WHEN DEMOCRACY DISAPPEARS:
Emergency Management in Benton Harbor

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Abstract

In this case study, I look at Benton Harbor, Michigan's tenure under a state-appointed "emergency manager," with extensive local powers replacing all local elected government, and a single imperative to balance the city's budget. The law, ostensibly race-neutral, wound up targeting almost all of Michigan's cities with significant black population. The law ultimately disenfranchised half the state's black population but only two percent of whites, as well as the majority of local black officials. This law invalidates a basic civil right and prerequisite for urban political theory: electoral democracy. Who holds power in the urban regime when the state takes over?

Drawing on 44 interviews, observations and archival research, I argue that a *white urban regime* governs without elected representation in this majority-black city. Emergency management, which shut out black officials, allowed this white urban regime to consolidate its influence, showing the deeper disenfranchisement inherent to this law. While posited as restoring "order" to troubled management, the process of emergency management in fact prolongs political crisis. But the ideological framing of emergency management as "neutral," and black politics as "corrupt" or "self-interested," provides the logic to blame black governance for structural disinvestment and white-led extraction.

Keywords: race, urban politics, citizenship, disenfranchisementⁱ

INTRODUCTION

The city of Benton Harbor, Michigan was declared in a state of fiscal emergency by a state review team and put under state-led “emergency financial management” in April 2010. This intervention removed all power from its elected officials for five years, locally disenfranchising its population. Examining the justifications for and ramifications of this racial disenfranchisement can help understand local black governance and citizenship, and even larger dynamics of race and politics in the contemporary era.

The construct of “emergency management” is revealing for the larger political climate. At this moment of “low tide” in local elected governance, another governing structure became visible, one that was usually largely hidden: what I call a *white urban regime*. I show how this case illuminates local racial politics, and the white urban regime’s operation, by discussing three aspects of emergency management in relation to racial governance in crisis. I derive my arguments from 44 semi-structured interviews with key players and observers, ethnographic meeting observations and over 3 months of fieldwork, and extensive archival research.

First, the process of emergency management legitimates the systematic defunding of Benton Harbor and other postindustrial centers by pinning the blame on financial mismanagement rather than these structural factors. Emergency management also facilitates additional extraction of the city’s assets, from land to services to water to pension funds. The concrete extraction under emergency management matters, but the

narrative justification of emergency management is a critical and underestimated tool for the white urban regime to legitimate its own role in the city.

Next, I examine the law's logic as a political blank slate to reset "problem" government, logic that obscures the asset capture implicit to the process. Emergency management uses blank slate logic to obscure the relationships producing inequality. The idea of the blank slate suggests (erroneously) that emergency managers are neutral administrators providing better governance, reinforcing the white urban regime's depiction of black city officials as hopelessly inadequate. By valorizing an abstracted notion of "change," it facilitates the same disruption that is elsewhere identified as part of Benton Harbor's problem. As such, emergency management serves as one of many mechanisms by which the extraction machine destabilizes the city, keeping it in a state of crisis. Emergency management is not a *solution* to crisis, but one disruption in a series of human-made crises.

Third, I show how emergency management consolidated a white power structure already in place surrounding Benton Harbor. The white urban regime is based around, but not coeval to, the city's major economic driver, Whirlpool Corporation, founded in Benton Harbor. Emergency management illuminates extreme race-based differences in social networks and resources, including setting the terms of debate, even in writing laws and policies. Emergency management builds up the shadow governance of the white urban machine, both through material assets and by symbolically legitimating its members' shadow governance. If elected government cannot be trusted, then the white urban regime's own shifts and inconsistencies are much less salient. Emergency

management is one tactic in a broader political dynamic undermining both black citizenship and elected black governance, and providing alternative, depoliticized and limited forms of participation.

BACKGROUND

Michigan's Emergency Manager law (PA 436, in its present iteration) permits the state to replace local government with an emergency manager (EM) for cities in financial crisis.ⁱⁱ

In 2013, this legislation was the most extreme among the 19 states that allowed some form of state intervention in city finances (Atwell, Fehr, Huh, and Russell 2013). A single state-appointed person with powers beyond elected officials' is supposed to fix municipalities' problems faster and cheaper than elected government. Michigan has had an emergency financial manager law since 1988 (PA 101), but the law was significantly strengthened in 1990 (PA 72) and expanded again in 2011 (PA 4). Ever since its drastic expansion, emergency managers have been granted nearly-unlimited power in the name of balancing a city's budget, including the discretion to determine elected officials' remaining authority; break union contracts; sell public property or utilities; fire any public employee or cut benefits; and eliminate, create or change positions. They can even dissolve the city. Emergency managers also operate in a black hole of accountability—they cannot be sued by residents or have decisions appealed, and in cases around the Flint Water Crisis and Detroit Public Schools, the state has argued they are not public employees (Jackman 2017, Carmody 2018).

The Koch-funded conservative policy think tank Mackinac Center also takes partial credit for PA 4, noting the similarity between Schimmel's 2005 memo

recommending the expansion of emergency powers, which they republished (LaFaive and Schimmel 2011) two months before the bill was introduced. By 2014, eight cities and four school districts had state-appointed emergency managers or consent decrees, and another two school districts had been dissolved by an EM.

Under all its iterations, the emergency manager law has had large racial disparities in its implementation. Including Detroit (placed under state receivership in April 2013), half of all black Michigan residents had no local elected city representation in 2014, as compared to only two percent of whites. Further, the six cities most heavily populated by blacks were all under some form of state administration. The law is supposedly triggered when cities' fiscal health scores are elevated, but the review process allows discretion in applying the law: each bill specifying the many triggers for financial review concludes that the treasurer, at their "sole discretion," may identify "other facts or circumstances" that indicate "probable financial distress" (PA 436 2012 141.1544.4.1.s). In a preliminary analysis of the probability that a city would be taken over by the state, chances of state takeover rise fifty percent with every ten percent increase in black population, holding fiscal distress constant (Kirkpatrick & Breznau 2016). Between 2006 and 2011, the state used ten-point fiscal indicator scores, as proposed by MSU (Kleine, Kloha, and Weissert 2002): a score of 5 or 6 was supposed to trigger "fiscal watch," and a higher score constituted "high risk" (Plerhoples and Scorsone 2010). Snyder discontinued formal scoring (Spreen and Cheek 2015), allowing more discretion in state review. However, these scores were still computed for 2008 to 2014 by contractor Munetrix, and can be used to compare municipalities that did and did not undergo

financial review or state control. Table 1 lists communities with the worst fiscal health as assessed by the state contractor, comparing the demographics and fiscal scores of those municipalities put under some form of receivership (emergency management or consent decree) to the worst-rated municipalities that escaped state control.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Even though the cities with highest black population are also most likely to have financial problems because of deindustrialization and white flight, fiscal distress, as a standardized measure, cannot explain which cities were taken under emergency management. The total population of cities under emergency management or consent decree was only 21% white.ⁱⁱⁱ Table 1 shows that the worst-off thirteen communities that were not taken over by the state have comparable fiscal warning scores, but very different racial demographics, with an average white population of 80% by municipality. (Of the next eighteen worst-off municipalities, with at least two scores above six, twelve were over ninety percent white). Moreover, eleven of the thirteen worst-off communities have received multiple warnings about financial malfeasance or noncompliance from the state Treasury department since 2004. Not only have those repeated warnings not led to state action, these municipalities have not been covered in online media as potentially experiencing financial distress, thus escaping stigma for their problems.

Failure to deploy EM for these places reflects what one member of Michigan Forward, the group behind the anti-EM referendum, was apparently told by her state representative: ““this law wasn’t really meant for us up here because it was mainly targeted at the people who were mismanaging their city governments and historically had

trouble, and he basically said we shouldn't worry about it. It's downstate's problem.'"

The fact that seven of the thirteen most distressed municipalities are, in fact, "downstate," in the same counties as EM cities, is an indicator that Michigan's nearly-totally white "upstate" may extend rhetorically to the distressed majority-white municipalities around black cities.

Moreover, much of the blame for growing deficits in majority-black municipalities is attributable to the state itself, thanks to its revenue-sharing cuts. In Michigan, cities receive a relatively large portion of their funding from state revenue sharing, owing to the 1978 Headlee Amendment, which capped municipalities' property tax rates. But in 2003, legislators cut the statutory portion of revenue for all cities, diverting over \$6.2 billion away from cities by fiscal year 2014 (Minghine 2014). Because only the redistributive component of shared revenue was cut, as compared to the "constitutionally determined" portion, it disproportionately hurt already-poor cities. This was later compounded by the effects of the Recession, which hugely affected Michigan industry and property values (and therefore tax revenue) for black neighborhoods and cities.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Community activists and officials in affected cities have mounted strong resistance to the law, especially since its expansion in 2011. Figure 1 shows a timeline of challenges to the law alongside changes in the law itself. One prong of attack was a petition that obtained 200,000 signatures to place PA 4 under voter referendum, although even this was contested, with a state board refusing to certify petitions over font size.

Petitioners eventually won through the Court of Appeals, and in November 2012, with 52% of voters opposing the law. Despite the voters' clear rejection of emergency management, the state legislature passed a new version (PA 432) within a month, effective March 2013: one of the few changes is the specification that this law cannot be overturned by popular vote. Opponents to the law have also argued that the legislature's reinstatement of PA 72 during the period between the petition and referendum was invalid, as PA 72 was repealed once PA 4 replaced it, and therefore could not simply be reinstated with PA 4's suspension ("Appeal," City of Pontiac Retired Employees Ass'n, et al. v. Schimmel, et al. 2013).

Several lawsuits have challenged the validity of emergency manager laws, both at the city and state level. In Pontiac, retirees sued Schimmel for actions during the law's transition period ("Appeal," 2013); in Flint, citizens have filed hundreds of lawsuits against EMs and the state over their water crisis; and Detroit's bankruptcy judge had to freeze several lawsuits to allow bankruptcy proceedings to go forward (Vlasic 2013). In 2016, Detroit Public School students filed a class action lawsuit against Snyder for 14th Amendment violations, depriving them of the right to literacy after fifteen years under emergency management (Jackman 2017). The broadest challenge to PA 4 was mounted by representatives of multiple cities affected by emergency management, including Benton Harbor. In a 2014 State Supreme Court decision, Judge Steeh upholding only plaintiffs' equal protection claim based on the law's racial impact, despite it being "facially neutral" ("Order," Phillips v. Snyder 2014, 20). Steeh noted that the "fiscal health" scoring system used to put cities under watch or review was only triggering black

cities despite equivalent scores in some white communities. However, the state dismissed this final claim in 2016, arguing that

There is no sufficiently direct connection to race in PA 436 that could amount to something...“comparable to the odious practice the Thirteenth Amendment was designed to eradicate”...The state’s remedy for financially endangered communities—passed by state-elected bodies for which African-Americans have a constitutionally protected equal right to vote, and facially entirely neutral with respect to race— are far removed from being a “badge” of the extraordinary evil of slavery. (18)

Deploying slavery as the bar for “odious” racial practices, this argument presumes a linear model of racial progress (AUTHOR forthcoming). Since the law was written in colorblind terms, “facially neutral,” its disparate implementation on black cities would not be considered.

While the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the state’s dismissal of this lawsuit in October 2017, a new set of plaintiffs filed suit against PA 436 in December 2017, arguing the law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. With three cities and four school districts still under state control, continued concern is warranted. Given that three cities—Pontiac, Ecorse, and Hamtramck—were put under receivership more than once, EM is not gone but only dormant, ready to be reactivated as needed.

Clearly, anyone interested in race and voting rights, local participation and citizenship should be invested in the origins and outcomes of emergency management. Sociologists studying race and citizenship have tended to focus on the racial consequences of felon disenfranchisement (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2005; Uggen & Manza, 2002) or other voter reforms (Chatman, 2012), but few have examined the emerging case of whole cities being put under state receivership. Despite continuing resistance to the law, academic and policy research has mostly taken its existence for

granted. A Pew study comparing Michigan's emergency manager law to other forms of state receivership recommended the expansion of emergency management-type laws for all states (Atwell, Fehr, Huh, and Russell 2013). MSU's 2015 review of emergency management (coauthored by a professor who has led emergency manager trainings), which blames state funding cuts for cities' distress, concludes that attempting a fairer distribution of funds is pointless. Instead, it recommends the creation of a new agency to support cities and a campaign to "raise awareness...that the causes of fiscal distress are not solely at the local level" (2015 24). The Michigan Civil Rights Commission's 2017 report assesses the role of the emergency manager law in producing the Flint Water Crisis. While the report argues that EM in Flint represented "systemic racism," and offers some potentially helpful modifications to the law, it assumes that reform is sufficient to remedy a law founded and implemented in systemic racism (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2017). Moreover, some of their reforms would *expand* EM powers, suggesting EMs should have regional authority to solve bigger problems and that EMs should train city leadership to prevent them "return[ing] without the training required to reach the expertise of those acting in the interim" (2017, 122), thus reinforcing blame on "bad" local management. For this reason, more systematic assessments of EM's role in reproducing racialized governance and inequality are urgently needed.

Urban Politics and the White Urban Regime

The field of urban regime analysis (e.g., Stone 1989; 1993; 2005) is a useful framework for interpreting governance and citizen voice. Stone's scholarship focuses on the informal

and well-resourced group of politicians, business people and elites who work through cooperation rather than bureaucracy or electoral politics to set agendas and, just as important, determine what will not be on the agenda. Urban regime analysis draws attention to the “flow” of decisions rather than open political conflicts. While this line of research minimizes the significance of electoral power and participation in these elite-run cities, none has yet considered a case in which elected local representation was invalidated. Who holds power in the urban regime when the state takes over?

However, urban politics has generally employed a superficial view of racial politics. Adolph Reed’s (1999) concept of “black urban regimes” is instructive, showing the limited power of governing black elites to serve black interests. Here I summarize Reed’s primary components of black urban regimes, which I have identified previously (AUTHOR 2015): black elected officials allying with whites to serve black elites’ interests, rather than their whole racial group; black urban power as partial and conditional, requiring endorsement of growth politics (Molotch 1976); and the era of black power coinciding with continued white institutional control (Holden 1971) and decreased municipal power, perhaps as a response to black electoral gains (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1997; Hochschild, 2008). Some have called for the extension of Reed’s work to study the “racial power relationships” (Horan 2001:29) in *every* urban regime.

Drawing on Reed’s work, I propose that a *white urban regime* exerts influence on Benton Harbor from the outside. I define this white urban regime as a racialized network of business people, landowners, developers, nonprofit heads, and philanthropists. The

white urban regime governs without needing formal elected positions within the black-led city. They monopolize local economic resources and control much of the grant money administered on the city's behalf. Second, Bracey holds that the division between public and private spheres of action is a "legal fiction" (2015:558). Ignoring this definition leaves room for a broad interpretation of what constitutes "governance" in the urban regime, which should include both public and private activity that shapes urban resource distribution, or "who gets what, when and how." Through both formal and informal arrangements that shape "value agreement," social capital and public agendas (Hunter, 1963 [1953]; Mills, 1956), this racialized network reproduces white interests.

This economic and political control is narratively justified by the white urban regime's public role as benefactors or city saviors, a positive public role is shaped in relation to its black opposite. The process of "territorial stigma," which Kornberg (2016) has fruitfully applied to the municipal level in a study of Detroit, has relational effects, as is true for the construction of racial hierarchies more generally. Not only does stigmatizing a black neighborhood or city as undeserving, undesirable, or threatening justify the deprivation of resources from that area, the process of stigmatization reciprocally frames white spaces and white governance as deserving and desirable, to the degree they are seen at all. The relentless focus on black Benton Harbor residents and officials as problematic distracts from whites' actions just outside the lens. Moreover, shared stigma of black governance and residents forms a "race-sacrificing covenant" (Bell 2004) to coordinate the actions of otherwise-competing white capitalists' interests.

Black elites serve an important role in justifying and supporting the white urban regime, whether in elected office or supporting non-profit organizations or business ventures. While black elite participation is essential, they have only limited and conditional access to these spaces of shadow governance, and can be replaced if they are out of compliance. Because they ultimately act in service of the white majority's interests, black elites' participation does not alter the "whiteness" of the WUR. The white urban regime does not operate under the "one drop" rule of racial classification. After all, Reed's black urban regime has white people working throughout its periphery, whether as the mentors for black elected officials, as the businesspeople pushing a growth model, or gatekeepers for the white-dominated county, state and federal agencies and other institutions with which the regime interacts. In a "white institutional space" (Moore 2008), the role transcends the identity of the person occupying it (Bracey 2015). Both the black urban regime and WUR are constructs that call attention to different and overlapping aspects of racialized governance in a larger system, and therefore serve complementary analytic goals.

Finally, the white urban regime is not disrupted by the ongoing "crisis" of Benton Harbor's government. In Bracey's "critical race theory of state," the state serves as an "instrument for maintaining white dominance" (2015:558), with whites' structural position shaping their interest and actions: white dominance includes whites' power to "exclude people of color from normal politics" (2015:580). The case of Michigan's Emergency Manager law represents an interesting test of that tenet, as elected black officials were literally shut out from "normal politics." But is "normal politics" state

administration under the EM law, or WUR actions, or both? Neither of the above seems like “normal” city administration as usually conceived.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Data from this paper derives from a mixed-method ethnographic case study conducted between 2012 and 2016. I examined data from state surveys conducted by the Ford School at the University of Michigan; policy papers produced by Michigan research organizations; local voting results; state and local demographic financial data; and emergency orders. I tracked EM lawsuits and the implementation and contestation of emergency management statewide.^{iv} I also conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with 44 key figures and observers in Benton Harbor, several of whom I interviewed multiple times. Pilot interviews began in March 2012, continued for an intensive period in May-July 2014, with the remainder conducted in May 2015. During the summer of 2014, I attended over twenty local meetings, primarily but not exclusively held at Benton Harbor's City Hall, as well as many other community events.

During my formal interviews, I spoke with local politicians (including five of the nine city commissioners then serving) and board members, ministers, lawyers, business-people, nonprofit workers, activists, and other residents. I spoke less formally with dozens of other locals, many of whom suggested connections or generously provided their thoughts. I also spoke with over a dozen employees of state and federal agencies and data analysts to supplement my analysis. My interviews ranged from half an hour to five and a half hours, with most lasting between one to two hours. I conducted interviews at

the public library, in coffee shops, respondents' homes or offices, City Hall, and local educational institutions.

I employed snowball sampling to get a sense of who was considered authoritative in the community. Becker has written about the "hierarchy of credibility," where people with high status are supposed to be able to give the broadest, most complete view of the situation (1967). I triangulate this official narrative with the alternative view of the white urban regime and emergency management, a critical black epistemology (Barnes, Robinson and Wright 2014; Woods 2017 [1998]).

I used a *modified grounded theory* approach for data analysis of archives, interviews and observations, building from initial theoretical concepts like the black urban regime and growth machine theory but with openness to new findings. This method of analysis allows researchers to engage deeply both with their data and existing theory (Burawoy 1998, Glaser and Strauss 1967), resulting in a theoretically generative series of arguments. Through iterative data collection and interpretation, building from within-case to cross-case analysis, I constructed and tested theoretical hypotheses until I reached theoretical saturation, at which point I was no longer encountering major new findings.

Benton Harbor

Benton Harbor, a small city of 10,000, sits on the southwest coast of Lake Michigan.

Once a thriving city drawing blacks as blue-collar workers during the Great Migration, the city has suffered from waves of out-migration, debt, and according to some, poor management. Further, as black migrants moved north for the manufacturing jobs in heavy industry, including corporations like Whirlpool, the whites in Benton Harbor fled to the

adjacent town, St. Joseph (Dumke 2008), bringing their institutions with them, from schools to churches and the hospital, resulting in communities highly segregated by race and economics. Benton Harbor is now 88% black, and one of the poorest towns in the state; it faces St. Joseph, now a white tourist town, just west across the Paw Paw River. The two cities are defined as mirror opposites to one another. While Benton Harbor's median property value has decreased 20% to \$49,200 in 2016, St. Joseph, just across the river, saw median home values rise 2% over this same period, to \$164,000 (American FactFinder).

But while BH is often portrayed as abandoned or “left behind,” the city can more accurately be described as “underdeveloped” (Woods 2017 [1998]), given the continued involvement and profiting of white elites. Whirlpool still maintains facilities in and around Benton Harbor and enjoys favored status like tax exemptions—it has also created a series of community non-profits to carry out projects in the city, like a luxury golf course and residential development built on industrial brownfields and Benton Harbor's lake access. Deploying these organizations along with public employees at the county and state level, and selective funding choices, Whirlpool has run the white urban regime in Benton Harbor for decades. The name “Whirlpool” now has a metonymic quality for the whole constellation of businesses and developers circling the city. In City Hall, “Whirlpool” is configured by its opponents as the entity pulling the strings, endlessly proposing front-stage projects without explaining the back-stage motivations or end game. A Whirlpool heir, Fred Upton, is the representative for Michigan's fourth congressional district; Al Pscholka, who wrote the 2011 expansion of EM powers,

worked for Upton as well as for Cornerstone Alliance, Whirlpool's primary non-profit vehicle for land acquisition and development. In this paper, however, I focus on the smaller players in Whirlpool's orbit.

Beyond St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, majority-white municipalities constitute virtually the entire county. In 2016, 65% of the white population of Berrien lives in a municipal unit that is less than 5% black; this is up slightly from 2009, when 29% of whites lived in a municipality that was less than 1% black. One WUR member, "Donald," described this extreme racial segregation as having occurred as a process of ghettoization through expulsive policy and NIMBYism, creating what he called "a white island effect." "Everybody...put all of their dregs and all their problems into here, and...put a wall around it." He continued, "we've got a lot of little communities around here...We've got nineteen. We've got townships, we've got cities, and they all have their own little fiefdom. And they're racist, they're stubborn, and they're belligerent." From my research, these small municipalities do appear to structure much of their identity around not being Benton Harbor through a process of territorial stigma. Benton Harbor's black governance is commonly singled out for stigmatization: the city's first black mayor, Charles Joseph, was elected three years before Coleman Young in Detroit. The county administrator is also Benton Harbor's last white mayor, defeated in a re-election bid. A reliable observer told me, "Unfortunately, he's very angry and bitter to this day about it... he's come out and just said to the County Commissioner, 'I will never do anything to help Benton Harbor.'"

Blank Slate

Emergency management represents an ideal tool for proponents of the “blank slate.” Though they are appointed by the governor, emergency managers are supposed to represent a neutral point of view, unburdened by politics as usual. A Mackinac article called PA 4 a “‘clean rinse’” (Littman 2012). A white small-business owner, “Sandy,” articulated similar themes of neutrality and lack of “politics” in an interview with me:

think of it as someone watching over--someone from the outside coming in. A fresh set of eyes, a neutral person who doesn't have these long roots in the community, where they owe somebody, and they owe somebody, and ten years ago he did this favor.

The blank slate served the needs of the white urban regime. “Donald” talked at length about emergency management and Benton Harbor’s needs, “look[ing] at it from a 60,000 foot view.” According to Donald, the city had to “get worse before it can get better,” facilitating a clean slate in market-rate housing, charter education, and new government:

Listen, every good government needs a good enema. And that's exactly what the EM does. It wasn't working locally, so how do you get radical change to occur? I guess that's the influence that I'm looking for. It's all about inertia. So you have to break those chains. Just like we talked about the generational poverty...you have to do the same thing with government. So the government contracts...in its purest state, it's really, truly a libertarian idea to be able to go in, have a magic pen, and wipe out every contract, to be able to take every employee and strip it down... I've got free market, I can now negotiate based on--forget collective bargaining and all the other bullshit that goes along with the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board], and all the other stuff...So what I need is a benevolent dictator, for a short term, to get it back on track, and then let the market take over. But you can't do that unless you can wipe it all out. It's chemotherapy. It's government chemo, and that's what we need.

Here Donald is echoing Milton Friedman’s economic philosophy of the convenience of “shocks” or crises to open opportunities for privatization and reform: “Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change” (Friedman 1965). For Donald, emergency

management represents the necessary “enema” or “chemo” to wipe out contracts, practices, and possibly also the people who had been part of governance. Donald explained, “it’s *really* important, for us, that the economics and the politics gets shaped a particular way because that drives our success.”

The concept of “emergency management” helps reinforce the idea of crisis—although some Michigan bodies, like Detroit’s school system, have been under emergency management for decades, or cycled through repeatedly. The shared logic of emergency management, charter and turnaround schools, and even tax-free districts like Enterprise or Renaissance Zones, assumes traditional governance is the problem and something new offers the solution (even if it relies on the same funding and larger structures). Reed argued fiscal distress in black cities was “not most significant as a portent of imminent crisis or collapse” but a signal of their limited political options (1999), but it can be advantageous to misinterpret the signals. In these “reform” programs, advocates can confuse change with progress, producing a constant imperative for change of whatever type, without knowledge about what came before or foresight into what comes next (AUTHOR forthcoming). This constant change can become its own kind of stasis, and destabilizes the ongoing work of governance.

Benton Harbor’s city commissioners, who also wanted change, were wary of the white urban regime’s series of spectacular plans without funding for the less-glamorous areas of city management and upkeep. Moreover, they were stuck in reactive mode from the constant influx of others’ impositions. As a city commissioner put it, they experienced the constant re-imposition of the blank slate as “crisis: when they get a crisis

and they keep you off guard because it's another crisis. You got to deal with this all right now, and all the other stuff goes away. So that's what they do to us.” She and another commissioner both mentioned Naomi Klein’s (2005) *Shock Doctrine* as an apt framework for their experience. Klein looks at the political deployment of Milton Friedman’s “shock doctrine,” the practice of pushing through austerity programs under cover of political/economic crises, with case studies of Chile, Hurricane Katrina, South Africa, and the Iraq War. (A third commissioner compared Benton Harbor’s external governance to post-invasion Iraq).

Ironically, the emergency manager’s role as disrupting what had come before represented continuity for Benton Harbor, which was already suffering the effects of constant staff turnover, in part from white urban regime involvement. A city commissioner complained to me that every time they hired a new city manager, he would start out saying the right things until Whirlpool’s nonprofit, Cornerstone Alliance, would get to him. She reflected, “it was always a battle for that position...city manager.” Someone in the white urban regime told the same story, complaining that as soon as they got somebody thinking the right way, the commission would go and fire him. A key dimension of underdevelopment is misreading cause and effect: seeing the destructive effects of policy, of intensive involvement, as the evidence of abandonment, suggesting the policy is needed (Woods 1998).

Black Governance Rendered Null and Void

The “disinterested outsider” was assumed to be more qualified and make better decisions than elected officials. In practice, it is not difficult to become an emergency manager. In 2011 and 2012, the Secretary of Treasury was running two-day training workshops to

certify emergency financial managers. With brief trainings and constant law change, it would be difficult for anyone to have a perfect grasp of the emergency manager's role. And in fact, even the trope of emergency managers as "neutral" is belied by the salary structure written into the newest iteration of the law, PA 436, specifying that private interests can contribute to emergency managers' salaries (raising troubling questions of representation and corruption). Moreover, the presentation of emergency management as an administrative or neutral law obscures not only the racial disparities in its implementation, but also the political conflict behind its establishment and subsequent iterations, including the voters' rejection of emergency management in 2012.

Joseph Harris and Tony Saunders were Benton Harbor's two emergency managers (Harris from April 2010-January 2013; Saunders for the final year). While both emergency managers were African-American, they came from outside the area, as was true of most of the twenty-seven emergency managers statewide (Bracey (2015) argues that people of color in political power today are often outsiders). The rotating cast of emergency managers (six served in more than one emergency manager position, a few simultaneously) comes from the same pool of city administrators and financial managers that rotate through Michigan cities.

Joseph Harris had previously served as Detroit's Auditor General, briefly as Detroit's CFO, and had been an accounting professor at Wayne State. As emergency manager, Harris was frequently described as a petty tyrant who took the absolute power of his title too seriously. An anti-emergency management activist, "Rodney," described him thus:

Harris was a terrorist...He was no picnic in the park. He thought he had so much power. He was arrogant...He came in telling commissioners off left and right, telling the mayor what he's going to do and what he ain't going to do. He said you all could have a meeting, take notes, and I want you to close it right then and there. Don't vote on nothing. Don't.

Even before Harris' powers were expanded under the 2011 law, citizens were resisting their own expulsion and that of their elected officials. As the father of a city commissioner put it,

“We spent a lot of time beating the bricks to get people to get get [sic] out and vote for the nearly elected legislators/elected officials...I want to ask the question of the citizens, if there is a law that they (commission) cannot be able to speak or to or sit in on anything that is going on here with this financial director?” (Heibutzki, 2010)

Within a week of the state's expansion of emergency managers' power under PA 4, “that's when hell broke loose,” Rodney reflected. “One of the first things that Harris did was show them that he had absolute power. He took the mayor's desk out of the office and put it in the basement. He took the keys and cell phones from the commissioners.” Harris issued a resolution limiting the power of the mayor and city commission to opening and adjourning meetings and approving minutes. Two months later, Harris further ordered that no city official or staff member could appear in an official capacity without his approval. He added that if the Commission issued any resolution, the city clerk must append a statement that the action was “NULL AND VOID, AND OF NO FORCE OR EFFECT” (EM Order 11-21).

To save money, EM Harris fired employees, raised water rates, outsourced functions, and merged the police and fire departments to cut staff. In one of his more widely-publicized actions, Harris (illegally) posted the city's radio station and equipment

on eBay (Savage, 2012), possibly to silence the commissioner who had been hosting radio shows criticizing emergency management. Harris closed and attempted to sell Benton Harbor's community center and the city's small-business incubator, both recently established with public funding. Harris also cut essential personnel, assuming many of the roles himself (Order 11-05). In February 2011, Harris told attendees at an Emergency Financial Manager training, "the City Manager is now gone—I am the City Manager. I replaced the Finance Director. So I'm the Finance Director and the City Manager. I am the Mayor and I am the Commission and I don't need them. All I need is the expertise" (Savage, 2011). Harris destabilized the operations of City Hall by temporarily eliminating these positions required by city charter. The gap in staffing harms institutional memory in city government, which was already at a premium due to the high rate of staff turnover; significantly lessens oversight for the emergency manager's actions; and raises questions about how City Hall was expected to function once the emergency manager left. Harris' attempts to modify the city charter also communicated his distaste for elected leadership. In Order 11-31, Harris introduced city ballot items that would have reduced the size and power of the city commission (something several white urban regime members had told me they wanted) and increased the power of the city manager. His proposed system would further decrease oversight in finance, where auditors had already identified the lack of sufficient staff.

Ultimately, Harris was expelled after Whirlpool and government representatives met with state leaders, and select city commissioners agreed to support a tax millage renewal in exchange for a new emergency manager. The "dictator's" reign ended because

he did not understand the tight interplay of government and corporate power in the region. As Rodney said of Harris, “He thought he was bigger than Whirlpool. He didn’t realize that Whirlpool was one of the reasons he was here.” When Harris’ reign ended, so did the era of openly combative emergency management. But, as I will show, the differences between first and second emergency manager were more style than substance. Crucially, while the second emergency manager’s reign involved participatory rhetoric, black residents and officials were still shut out of politics. Rodney commented:

they were so glad to get rid of Joseph Harris. Not only was Whirlpool happy, but the citizens were happy, the commissioners were happy, because this guy [Harris] was something else! He didn’t take no mess either...I figured the governor had a hard time dealing with him! Now he’s gone, and Saunders is in here, who speaks softly. He speaks softly, you see?...he was trying to play both sides of the fence to see where we was at. But yet he’s still, during that period of time, steady taking the last things we had.

Saunders was a much younger Emergency Manager: he told Crains Detroit the year after he left, ““I was 26, and I had no idea what the hell I was doing”” (Pinho 2015). After graduating from the University of Michigan in 2007, Saunders had worked as the chief of staff for Detroit’s City Council president. After leaving Benton Harbor, Saunders was hired as Wayne County’s CFO but was soon discovered to have also started his own consulting firm, Dent Advisors, which targeted majority-black school districts like Shelby County, TN and Prince George’s County in Maryland. In 2017, Saunders got out of this conflict by joining a development equity firm headed by a county contractor who recently acquired Wayne County property (Jones 2017).

Most people I interviewed in 2014, both those for and against emergency management, agreed Saunders at least seemed better than Harris. Saunders solicited

opinions; he did not issue histrionic orders; he got along with the locals. He was even charismatic: a city commissioner described Saunders as a “dictator, but with a smile” (Gryczan, 2013). But as Rodney put it, “Saunders came in here, did a lot of stuff behind the peoples’ back. About as two-faced as you can get. If I had to choose I would take Harris over him, you see? You know Harris is going to do something. This guy was doing stuff undercover. That was the difference.” The second emergency manager was better at employing the discourse and symbolism of participation, and pleased outside observers who believed that Benton Harbor’s problems occurred from overly-generous government spending. However, Saunders’ reputation for friendliness didn’t prevent him from blocking elected officials’ access to city property except for commission meetings.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table Three above categorizes Saunders and Harris’ two hundred and forty-six emergency orders under the three different laws. Saunders issued orders at a rate of nine per month, twelve of them on his last two days in power, over double Harris’ average of four. While they do not constitute the full range of emergency managers’ actions, tallying the two sets of orders still shows underlying similarities in priorities and governance. Of the thirteen orders providing tax exemptions, twelve went to local corporations or developers; twenty-seven sold or vacated property. The orders are indicative of whose habitus and contributions were being recognized or facilitated: most liquor licenses issued were for microbreweries or the Elks; the recognitions went to entities like Arts District benefactors, Whirlpool, and “Bike to Work Week” (in a city where 60% of residents have no car (Bedford, 2009)). Meanwhile, both emergency managers imposed

austerity in raised fees and benefit cuts. Twenty orders were devoted to specifying the city commission's powers (usually limiting them).

Individual Blame for Structural Problems

At majority-white meetings in the county or at a local development non-profit, I was frequently approached by friendly people asking what had brought me there, marked as an outsider in this small town. In these interactions, the reaction to hearing I was studying politics and economics in the city was often a dubious "good luck..." as if I would need it. At one meeting, an attendee asked if I was studying local politics "in the context of—Barnum and Bailey?" Whites working in business and non-profits around Benton Harbor commonly deplored the city government's "dysfunction," or lack of ability to get things done. They talked at length about this dysfunction, whether attributed to lack of education, "self-serving politics," stupidity, nepotism, or corruption, as the origin of Benton Harbor's problems. One white urban regime member, "Steve," commented, "The city is not bleeding anymore [since emergency management ended]...It was just total complete stupidity and mismanagement." A second white urban regime member, "Eric," put it this way:

To be a city commissioner, I think, is a pretty complex job. You have to have a wide range of...education, but certainly a wide range of experience in what it actually means to run a city, to be part of developing a city, especially a city like this that needs to go from nothing to something. There's a lot of people that don't have that education, that are ignorant, maybe stupid—I don't know—but certainly ignorant about it.

Donald said of the city commissioners,

They're all whacked. They're all whacked. Meaning, they're from one end of the spectrum to the other, in terms of good, or bad, or crazy, or otherwise. But I would interview every single one of them.

LS: And what do you mean whacked if you say they're all over the spectrum?

Donald: They're whacked out. Meaning you can have some that are whacked out left, and then whacked out right. They could be--but it's a very polarized group. Now that's another dissertation. The commission.

These comments reflect what many white urban regime members expressed about black officials running Benton Harbor. These descriptions of black commissioners effectively devalued that group's perspective. Focusing on individuals and their alleged deficits parallels the use of "culture of poverty" narratives attributing black poverty to behavior. Even city commissioners agreed that city governance had traditionally been fractious, divided, and often poorly run. But from attending commission and committee meetings, I saw the substance of their political disagreement was often highly important. In Benton Harbor, black officials' main source of division was over whether to support the white urban regime's activity: those in favor argued cooperation with the white urban regime was necessary, given that they did not fully control their destiny. Moreover, some commissioners pointed out that the disagreement itself was not causally responsible for the city's problems.

Even whites who opposed emergency management recognized the strength of the "dysfunctional" narrative in the context of a black city. A lawyer trying to fight the emergency manager law noted the difficulty in obtaining plaintiffs for a lawsuit against emergency management: "It's a challenge. Because Benton Harbor's a dysfunctional community, I mean, it's hard. Who do you have represent that?" He said it was worse in another city: "Every time a person we got referred to us—they might be fine people, I don't know, but I can't have someone who was arrested two months before, and two

months before. But it's the nature of a community that's fractured. It's dysfunctional, you know?" Here, the lawyer is expressing a conundrum of racialized citizenship in Michigan: the very state institutions that disproportionately affect Black residents *interact* to restrict black voice and participation. Our racially disparate legal system and segregated cities mean that black residents are more likely to have a criminal record (especially after a scandal in which detectives planted drugs on hundreds of people (Warfield, 2009). In turn, that background labels them untrustworthy, even laughable, when they speak against a law that is restricting their democratic voice. What is more, the criminal record patterns are not simply racially unequal, but (it is alleged) represent whites' ability to employ local legal institutions against black resistance.

If Benton Harbor elected officials were assumed to be incapable and therefore deserving of emergency management, so were the city's citizens. When asked about the antidemocratic element inherent to the emergency manager law, both black and white locals who represented the white urban regime's point of view dismissed this concern. Black elites alleged locals lacked the political acumen to make good decisions, due to what Reed might describe as the "uplift" perspective that "a leadership of the best men need not trouble itself with deliberatively based ratification and input from a population in need of tutelage and custodianship" (1999, 20). For instance, the then-mayor of Benton Harbor alleged individuals who got evicted despite subsidized rent of what he said was \$8 or \$16 a month^v would not choose a successful candidate at the ballot, because they wouldn't identify with that person. He was not alone in claiming housing subsidization was a disincentive to political action, rather than an indicator of residents' poverty.

Florence, a black elite member, told me,

Well, the demographics of Benton Harbor are such as they have this raft of really, really young families. I mean kids, literally, that are heads of households, young women that are 16, 17, 18 years old. The welfare system provides them with money to get into an apartment. There they sit with their one or two babies and I don't know if they could even articulate to a commissioner what they really need.

Another frequent theme when talking about the city's democratic process was to invoke the claim that Benton Harbor's low voter eligibility rate and low electoral participation, rendered elections meaningless as a representation of local will. Several people claimed that commissioners were getting elected based on the size of their family: for instance, "Pete," a white man who worked in development, claimed,

You still have the individuals that might be getting a win by ten--we had a city commissioner couple years ago that was voted in and it was, like, a total of 62 votes. I mean there's *families* out there that are 60 people and so—and he's probably not the right guy for the job, but he just happens to know—have 60 family members and [they] rallied around him, the next thing you know you're elected as a city commissioner, you've got no business being in the city commission seat, but you are now running the city!

Donald, who also referred to "voter turnout here" as being "at a paltry single digit sometimes," claimed that buying votes in such a context was easy: "You can offer potato chips and a hot dog, find a bus, take them to the polling place, and they will go. And you will buy a vote for literally three or four bucks, in terms of transportation or food."

By invoking young women with children, public housing, large families, and cheap vote fraud, these respondents drew on specific racial stereotypes emphasizing characteristics supposedly in conflict with those of a "good citizen." Their talk ties into a long history of invalidating black citizenship based on irrelevant characteristics (Glenn 2002; Smith 1997), such as the impossibly difficult "literacy" tests, involving complex

constitutional interpretation, once imposed as a means of voter suppression of Southern blacks. This demeaning talk served to dismiss the claims of Benton Harbor residents that their democratic rights had been violated. If Benton Harbor's democracy could be symbolically rendered worthless prior to emergency management, then its loss was less important than in a city with less "suspect" citizens. And despite the progress of the anti-emergency manager lawsuit claiming racial discrimination, whites around Benton Harbor did not engage much with the possibility that the law's implementation was racialized. When I brought up the statistic about black cities' increased vulnerability to takeover, Donald simply commented, "I don't know if I buy that."

Upstream Determinants of Municipal Crisis

By focusing on low-level mismanagement, the white urban regime pointed away from the potential role of business and the state in driving the city's distress. Most people glossed over the property tax values that plummeted from white flight. Nor did they mention the business incentives that provided a total of \$52 million in tax waivers and credits for Whirlpool's downtown campus alone—these were just the cost of business in today's economy. And they certainly did not mention the state of Michigan, which has been whittling down cities' share of sales tax to balance the state budget, the revenue sharing cuts mentioned above. Due to the cuts' disproportionate impact on postindustrial cities, Benton Harbor's recent revenue loss was consistently almost double that of its wealthy neighbor St. Joseph. By fiscal year 2010, when Benton Harbor was put under emergency financial management, it was consistently losing about half a million per year from this

one cut, for a cumulative loss of \$4 million. The amount of the loss fairly closely matched Benton Harbor's annual deficit—the deficit that partially triggered Benton Harbor's takeover. Detroit lost \$700 million during the same period, which should complicate the traditional reasons given for that city's bankruptcy in 2014. For fiscal year 2016, Benton Harbor is anticipated to receive \$1.7 million – still \$900,000 a year less than it was receiving in 2000 (without standardizing for inflation). In other words, the problems ascribed to individual black politicians in Benton Harbor were caused by the same state actors who imposed emergency management.

Several city commissioners cited revenue sharing as being directly responsible for their deficit. One commissioner claimed, “the state of Michigan...created the problem in the first place with revenue sharing. They took the money and gave it to somebody else...And that's why I said yesterday that we need to sue the state, because they started this. And then they come over and take over communities and start selling off everything, and bringing in their buddies to capture anything that's left.” I asked whether people were talking about that in Benton Harbor, and she replied, “Oh yes. Oh yes...Among ourselves.”

Tightening the Stranglehold

The idea of emergency management mapped well onto the desires of the white urban regime. For this group, who constantly emphasized the need for “change” at virtually any cost, emergency management presented the promise of extreme change – and, on top of it, the possibility of new people in charge.

Beyond the disparate impact of black residents' vulnerability to emergency management, I found another racialized impact in the law's implementation. As Benton Harbor citizens and government officials were shut out under emergency management, another group was let in. Emergency management allowed unelected members of the white urban regime to consolidate their access to City Hall –and a set of social rules governed who was able to wield influence. Moreover, as I discovered, Saunders' "friendliness" did not evenly translate into access for all. Where Harris went wrong in considering his political appointment above and separate from business, Saunders worked closely with white urban regime.

Letting Outsiders In

The strongest academic defense of the law comes from a law professor who had consulted for Detroit's EM; a benefit of the law, he suggested, was that unelected officials "may also represent the interests of nonresidents and creditors who are not considered by those officials" (Gillette 2014, 1973). I found a similar elevation of the interests of "nonresidents and creditors" above city residents' self-determination. The "first emergency manager-bad, second emergency manager-good" narrative I heard so frequently turned out to be a story about racialized access, as most people who made that comparison were white. As Rodney noted, the first emergency manager, Joseph Harris, did not understand that other local entities, including Whirlpool, still held sway: only the *elected* government was displaced in emergency management. What made Saunders good, when Harris was bad, was his sympathetic leadership style. But from the stories of

privileged access told by white urban regime members, Saunders knew whom to listen to in terms of local power.

A pattern emerged in cross-case analysis: only those respondents I had identified as white urban regime members, all white men and business owners, reported positive and personal relationships with one or both emergency managers. Donald described both emergency managers as “dear friends.” Eric said he met with the second emergency manager “all the time. Basically once a week.” Eric explained his local knowledge was useful to Saunders: “downtown there’s not a lot of people who are more involved and been here longer than me, so I kind of have a good understanding of the history...He was interested in that.” Several other white men also mentioned giving Tony Saunders input. Furthermore, these men had an easier time in getting their own needs met during emergency management. Donald was explicit about how the emergency managers facilitated his goals:

If you properly work the situation, and you have a good case, you could probably get a lot more done with the emergency manager if you have a good relationship with him, because it's one stroke of the pen, as opposed to ongoing bureaucracy, going in front of the commission, having all kinds of debate, public forum, and people criticizing you for not doing it.

Here, Donald identifies not only the “bureaucracy” of normal city government, but also the public participation inherent in democratic governance, as obstacles for business and development.

White urban regime members also occasionally reported receiving information from the emergency managers in confidence. For instance, “Monty” explained,

One of those state-directed managers before he left stopped in to see me. His comments to me were: “We’ve still got a long ways to go. We’ve still

got a lot of work to do on the city commission. We've got a lot of work to do on people really understanding cities are all about—schools, and streets, and financial responsibility.” There was a time, I was told, that there would be checks coming in and laying around for quite a few days before they got deposited.

Later, Monty mentioned that, during his visit, the emergency manager “was not very complimentary about what there is to work with in the intelligence side of things,” legitimating Monty’s beliefs about city officials. Similarly, “Steve,” involved in business and boards downtown, alleged that in city hall, “There was a lot of corruption there... They used to go down in there [the Water Department] and they’d find drawers full of bills. A lot of the bills were torn up. Any bills that had cash in them, torn out and money put in people’s pockets. A lot of checks were never turned in – a lot of stuff. The whole billing thing was just a fiasco.” As I was wondering how he knew these stories, Steve continued,

I asked the emergency manager one day because he was telling me all this stuff and I’m like, “How come you didn’t *prosecute* these people?” And he goes (emphasizing point with finger on table), “Steve, I was not brought in to prosecute. I was brought in to balance the budget and get it going.” He goes, “I had to get rid of a lot people that were corrupt and doing bad things, but I couldn’t—I didn’t want to prosecute. I just wanted to fix.”

The information these men received from the emergency manager likely does not constitute state secrets, but the stories validated their opinions of Benton Harbor’s government. This access performed the important function of gossip, to establish solidarity and to draw a thicker boundary around “those corrupt, dysfunctional officials.” And it indicates the emergency managers’ relationship to the white urban regime—that intimacy of confiding, the gesture of respect inherent in visiting a powerful businessman in his office, may have been performed intentionally as political currency.

Black Insiders Left Out

Given that the emergency manager law invalidated local governance, it is unsurprising city officials lacked this close contact with both emergency managers. As I have shown, these relationships were difficult if not outright antagonistic. Given several commissioners' public stance opposing emergency management, it is unlikely they would have admitted to getting along with an emergency manager. But even members of the local black elite, many of whom were neutral or positive regarding emergency management, did not describe similar access to the emergency managers. I would have expected black elites outside the deposed city commission to report close relationships with or informal access to an emergency manager, as did the white urban regime. This was not the case.

A large part of my evidence from black respondents consisted of the *absence* of any description of a relationship with an emergency manager. When black respondents did describe interacting with the emergency managers, their experience was not positive, much less friendly. "Cecily" occupied an intermediate position in Benton Harbor's hierarchy as a black board member who was not willing to be what she called a "muppet-puppet on a string" to keep her position. Cecily related an experience with EM Saunders to explain how she saw local black residents being used as symbolic representation. When Saunders invited her to join a committee, Cecily was incensed when her first vote was invalidated by Saunders' final decision. She explained, "I thought, according to all the stuff that I read, that they made all these important decisions." But Cecily continued,

I found out all these boards are the same. Legally, they have to exist so people have to be on them. But they have to get the right kind of people on them for people not to care, and to just do what they say. I found out, this is

just a dummy board! The EM makes these decisions!...He's just wanting you to make a recommendation so he can say he has something to counter his thinking...I was *so mad* at Tony Saunders. And I called him up. And I said, "you know what? I don't have a lot of time like that. I really resent you using me in that way."

He said, "Is that what you think I've done?"

I said, "Yeah, I do. I think you think that we share some like-mindedness. And I think you think that I could be a part of whatever majority that you're looking for to support whatever outcome that you're going to take from whatever the recommendations are." I said, "I've seen this before, so I'm not a novice."

But if anyone could have expected to be part of the informal "advisory board" for an emergency manager, it was "Darlene." A black elected official who was not vulnerable to emergency management), Darlene was one of the most prominent members of the community. Born and raised in Benton Harbor in the 1940s, Darlene and her husband had racked up decades of service on boards and political leadership and was still extraordinarily involved in politics. She was also known, both by supporters and opponents, as someone who cooperated with Whirlpool. Darlene considered herself a go-getter ("I know how to get up and get out"). She reads the legal section in the paper every day and shares the information with her friends. She also invoked the Open Meetings Act to demonstrate that, while other residents might feel apprehensive about attending meetings, "I think you should use those kinds of things; if you feel like you're not supposed to be there -- they can't keep you out. They will welcome you."

But instead, Darlene was ignored by both emergency managers. She said of the first emergency manager, Joe Harris, "He was a terrible person. He treated us like we were fools. He never wanted to listen to anything anybody had to say." After describing Harris' tone-deaf behavior, she proceeded to describe Saunders:

I thought he was good. I had great hopes for him. I thought he wasn't

scared. I liked that. He was amongst the people. I would see him at games and different things... he wanted to go. I felt like he was doing things and he was in a hurry to go...And so when he was started announcing, he would be gone by-- I said, "Is he through? Are we finished? Are we done? Are we fixed?" Because I didn't know. I had no way of knowing.

Just like I said to the one man, Harris, I said, "We need to talk. I'm the county commissioner." I needed to talk to him. What do you want from the city? What should I be saying or to be able to tell him some things, because I know plenty. And it's no secret, but I'm just walking around with it; who am I going to tell it to?

LS: Right. And he never contacted you either.

Darlene: No. Nor did the next one. Saunders. I think he did some good things. We have land, and he was selling everything he could and consolidating. So he did some good things. But I don't like it when you come into a community and you don't try to know what was going on or what do you want or what is needed. Just to fix it and give it to you? That's ugly, in my opinion. That's what I think. So ugly things were done without any input from the people that we had voted in, and the citizens. There are citizens that have thoughts, or other elected officials. It should have been some time when they brought us all together and said, "What's going on. Tell me. What's going on here?" Because we could take them somewhere and they wouldn't be able to find their way back. There are no signs on the streets.

What Darlene did not know was that both emergency managers were soliciting advice and historical memory—just not from black Benton Harbor residents. Even as an elected official within a “working” unit of government, Darlene did not have access to Harris or Saunders. Darlene's engaged view of citizenship, involving the active seeking out of relevant information, putting people and ideas together, and insisting on her right to attend meetings that are often otherwise all-white, may paradoxically be what distances her from the white urban regime. White citizens around Benton Harbor did not worry as much as Darlene about engaging in front-stage political activities. Darlene knows this

engagement is necessary to access valuable information otherwise kept among whites, as she still does not have access to all the "back rooms" that produce that information.

So far, analysis of the law's racially disparate outcomes has focused on its concentration in majority-black cities containing half of Michigan's black population. Critiques of the law have focused on the elimination of local democracy and stripped authority of local officials, reducing power to a single, appointed individual. But only fine-grained analysis reveals something even more serious about the racialized impact of emergency management.. Before emergency management, Benton Harbor's political system was already structured to bypass locally-elected (majority-black) governance. Under state receivership, elected black governance was destabilized, shut out and restructured to reduce future input. But the unofficial, majority-white and well-off shadow governance was *not* disenfranchised under emergency management. The white urban regime's governance of Benton Harbor continued without interruption—if anything, with easier access to City Hall, especially after the first emergency manager was deposed by an informal committee's Lansing visit.

Rumors and Memory

What did city officials do without this informal access to the back rooms, particularly those opposed to emergency management? They made do with less than full information. Given the lack of communication between the business-oriented political machine and the impoverished residents, truth gets mixed with fiction in this "walled" city. But the extremity of claims made by the side protesting emergency management, whether true or false, makes them easy to dismiss by the white business elite. With a discursive monopoly on "neutrality" and the local papers, legal and political monopoly over the

courts, legislature, and county government, not to mention the predominance of financial resources, the shifting stories and rumor-based knowledge of the white urban regime still maintain the confident air of truth. As a result, many Benton Harbor residents both mistrust official news and cling to documentation of facts or misdeeds. In the constantly-shifting set of conditions and players, with little historical memory either in City Hall or among business leaders, facts are at a premium. But facts that do not match the official narrative seem to lack some essential adhesive and melt away—echoing Mead’s observation that “if a thing is not recognized as true, then it does not function as true in the community” (1936:29).

For instance, while the emergency manager’s technical abilities were celebrated by the white urban regime, detractors argued that both failed at managing finances. In my interviews, several people castigated the budget-balancing strategy of interfund borrowing as an example of city staff ineptitude. However, the 2011 audit revealed that Harris engaged in the same practice^{vi}—something those who criticized Benton Harbor’s elected officials never mentioned. A commissioner alleged,

“what they said about us was that we were mixing, co-mingling funds, and not paying the pension. Joe [Harris] did the same thing... What he did was he closed out all of the bank accounts and had one checking account, and all he wrote--he was the only one to sign. He was the treasurer, he was everything. And he wrote one--paid everything out of one checking account. And he co-mingled funds... We don't know what he did. A lot of it is still coming out right now.

In fact, Harris was caught misappropriating 2011’s pension funds into the general fund, then called it a “payroll error” from contracting out the process (Smith, 2012). In an interview, Harris attributed this error to “too little staffing,” without mentioning he himself had been reducing the staffing in the finance department (Smith, 2012). The 2011

audit also found that Harris had simply erased the accumulated deficit to the pension fund from Benton Harbor's books. When Saunders took over, he ratified his predecessor's decision as a "write off of accrued pension distribution" (Order 13-28). A reporter for Michigan Radio, summarizing the audit finding, reported the cumulative deficit reduction by over \$1 million as only "a sort of onetime accounting fluke" (Smith, 2012). When the 2011 audit came out, the state treasurer did not investigate Harris. And despite this negative review in 2011, the 2012 audit, conducted by the same company, no longer had any problems with Harris' activity or mentioned past issues.

How did that lack of access play out in the realm of story and rumor? On two occasions, I was told a story about access to information. A city commissioner asked me rhetorically during an interview, "Why would an emergency manager come in here shredding up documents?" The commissioner went on,

I didn't see it, so I can't say, but the person that was—ex-commissioner _____, he said, "You didn't see that big ol' truck out there? That was a shredder!" And I do remember seeing somebody taking some boxes of something...but see, this is why they don't want us approaching... This is why the emergency manager and the state has tried to change the arms of how they report—that they don't have to answer to us. But I represent these people and if I want some information I should be able to get it.

I had heard a similar version from a friend I spoke with frequently around town. He said that about seven years ago "they," he didn't know who, came and took out boxes of documents from City Hall— a lot of information. While I initially took this as a crucial metaphor, representing some black commissioners and residents' feeling that valuable information had been taken from City Hall, there is some evidence that other emergency managers purged information. A contractor hired by the emergency manager to

“consolidate records” threw out Highland Park’s high school library, a collection of black literature, music and films decades in the making (Staff, 2013), causing confusion about how this collection constituted “records”. In Pontiac, Schimmel had a staffmember “shred 130 tons of unneeded documents at City Hall” (Blitchok 2013). EM Harris’ attempted sell-off of City Hall’s radio station, when many black residents did not read or trust the newspaper, can also be interpreted as an attempt to block, destroy or devalue local black perspectives through “epistemic redlining,” described by Doan as occurring in Flint (2017).

Whether or not a shredder truck came to Benton Harbor, destruction of knowledge certainly occurred under emergency management. In summer 2014, I asked a commissioner who had the documentation of the emergency managers’ actions, and she replied:

Right now? Staff does. I mean, I tell them all the time, "give it to me. Just give me all the contracts."...I asked for it before Tony left—Saunders. He promised me, "Commissioner, I'm gonna give it to you. I'm gonna make sure that you get it. It's gonna be a big document, but you're gonna get it." OK. So, a little at a time, I get one piece of paper here that says this, and another document that says this. I'm holding it together. And, some of the other commissioners asking different questions and getting--so we come back together and say, "oh, now, that happened? Oh, we didn't know that he made a contract with this person." And most of it were bad, bad deals. In the public meetings I attended, the commissioner’s claim was backed up by my observations that commissioners and committee members were repeatedly rebuffed or delayed when they asked for more information, while meetings of the Transitional Advisory Board (R-TAB) supervising commission decisions had more complete access. The disruption of five years of emergency management is compounded when those years’ activities are not made clear, at least to city officials. (For instance, one 2017 treasury

Report of Deficiencies or Findings found that the city had missed a certificate of deposit for the cemetery, and attributed its loss to turnover during and after emergency management.)

Meanwhile, white urban regime members could draw on other sources to get information, from Whirlpool's development nonprofit Cornerstone Alliance, to the County Building and courthouse in St. Joseph, to St. Joseph City Hall's more accessible records, to related state departments, and even local historical associations maintained by white folks. Besides, they were often the people who had drawn up the documents themselves. This led me to consider who was ultimately harmed by Benton Harbor's lack of memory, and who benefitted from that constant forgetting, a form of epistemological ignorance (i.e., Mills 1997).

The End of Emergency Management

Questions of management aside, Saunders is broadly viewed as successful because he balanced the city budget and left within 13 months. While most attribute this success to Saunders' cost cutting, he would not have been able to leave without the state's granting a \$2.3 million emergency loan to the city (Harris had earlier had a larger request rejected).^{vii} The loan represented the emergency manager's alternative to the city commissioners' 1% income tax proposal placed on the November 2013 ballot, which was unpopular in the business community as it would have taxed the income of non-residents who worked in the city (including most Whirlpool employees). In online comments and a white urban regime-conducted survey of business people's opinion on the proposed tax,

some complained of “taxation without representation.” Their invocation of the patriotic cry has an interesting twist in a city where residents had lost political representation much more brutally. (Benton Harbor narrowly approved the income tax in a 2017 election.)

The “emergency” loan seems to foreshadow continued state dependency and distress. Over half the new loan was garnished by the state and county government to repay prior debts. In an interview, a commissioner compared the loan to “sharecropping, where you never get out of debt, which means you can never leave the plantation. You're not a slave, based on the law; however, you're still under my control.” The state’s arrangement also seems to insure the loan will hang on the backs of residents for a long time to come. For instance, the state emergency loan conditions allow interest-only payments for 10 years (Gryczan, 2013), which would mean the city would have to pay \$700,000 annually for the final 5 years of the \$2 million loan. Cities taken over by EMs, have seen exponential increases in their debt-to-asset ratios since takeover: Benton Harbor’s increased from 0.8 in 2010 to 1.4 in 2014 (Wang and Crosby 2017). Moreover, this is not Benton Harbor's first emergency loan: a series of loans was also obtained between 1981 to 1985 for a total of \$2.4 million. Indeed, the city finished repaying this prior round only in 2005. But this prior loan was not part of the discourse about the current loan. One commissioner reflected, “The EFM claimed he was coming to fix the financial situation. How did he fix it? Get a loan. If that's the case, why didn’t the state give us a loan a long time ago?”

The legacy of emergency management was still very present in the city in 2014. City officials still get reminders through the multiple lawsuits incurred through the

emergency managers' actions. The city, not the emergency managers, is considered liable for emergency managers' decisions (Saunders is co-defendant on only one lawsuit). The emergency managers' legacy also persisted in their orders, irrevocable for two years following emergency management—for the commission, that is; the advisory board did have the power to change them. Further, the city manager's powers have been greatly enhanced by fiat, where electoral politics failed. In his final flurry of orders in 2014, Saunders significantly enhanced the powers of the City Manager, making this position more like a permanent emergency manager. (Exiting emergency managers also created or strengthened the city administrator's role in Allen Park, Hamtramck, Pontiac, and Flint, although the emergency manager's choice was pushed out within seven months in majority-white Allen Park.)

Several commissioners attested during meetings and interviews that they felt power has not actually been restored to elected government. For instance, when I asked a city commissioner what it was like in 2014 with the end of emergency management, he replied,

Well, it's not *over*...and actually I have, the emergency manager's final order, where it became more sophisticated, in that, the TV was controlled where you had to get up and turn it...But now, through remote control, you don't even have to--now you can, through your phone, record something through DVR, and you don't even have to be at home...So the way that they have transferred power, is where they don't have to have an emergency manager *physically* here. However, the idea can still, not only exist, but control what happens.

Officials perceive that control occurring through emergency manager-appointed staff like the city manager, as well as the RTAB. The same commissioner said EM Saunders told him a transitional advisory board would be need to be in place ““maybe 20-30 years.””

For over two years after emergency management ended, the RTAB, staffed by state and county finance employees and two black current or former Whirlpool employees, met to oversee the commission's decisions. Between the R-TAB and the expansion of the city manager's power, external rule was institutionalized. It is problematic enough to have democratic self-rule temporarily removed in the name of an emergency. But the long-term solution, as well as much academic evaluation of this phenomenon, appears to be founded on the same position: that elected oversight of local functions is the key problem.

And is Benton Harbor better off? It certainly is a “shrinking city” (Wilde Anderson)

Despite major Whirlpool-led development, its tax revenues and total taxable value have declined since 2010. Despite the loss of control over its park system, Benton Harbor is still paying the same amount in upkeep for parks and recreation as before emergency management.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I evaluated Benton Harbor's time under emergency management as a manufactured crisis that destabilized local government rather than solving a problem. I showed how support for emergency management comes from a framework that blames individuals and management styles for structural disinvestment, especially at the state level (over the past ten years, state revenue sharing cuts to Benton Harbor nearly equal its deficits). The emergency manager law is legitimated by racial stereotypes regarding black governance, in which black citizens' right to self-rule and black officials' leadership are

devalued. Moreover, we can understand emergency management as the state-sanctioned consolidation of power in the unelected white urban regime, whose informal access to Benton Harbor City Hall increased, while all black city residents I spoke to were shut out. Finally, I discussed emergency management as one stage in an ongoing dynamic of constant change. Both emergency managers' tenure, and the changes they instituted, disrupted city government precisely when their ostensible job was to improve the city's function. This raises questions about how the emergency manager law is supposed to actually help cities in the long term, and why it seems to have instead positioned Benton Harbor for decades of future indebtedness and state control.

By now, it should be clear that emergency management and its fallout matters greatly for how we understand racial citizenship, especially in black-led cities. One direction for future research on race in receivership could focus on how receivership policies target black institutions, from school districts to black-owned banks. Another line of research should investigate white localities' practices that fail to meet standards of "good governance" but without being problematized. Extending the white urban regime component of the analysis, research should assess how white urban regimes of foundations, corporations and state/local partners have operated in other EM cities. My own future research agenda with a co-author will explore how black cities and towns function within a white context that deploys laws to support white dominance.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ The author would like to acknowledge the Kenan Institute for Ethics Rethinking Regulation Graduate Research Workshop, especially Melissa Jacoby; the Duke Sociology Race Workshop; and the Buell Center for Architecture's workshop on Emergency Management at Columbia University for comments on drafts of this paper. This research was supported by Duke Graduate School, the Rethinking Regulation Center at the Kenan Institute for Ethics, and the Center for the Study of Philanthropy and Voluntarism at Sanford School of Public Policy.

ⁱⁱ The official title varied between Emergency Financial Manager [EFM] and Emergency Manager [EM] as the law shifted; I will only use "emergency manager" or EM for simplicity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the three majority-white municipalities taken under EM (Three Oaks, Lincoln Park, and Allen Park) had qualitatively different experiences of receivership—either described as collaborative by the council, or over quickly. Allen Park's receivership stemmed in part from a disastrous film-studio scheme which was not blamed on bad management by officials.

^{iv} The state's records on EM are shifting and sometimes inaccurate—for instance, in February 2018, 6 school districts formerly under receivership were not included in their summary.

^v In 2016, census data shows 70% of Benton Harbor renters were "cost burdened" (paying over 30% of their income to housing).

^{vi} This has happened at the state level as well: for example, in 2015, Governor Snyder shifted \$169 million from the School Aid Fund to cover General Fund shortfalls.

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^{vii} At least three other cities (Hamtramck, Allen Park, and Flint) and two school districts (Pontiac and Detroit) also received loans to end emergency management.