburban neighbors worked in partnership to construct the pipes required for Detroit residents to move into new municipalities. In effect, they agreed that Detroit could provide water for the suburbs 'cheaper than

3 City of Detroit Ordinance No. 491-G of 10 February 1970, obtained from Detroit City Clerk Archives.

**TABLE 1** Total 1959 population planning projections compared with actual census data (in millions)

	1959 Projections			Actual Population		
	City <sup>a</sup>	Suburbs <sup>b</sup>	Region	City	Suburbs	Region
1960	1.93	1.47	3.40	1.67	2.09	3.76
1970	1.98	2.39	4.37	1.51	2.69	4.20
1980	1.96	3.21	5.17	1.20	2.84	4.04
2000	1.96	5.19	7.15	0.95	3.73	4.68

<sup>a</sup>Includes only the City of Detroit.

<sup>b</sup>THE years 1960, 1970 and 1980 include Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties; the year 2000 includes Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne counties because the 1959 predictions included these areas for those years.

SOURCES: Projection data from the City of Detroit Board of Water Commissioners (1959: 9); actual population data from the US Census (accessed via *Social Explorer*)

they can provide it for themselves', so the system's total capacity was boosted from 760 million gallons per day to 940 million gallons by 1960 and 1.24 billion gallons by 1970 (Carlisle, 1956: 20). Water, it seemed at the time, might become the source of a cooperative regional authority (Editorial Board, 1954). Instead, in the decades to follow, the water department would become a central site of city-suburban conflict.

### **Generating stigma to reduce costs: suburban leaders organize against Detroit (mid-1970s to the 1980s)**

Cooperation forged in the 1950s would quickly erode in the 1970s after the surprising victory of Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young, in 1973. While suburban leaders partnered with city officials in the 1950s to build new water intake plants, mains and pumping stations for increasingly distant suburban developments, once the region had been divided into several majority-white municipalities with a black administration at the center, contests over rates and governance structure ensued.

By the time Mayor Young took office, the Detroit authority served nearly one hundred suburban municipalities as wholesale customers, but served only 4 million people instead of the 5.5 million that had been projected when the Lake Huron plant was approved (Ball, 1975b). These twin ingredients—rising costs owing to an overbuilt system that received less federal aid but was subject to increased federal regulation, along with a black administration at the helm of a regional institution in a highly segregated and racially charged metropolitan area—would become sufficient cause for the area's white leadership to foment resentment and opposition. They used the issue to assert racialized positions to protect their communities from regional responsibilities and curry favor with their constituents.

Suburban municipalities contributed to the stigmatization of Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s through two public claims: first, that rates hikes for suburban customers were based on unfair and unjustified reasons, and secondly, that the Detroit-run department was incompetent and untrustworthy and should be replaced with a suburban-majority water board. They established the first claim in the judicial system, while the second was broached in the state legislature. When these allegations were echoed by the region's media sources, they became associated with the city itself and contributed to Detroit's stigmatization by marking the city administration—and the city itself—as incompetent, corrupt and dangerous.

The event that provided an immediate cause for suburban leaders to organize was an annual water rate increase that was proposed in 1975 hikes for the following fiscal year. The budget proposed for the 1975/76 fiscal year totaled US \$94.7 million, up from US \$73.8 million the year before, requiring the first water rate increase since 1972 (Ball, 1975a). At the time, Detroit boasted a water rate that was 'the lowest among



the nation's large urban areas', but the 39% increase was steep (Ball, 1975c). Initial newspaper reports did not offer reasons for the rate increase, but later city filings explained that they were precipitated by costs resulting from inflation, which had produced a deficit in the department's budget.

Leading the charge against the rate hike to support a budget that he claimed at the time 'almost borders on fraud' was the ambitious suburban mayor Edward H. McNamara, who called for a state audit of the department (Ball, 1975a). McNamara, described as a 'symbol of suburban frustration' in media reports (Warren, 1976a), was up for re-election as mayor of the Wayne County inner-ring, middle-class and 99% white suburb of Livonia (Darden *et al.*, 1987: 101) and had been a suburban representative on the water board until he was fired later that year by Mayor Young (Warren, 1976b). After he was forced out of his position, McNamara took aim at Young through the water issue by organizing 160 officials from the department's 96 suburban municipalities to wage collective action to fight the rate hike; a front-page newspaper headline announced plainly at the time: 'Suburbs to wage water rate fight' (Warren, 1976b). Along with Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn and Democratic State Representative John Bennett, McNamara was expected to run for a US congressional seat the following year, and contemporary reports reasoned: 'there are few easier ways of winning political support in the conservative 2nd District than by playing David to Detroit's Goliath' (Ball, 1975c).

Suburban politicians, led by McNamara, Kuhn and Bennett created a 'Goliath' out of Detroit by characterizing the department's decision to raise rates as unfair and discriminatory and suggesting that the city was swindling the suburbs. For example, Democratic State Representative Aldred Sheridan charged that Detroit residents were directly benefitting from the hike: 'There is nothing uniform about the water rates, except the ridiculous low prices being paid in the city of Detroit' (*The Detroit News*, 1975). Similarly, McNamara claimed that the rate increase, which was uniformly 39% for city and suburban customers, was 'obviously unwarranted and unnecessary (Roach, 1976a). Suburban leaders' thus charged the city department with raising rates without reason in order to benefit their own residents.

In a letter to Detroit City Council members, McNamara made several charges that implied that the department was not being run efficiently, including that the department's audit did not reconcile its budget with its expenses, that there was too much overtime expenditure, and that there was a surplus of several million dollars in the department's operating fund. Only one charge explicitly suggested malfeasance, and even that was anticipation rather than accusation: that the proposal to add 100 new employees would lead to unnecessary 'patronage appointments' with ties to the mayor's office (Warren, 1976a). Except for this letter by McNamara, contemporary news reports did not identify any particular event or activity to justify suburban leaders' charges of mismanagement.

The suburban alliance, which called itself the Suburban Association of Detroit Water Customers, launched a class action lawsuit against the city, claiming that the 39% water rate increase would result in the 'unjust enrichment' of the city at the suburbs' expense (Roach, 1976a). The lawsuit made two claims: first, that the City of Detroit was receiving a rate of return on investment beyond their costs, and secondly, that the rate hikes were 'discriminatory because the suburbs already pay more for pumping and storage costs' (Roach, 1976a). As a result of the increases, the plaintiffs charged, the city was realizing 'unreasonably high rates of return on investment', which violated the 1957 Michigan law mandating that rates be 'reasonably related' to the cost of providing service (Supreme Court of Michigan, 1985).

The attorney on the case, George Ward, argued that his suburban clients were seeking US \$21 million in damages because 'they were overcharged for water so that the city could keep the cost of water service down for its own residents' (Finley, 1981).

Suburban Plymouth city manager Fred Yockey was more explicit: 'It's our position that the increase is blatantly inequitable', he charged (Roach, 1976a). The City of Detroit countered these accusations, claiming in its court filing that without the rate increase the water system would have had a US \$1.4 million deficit for the year, but with the rate increase the system managed a US \$4.6 million surplus, which could be used for capital improvements (Roach, 1976c). In fact, even McNamara's hometown of Livonia had raised its customers' rates by 11% in the same year, the council similarly citing inflation as the reason for the increase (Warren, 1976b).

The 1976 water rate lawsuit ultimately received a ruling in Detroit's favor, but the case was tried in three courts over nine years before the Michigan Supreme Court finally handed down its decision in 1985. By then, nearly a decade had passed—during which time at least two additional lawsuits were filed by the suburbs, along with two federal cases—and years of media coverage had led to the department being associated with stigmatizing traits such as greed and exploitation. In fact, the 1985 Michigan Supreme Court's decision opined that the lawsuit had been filed despite the fact that there was 'general agreement by the parties that the projection of new revenue needs was conservative' (Supreme Court of Michigan, 1985). These needs included anticipated debt reserve requirements and a five-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP) that was to be paid for mostly from operating revenue. In other words, the court acknowledged the political motivations of the suburban alliance in order to protest rate increases via the judicial system.

Indeed, when the audit that suburban leaders had called for was completed and results released in March 1976, the findings were summarized as follows: '1. It isn't swindling its suburban water and sewer customers. 2. It isn't mishandling its funds. 3. It isn't lying about the need for water and sewer rate increases to avert deficit spending' (Ashenfelter, 1976b). Without the 1976 increase, the article detailed, the department would have run a deficit, as it had the previous year. Still, this was a single news article and appeared only on page 3, unlike earlier reports that were carried on the front page.

Meanwhile, city officials explained that the actual rate individual suburban residents were charged tended to be higher than the wholesale rate charged by Detroit because local water authorities added their own rate and fee structures onto what Detroit charged the municipality. For example, in 1979 the Detroit department sold water for US \$3.11 per unit to Avon Township, a municipality that was active in the suburban campaign, but Avon Township charged its residents US \$11.43 for the same unit of water (Keith, 1979). The amount of the markup depended not only on costs, but also on whether suburban wholesale customers chose to charge fees through water rates, or through other means such as property taxes or new building fees. When the city eventually issued an apology for the 1976 rate hike dispute, the newspaper headline suggested that the apology was for administrative graft ('Water chief admits lapse'), although the city was actually expressing regret over its poor communication (Ashenfelter, 1976a).

In fact, a central point of city-suburban disagreement that emerges from these contests is the role of debt financing in paying for long-term maintenance and repairs. A 1976 city council investigation reported that the 39% rate hike could be cut down to 20%, but it continued to explain that the difference would need to be made up through bond revenue. In other words, the decision was not a matter of cutting costs, but instead of choosing between debt (via bonds) and revenue (via rates) as sources of capital (Glazier, 1976). While Director Charles Scales insisted that it was cheaper and therefore better for the city to borrow less money and pay more in cash through revenue (Roach, 1976b), suburban leaders labeled the department irresponsible for opting not to sell US \$25 million in bonds that were in the budget (Warren, 1976a). In fact, throughout the 1940s to 1960s, the department had routinely posted revenue surpluses—which the press referred to as 'profits'—and these were put towards capital improvements. For example, for fiscal year 1964–65, the department posted a 'net income' of US \$5.6

million (*The Detroit News*, 1966). At that time, however, there were no related charges of mismanagement or extortion aimed at the department, and the surplus was presented as evidence of responsible administration.

In addition to seeking court action, the suburban group also sought legislative action to shift authority over the department to suburban representatives via majority control on the water board, which then included four city and three suburban members appointed by the mayor. State Representative John Bennett, a Democrat from the inner-ring suburb of Redford Township, where there was not a single black-owned home in 1968 (Darden *et al.*, 1987: 138), introduced three bills to the Michigan House of Representatives in 1976 that would require suburban representation on the water board not to be subject to dismissal by the mayor, an annual external audit of the department, and mandatory public hearings to be held before a rate increase is issued (Warren 1976a). While the first proposal was not passed, it became a model for successive attempts to gain suburban control via the state legislature over the next four decades.

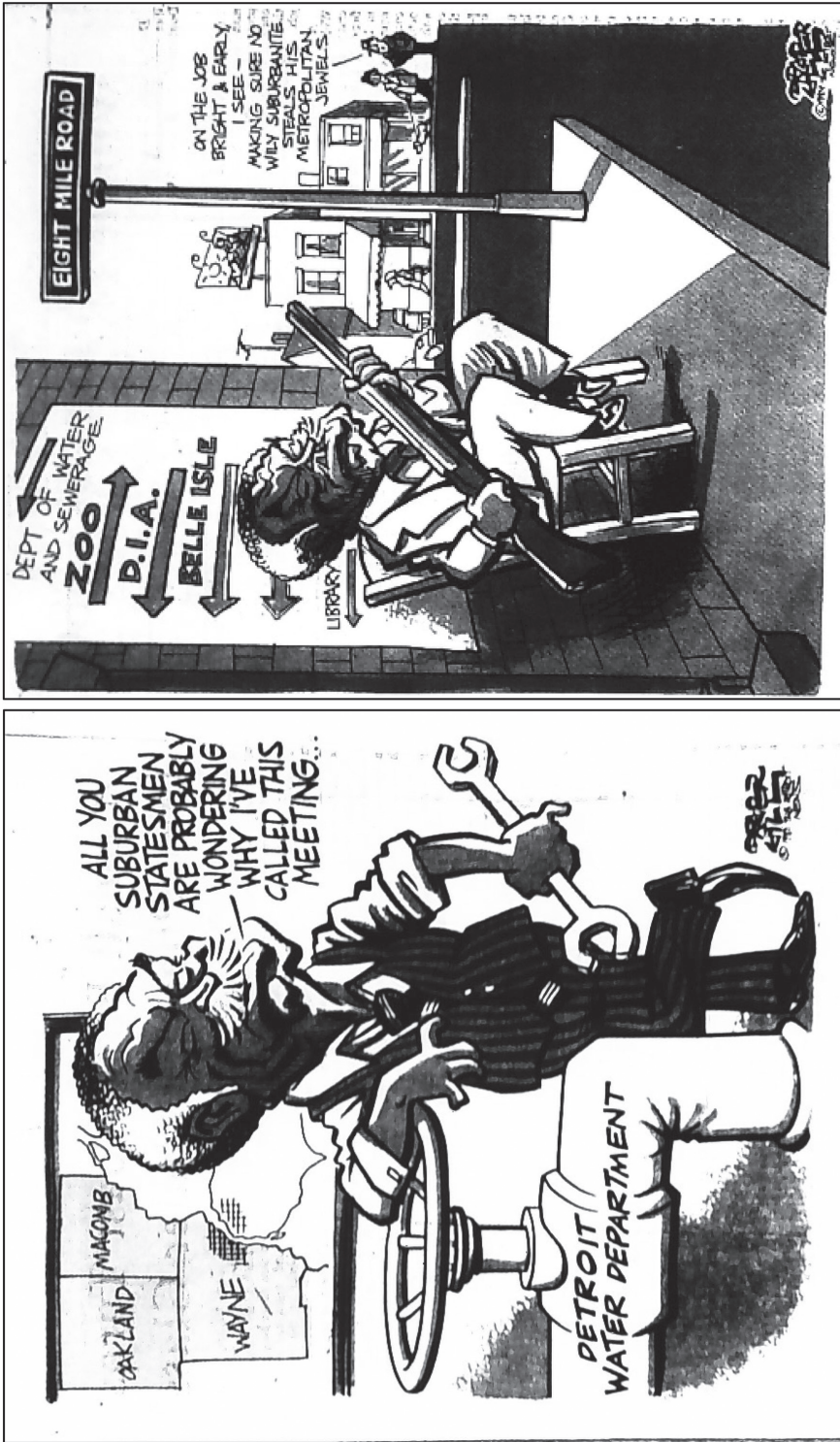
During the legislative process, suburban leaders cultivated tropes of the city as incompetent, criminal and corrupt. For example, Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn explained the rationale for the bills in the following way: 'The price of incompetence should not be spread on suburban customers who are denied any role in correcting the incompetence' (McCleary, 1979). John Maynard, a Democratic State Representative from suburban St. Clair Shores, described the action to a response to violent threat: 'We have to make the suburban representatives on the board bulletproof', he said, referring to the city administration and its ability to dismiss them (Keith, 1979). The 1976 legislative demands were supported by claims that the city's mismanagement of the system was the reason for the proposed rate increases. This, suburban leaders argued, necessitated overhauling the department's administration through increased suburban control.

At the center of these contests was Coleman Young, the city's first black mayor and a provocative orator who regularly raised issues of race and suburban hostility. As the ultimate authority over the water board, whose members were appointed by and subject to his dismissal, Young was a central object of suburban disdain.<sup>4</sup> Although the administrative system under which Young operated had been in place since 1960, oppositional suburban leaders charged that Young's authority over the board amounted to 'one-man rule' (Editorial Board, 1977). As Detroit became darker and poorer, it also became coded by white leaders as dangerous and dishonest. River Rouge Mayor James Doig demonstrated the frustration that many suburbanites felt at depending on the black-led City of Detroit for water, by commenting: 'Our hands are tied. We're at their mercy and always have been. We need the water, so we have to pay whatever they decide. It's out of our hands' (Twardon and Bradford, 1986).

In a set of political cartoons, city-suburban antagonisms are illustrated through racialized depictions of Mayor Young. In one image he is shown as a threatening figure, armed with a wrench and a gun and threatening to turn off the water in advance of the 1981 rate hikes (see Figure 2, left). In the second image, Young is sitting with a shotgun, as if on his front porch, guarding Detroit's infamous Eight Mile Road boundary (see Figure 2, right), the image suggesting that his armed defensiveness intimidates the white suburban couple innocently walking their dog. Although suburban leaders had actively cultivated an opposition movement, it was the city and Mayor Young who were characterized as threatening.

The suburban unity that was possible after Young's election contrasted with a couple of suburban attempts to exert authority over rates in the 1950s and 1960s. A 1956 proposal had sought to put the water department under the oversight of the

4 In 1960, Detroiters had voted to expand the water board to include suburban members for the first time (Ball, 1975a).



**FIGURE 2** Two political cartoons by *The Detroit News* cartoonist Draper Hill, depicting Detroit's first African American mayor, Coleman Young, aggressively protecting the city's authority over the water department from neighboring suburban counties (the cartoon on the left appeared on page A18 on 4 June 1981, the one on the right on page A10 on 14 March 1984; reproduced by permission of *The Detroit News*)



Michigan Public Service Commission, which would have regulated rates and expansion plans while allowing the department to issue bonds at lower interest rates. The measure, however, was described benignly as ‘an attempt to aid local governments, many of which are hard pressed for money to build adequate water supply systems’ and would have given the state an additional layer of oversight instead of replacing existing leadership (*The Detroit News*, 1956). In 1966, forty suburban leaders had joined together to support a similar measure, but the group lacked widespread support—viewing Detroit, as they did at the time, as the region’s lynchpin rather than a common threat (Maharry, 1966).

Another event in the 1970s substantially affected the administration of the Detroit water department: in May 1977, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Detroit for dumping excessive pollutants into the river. The outcome of the lawsuit was a consent decree leading to the court appointing a ‘Special Master’ to oversee the department—a position that would last for an astonishing 36 years and be filled for most of that time by Federal Judge John Feikens. Dubbed the ‘Sludge Judge’, Feikens oversaw plans mandating the construction of expensive pollution abatement mechanisms and the restructuring of the department to address personnel and procurement issues, which increasingly relied on contractors and consultants.

In 1981, the Michigan legislature passed a law that changed how wholesale rates could be calculated. Instead of mandating that they be ‘reasonable’ for the actual service delivered, the law required that rates be ‘based on the actual cost of service as determined under the utility basis of rate-making’.<sup>5</sup> In 1980, the department had contracted the consulting firm Camp, Dresser & McKee to determine how to calculate rates according to this logic, which incorporated revenue requirements along with differences in the costs of serving different municipalities (Camp, Dresser & McKee, 1980). Based on the American Water Works Association criteria, the new rate structure took into account the ‘major concerns of suburban wholesale customers regarding cost allocations, unaccounted-for water, and the costs associated with Detroit’s retail water distribution system’ (*ibid.*: 1–1). In effect, this basis of accounting addressed the suburban alliance’s concerns that they were unfairly shouldering part of the city’s own costs and created a system whereby rates would be calculated according to each municipality’s actual costs in an attempt to remain close to a market system of allocation.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, suburban charges against the water department administration contributed to characterizations of the City of Detroit as administratively incompetent, discriminatory—and ultimately criminal and corrupt. White suburban politicians thus drew on existing racial stereotypes to deflect their responsibility to pay for an overbuilt water system, instead blaming city administrators for mismanaging the system and constituting the primary cause of rising costs.

### **Realizing crisis in a stigmatized city (from the 1990s to the 2010s)**

By the 1990s and the 2000s, the water system had emerged as a central site for stigmatizing Detroit’s leadership, and the infrastructure proved vastly overbuilt. In 2013, the system pumped less water—610 millions of gallons daily—than it had in 1954 (when it pumped 695 million gallons). Its peak capacity was enormous: the pipes were capable of sending up to 1,700 million gallons of water per day throughout the region, which significantly exceeded the actual peak usage of around 900 million gallons (Mowitz and Wright, 1962: 171; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, 2014).<sup>6</sup> Fewer people and industries paying into a system with an estimated 80% of its budget dedicated to fixed-cost items meant that each household was forced to bear a higher proportion of the department’s overheads (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, 2009: 4). Those

5 Michigan State Act No. 34 of 1917, available from <http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?mcl-123-141> (accessed 10 April 2014).

6 This information was corroborated during a meeting with the department’s finance team on 28 October 2014.



who remained in the city bore a higher proportion of the system's fixed costs, paying more on average than suburban residents despite significantly lower average incomes (Butts and Gasteyer, 2011).

Meanwhile, the department's Master Plan of 2004 predicted that 'approximately US \$4.6 billion will be needed by the year 2020, largely due to the need to catch up on previously deferred rehabilitation and replacement (R and R) of aged infrastructure' (CH2MHill, 2004: 1-2). The combined challenges of raising revenue and maintaining increasingly aging and abandoned infrastructures contributed to this deferment. Moreover, the financialization of the department had resulted in an organization more highly dependent on debt capital than revenue: whereas in 1970 only 30% of each water revenue dollar was put towards replacements and improvements to the system, by 2010 around 80% of each dollar was used for debt service and bond capital financing, demonstrating that the suburban-preferred system of debt financing had succeeded.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, suburban leaders continued to rely on tropes of unfairness, incompetence and corruption to buttress their opposition, while many of Detroit's leaders responded to these stigmatizing charges by defending the system as a core city asset and source of economic development. As the city moved into its next round of 'crises'—the conviction of former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick on federal charges and state appointment of an Emergency Manager who filed for city bankruptcy—long-standing accusations of mismanagement provided implicit justification for the city's increasingly diminished sovereignty.

In the 1990s and 2000s, a new crop of suburban leaders ascended, inheriting both the rhetorical and tactical approaches of their predecessors. They introduced a steady stream of legislation—in 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2006 and 2012—seeking to shift control over the water system to the suburbs and challenging rate hikes with allegations of profiteering and mismanagement. Suburban Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, a leading figure in Michigan politics, who built his career on maintaining one of the highest county credit ratings, was essential to the water politics that ensued. Patterson had gained national recognition for successfully defending suburban municipalities against regional busing to promote integration in the *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) US Supreme Court case. He revived claims developed in the 1970s, interrupting the brief 'cease-fire' that had begun when Dennis Archer was elected as mayor in 1994, by explicitly continuing characterizations of the mayor as corrupt: 'I don't think (Detroit Mayor Dennis) Archer will be any more willing to give up that cash cow than Coleman Young', he charged, referring to the water department (Ourlian *et al.*, 1995). Archer, in turn, stated that suburban attempts to gain majority control over the department had become an 'emotional issue' for Detroiters (McWhirter and Brand-Williams, 1999).

Patterson was not alone in his charges against the department. In 2002, leaders from the inner-ring, working-class and majority-white suburb of Warren fought against the city in court, alleging that the municipality had been overcharged for several years. They supported a fresh legislative initiative to gain a suburban majority on the water board. Suburban leaders claimed that the department had refused to release its rate calculation formula. Warren City Attorney George Constance led the charge in 2002 by introducing a bill in the Michigan State House of Representatives and publicly serving papers for a lawsuit, which implied that there was malfeasance behind the city failing to provide its rate calculation formula. Constance explained, 'There is a lot of interest in Warren and across Macomb County ... People are telling us to move forward with our lawsuit because they have felt so powerless for a long time. They are glad someone is taking the bull by the horns' (Schabath, 2002).

7 From page 6 of the DMWD annual report for 1970, and page 69 of the DWSD Summary of Operating Statistics for 2010, both obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

Recapitulating charges made in the late 1970s, Patterson accused the Detroit department of discriminating against suburban municipalities. Patterson's rationale for renewing attacks against Detroit were rhetorically 'color-blind': he claimed to 'regionalize the water board and make sure that it is equitable and fair to all' (Ourlian *et al.*, 1995). However, making the board representative of its users would have granted majority-white suburban municipalities, who had been historically united, control over the utility without inheriting the risk of its debt. State Senator Laura Toy, a Republican from Livonia who sponsored the bill in 2006, explained: 'We never wanted to buy into the system, we just wanted another set of eyes and ears on it' (Wisely, 2006).

Calls for a majority-suburban board—whether in assembly or representative form—were also supported by accusations that the city department used its revenue for inappropriate purposes. In 2005, Oakland County Drain Commissioner John P. McCulloch, who was George Kuhn's successor, reportedly 'said water rates for suburban cities ... have been artificially inflated "for years" and the rate increases are used to underwrite other projects in Detroit rather than just the water system' (Nichols, 2005). Department Director Victor Mercado countered: 'We have had tremendous strides in productivity increases, reductions in overtime and the overall cost of the system. But the capital improvement is the driving force ... because you still need to improve the infrastructure' (*ibid.*).

Suburban claims that their ratepayers were effectively subsidizing the high number of Detroit residents defaulting on their water bills drew on existing characterizations of the department as unfair and exploitative and extended those stereotypes to Detroit residents. Suburban leaders had long argued that the department needed to shut off water connections for customers who defaulted on payments—people who had been stigmatized in the news as 'deadbeats' (Willcox, 1978). A series of articles published in 2002 called for increasing shutoffs, arguing that the department had not taken any action to collect the US \$59.3 million it was owed (Bebow, 2002a). The Deputy Mayor of Warren, Mike Greiner, concluded: 'We believe the city of Detroit is completely incapable of managing the water department, and this is just one more example of it' (Wisely, 2004). Suburban leaders overlooked Detroiters' increasing poverty and demolished industrial base, effectively denying their own potential responsibility for sharing these costs, while neoliberal expectations that every municipality be self-sustaining provided *laissez-faire* legitimacy for their claims.

These debates revealed a divergence in how the department was framed by the suburban alliance and the city. While many black leaders in Detroit understood the department to be an asset essential to the city's economic development and sovereignty, white suburban leaders claimed to be purely technocratic but favored governance and rate structures that worked in their interests by allowing them to deny fiscal responsibility for the city's deepening impoverishment. This became most apparent in debates over contracts, where opponents claimed moral superiority because of their professed 'color-blindness' while labeling black Detroiters the perpetrators of racism because they referred to racial categories when expressing an affirmative action policy in hiring and contracting. In accordance with City of Detroit policy, the department had aimed to develop the local workforce and award 30% of contracts and supplies—which totaled around US \$400 million annually—to Detroit-based companies and small firms (Bebow, 2002b). Mary Blackmon, a Water Board Commissioner since 1988, had long framed the department as a mechanism for promoting Detroit's economic development: 'This board feels very strongly about equal opportunity for black-owned and Detroit-based businesses ... It's not just the bottom financial line here. What does the community get for this? It's power', she explained (*ibid.*).

At the same time, L. Brooks Patterson represented a popular opinion among white suburban leaders when he argued that the best way to expand on the number of black-owned businesses was to enact a color-blind procurement policy based on

his own county's: 'Oakland's procurement system is simple: Companies fill out computerized forms and get bid packets any time a related service is needed. Price—not race or gender—is the determining factor. It's very clean' (*ibid.*). Republican State Representative Leon Drolet took the argument further: 'Any time you require people to have a certain skin color to get a contract, those people are the ones who are making it into a racial issue' (*ibid.*). While Blackmon promoted the department as an important source for the city's economic sustainability and political sovereignty, suburban politicians such as Patterson and Drolet merged neoliberal ideas with euphemized racial biases to call for efficiency and transparency via the price mechanism in order to challenge the city's prerogatives.

While suburban proponents of privatizing or regionalizing the water system invoked an outwardly 'color-blind' logic of market efficiency because it did not reference racial categories explicitly, Detroit leaders sought to repair their stigmatized status by charging that suburban efforts to gain control over the water system were part of a larger design to wrest power from the black-led city. Detroit NAACP Executive Director Heaster Wheeler confronted his suburban colleagues: 'With this water issue and other issues, many black people are wondering: Why are you raping our city? Why are you trying to take governmental control, which is power, from black leaders?' (McWhirter and Brand-Williams, 1999). Or, as Detroit City Council member Kwame Kenyatta elaborated, the water issue affected regional cooperation more generally: 'This creates animosity and feelings of racism across the board when it comes to other discussions. Okay now, if I can't have a good relationship with you over the water, then how am I going to have a good relationship with you over transportation?'<sup>8</sup> Black leaders understood suburban opposition to be an attack on black sovereignty, which, by naming otherwise euphemized racial biases, invited backlash from white leaders who accused the city of stirring up those antagonisms in the first place.

In the 2010s, Detroit suffered a reputational crisis resulting from the city's former mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, being convicted of profiting from city contracts. In 2014, Victor Mercado, who had been appointed as Director of the water department by Judge Feikens and had served under Kilpatrick, was found guilty of conspiracy for his involvement in steering contracts to Kilpatrick's associates. Ironically, the department was under a federal consent decree (from the 1977 EPA case) at the time, which had designated Kilpatrick as the department's Special Administrator and allowed him to bypass the Water Board for the approval of contracts and extensions, which he did in order to direct money into the pocket of contractor Bobby Ferguson. This crisis of confidence was soon followed by Governor Rick Snyder assigning an Emergency Manager to oversee the city in March 2013, the first time the department had been without federal oversight since 1977. With the subsequent filing for municipal bankruptcy, the department was ultimately restructured into the regional Great Lakes Water Authority, which began to lease infrastructure from Detroit for an annual fee from 2016.

While allegations of the Detroit administration's ineptitude and corruption stem from the mid-1970s, when no evidence was cited or found for these claims, events in the 2000s saw these accusations reaching fruition. Suburban leaders continued to assault the city department—amplifying earlier charges of bias, profiting, and criminality—while city leaders defended the department as a source of economic development. By this time, however, those charges had become reality, as Detroit's administration was increasingly being supplanted by state and federal oversight. Meanwhile, the vicious circle of aggressiveness and defensiveness that had been set in motion prevented partnerships from forming across municipal lines, effectively sheltering suburban

municipalities from the costs of Detroit's abandonment—particularly from the inherited costs of an overbuilt and increasingly regulated water infrastructure.

### **Discussion: the frustrated regional politics of stigmatization**

Few would dispute that the City of Detroit is an extreme case study in territorial stigmatization. Coleman Young's description of the city as 'the blackest, most segregated, most isolated, most restructured, most abandoned, most disenfranchised, most detested, and possibly the most feared city in America' has remained both provocative yet poignant for decades now, supporting the idea of Detroit as an exemplary case of territorial stigmatization (Young and Wheeler, 1994: 325). Territorial stigma, then, as we have seen here, can develop from regional politics—where impoverished deindustrialized cities such as Detroit become labeled as inept and corrupt by their regional neighbors, effectively placing the responsibility for urban problems onto the city itself and foreclosing larger scales for distributing the fiscal burden.

This finding pushes the argument for the formation of territorial stigmatization further by demonstrating how territorial stigma can be cultivated through active political campaigns that draw on patterns of racial and ethnic segregation, thus contributing to the growing literature on the origins of territorial stigma in bureaucratic structures (Larsen, 2014), media sources (Glasze *et al.*, 2012) and ethnic succession (Cohen, 2013). This article has sought to identify an important source of territorial stigma in the structural and relational conditions of social divides and state boundaries—which together allow the stigma to be cultivated in order to divert cost distribution questions and make Detroit independently responsible for its abandoned condition.

In this case, the organization of a suburban alliance and the use of racialized labels vis-à-vis the water department emerged shortly after Coleman Young took office in 1974, after which an important city department was stigmatized as discriminatory, dangerous, inept and corrupt—codes that drew on existing stereotypes of African Americans but grafted them onto an institution. Although rate hikes were often high—for example, the 39% rise in 1976—they were met with disproportionate allegations of corruption rather than being presented with the identification of particular practices of graft. The region's ongoing tendency to attribute city problems to Coleman Young was made apparent in a landmark investigative report on the Detroit bankruptcy, which challenged this characterization in its headline, finding that Young was the only Detroit mayor to oversee budgets with more revenue than debt since 1950, despite the region's ongoing tendency to blame him for Detroit's problems (Bomey and Gallagher, 2013).

The objective of this analysis has not been to locate the sources of territorial stigma in individual psyches, but rather to identify how the stigma was generated and whom it benefited—in other words, its *relational* social origins and consequences. Many of the suburban politicians who collaborated to villainize the department enjoyed successful political careers lasting several decades, suggesting that their actions were widely endorsed in the majority-white region. Moreover, filing long-running court cases and using rhetorical intimidation tactics were useful defenses to employ when the city was contending with a diminished tax base from commercial and residential abandonment, less federal aid for infrastructure, the 1970s recession and the expensive requirements of the 1972 Clean Water Act. This politics of intimidation deterred the city from raising rates on suburban customers because increases were likely to lead to allegations of profiteering and corruption, and litigation would require ample resources and take years to resolve. Suburban politicians thus benefited electorally by defaming Detroit, while also reducing their responsibility for legacy and regulatory costs.

An example of 'real existing regionalism' (Addie and Keil, 2015), this case combines analyses of discourse, territories and technologies that help us consider how regions actually operate—acknowledging that they are grounded in their own social contexts and historical experiences. In Michigan, a 1926 act halted the annexation of



**FIGURE 3** The vicious circle of territorial stigma (source: author's research)

suburban municipalities that, when combined with existing social cleavages, allowed Detroit's suburbs to maintain relative independence—even while other cities were able to incorporate their regional neighbors (Rusk, 2003: 55; Galster, 2012: 53). The water department is an important site for understanding why regional cooperation has so frequently failed in the Detroit metropolitan region. As an explicitly regional enterprise, the department offered a target for suburban assaults. Indeed, these water disputes, which are a crucial site for understanding the reinforcement of regional divides, have effectively reinscribed racial divisions onto municipal boundaries in an effort to defend the unequal distribution of resources (Omi and Winant, 2008).

The fact that the city's administration was cast as predatory without evidence of maladministration in the 1970s did not mean that real acts of corruption did not occur later, as mentioned. The politics of stigmatization has some consequences for actual graft. First of all, territorial stigma tends to transform individual acts of corruption into evidence of more general stereotyping about a group. For example, one corrupt black administrator can effectively taint the population of black leaders as a whole, whereas for white leaders such characterizations tend to remain confined to the individual. Secondly, once an administrative group is given a stigmatizing label, it logically follows that the cost of administrations actually *engaging* in those activities decreases. This can ironically create the conditions for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, an onslaught of stigmatizing labels may open up opportunities for city leaders to claim to protect residents from dangerous outsiders even while they are themselves engaging in unsavory activities. In Detroit's case, for example, Kilpatrick was able to use city-suburban antipathy to claim that he was protecting city interests from suburban attack, even while he was squandering public funds through inflated contracts. By focusing political attention on outside aggressors, internal criticism may be diminished.

The politics of stigma can also lead to a cycle of frustrated politics. When the city's water department challenged suburban independence by exerting authority and raising suburban rates, the suburbs took the opportunity to organize against the city, labeling its administration as incompetent and thieving. City leaders responded defensively to protect their sovereignty and resources, which became fresh evidence for suburban characterizations of the city as aggressive (see Figure 3). The stigma effectively



associated the city administration with the territory and finally with the residents themselves, with characterizations of ineptitude becoming so normalized that actual fraud eventually came to reinforce existing stereotypes. In other words, territorial stigmatization became an influence that ‘not only denie[d] blacks their rights as citizens but force[d] them to bear the social costs of their own victimization’ (Massey and Denton, 1993: 16).

Part of the process of territorial stigmatization, Wacquant (2007: 69) tells us, is that once a place has been deemed criminal, it becomes ‘easy for the authorities to justify special measures, deviating from both law and custom, which can have the effect—if not the intention—of destabilizing and further marginalizing their occupants’. While Wacquant focused on neighborhood-level criminality, particularly mass incarceration, we have seen that this can also apply to city administrations. For, just as special measures such as militarized policing can be implemented at the neighborhood level, at the municipal scale the state, national government or an international authority may enter to challenge that territory’s authority—its very sovereignty—based on allegations of corruption.

### Conclusion

These established but localized battles over water in Detroit made international headlines in the middle of 2014, when the city’s water department paid a contractor, Homrich, US \$5.6 million to shut off the water supply to 33,607 Detroit customers (Thibodeau, 2015). As families ran improvised water pipes into neighbors’ houses and community members brought packaged water to homes, activists charged that shutting off water amounted to human-rights abuse—for not only were water connections severed, but children were removed from family homes, as a water shutoff was deemed reason enough for parents to be classified as unfit by the state. In October 2014, two representatives from the United Nations visited the city and added international legitimacy to local activists’ claims (Gottesdiener, 2014). As these events were disseminated via the international media, questions were raised about how such a situation could have arisen in a region that enjoys the greatest freshwater abundance in the world.

As I have argued here, the politics of distribution in Detroit’s water department have long been an essential site for the frustrated politics of stigmatization—a cultural politics that has helped suburban residents avoid shouldering the costs of an overbuilt and increasingly regulated utility in an abandoned and deindustrialized city. Through their organized resistance, suburban leaders effectively called for a system that charges rates according to a formula to determine actual costs—however difficult those may be to calculate in practice—thereby effectively denying responsibility for legacy costs and rising city poverty. In a bitter paradox, longstanding suburban accusations that Detroit residents were benefitting from lower rates were effectively upended, as thousands of Detroit residents suffered the devastating consequences of the shutoffs when they were unable to pay their bills. Although some causes of the shutoff crisis were more immediate—for instance, the increasing amount of debt due to credit swaps in the early 2000s (Bromey and Gallagher, 2013) and the department’s desire to demonstrate its will to recoup revenue in the face of neoliberal expectations—many aspects were several decades in the making. For, while the suburbs fought for the city to pay a higher share of the region’s costs, Detroit residents were made increasingly responsible for a share of the costs even while they were less able to afford them.

Theoretically, this article has argued for recognizing and further investigating how, under what conditions and with what effects territorial stigma is propagated across administrative boundaries. Here, I have demonstrated how the symbolic politics of stigma are cultivated through, and in turn affect, the distribution of critical material resources. Often, especially under regimes of euphemization such as the post-1960s

US racial landscape, the tropes that are leveraged in order to uphold systems of urban inequality remain implicit and widely accepted. In order to call attention to these, we must continue to identify the historical sources leading to the development of territorial stigmatization and attempt to link those sources more explicitly with their pernicious and enduring effects.

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