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Review – Nor Any Drop to Drink: Flint’s Water Crisis

By Melissa Heil

Synopsis

Nor Any Drop to Drink: Flint’s Water Crisis (2018) is a 124-minute-long documentary directed by Dr Cedric Taylor, a sociologist with expertise in environmental justice and racial health disparities, with cinematography by Daniel Bracken. *Nor Any Drop to Drink* examines the causes of the Flint water crisis and documents the crisis’s impacts on city residents years after the initial water contamination. The first half of the film analyses the political roots of the water crisis: the imposition of emergency management in Flint, a system of undemocratic rule in which the governor of the State of Michigan can appoint an emergency manager to restructure a city’s operations when it is determined to be in fiscal distress. *Nor Any Drop to Drink* chronicles how emergency managers oversaw the switch of the city’s water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River and resisted addressing residents’ water quality concerns after the switch occurred. The second half of the film explores various aspects of living with the water crisis: the activism undertaken by Flint residents to hold public officials accountable, the difficulties of supporting Flint children who had been exposed to lead and other contaminants, the modifications to day-to-day habits of hygiene and domestic labour, the work of monitoring household water quality amidst conflicting information, and the long wait for the city’s infrastructure to be replaced.

Critical analysis

Many documentaries about the Flint water crisis have been produced in recent years. *Nor Any Drop to Drink* stands it out for its ability to capture the *longue durée* of the crisis: its structural antecedents in public policy and its persistent presence in lives altered by the water contamination years later. Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) has observed that “the genre of crisis can distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional.” While *Nor Any Drop to Drink* conveys the urgency and intensity of the effects of Flint’s poisoning in the lives of the city’s residents, it also effectively troubles popular framings of crisis events as sudden, short-term, and obviously recognizable. In so doing, *Nor Any Drop to Drink* offers important insights into the nature of environmental racism.

The film narrates the slow unveiling of the crisis with a combination of local news reporting, footage of community meetings, and interviews with key actors in the crisis (e.g., activists Melissa Mays, Claire McClinton, and LeeAnne Walters; politicians Dayne Walling (former Flint

Mayor) and Robert Klein (former Michigan Treasurer); and scientist Marc Edwards). This footage coupled with the first-hand accounts effectively conveys how rather than an unpredictable sudden disaster, the contamination of Flint's water came about from quotidian, bureaucratic, "common sense" practices of governance that produced more precarious living conditions in low-income, racialized communities. Footage of Michigan politicians defending the emergency management policy before the water switch, for example, shows how anti-democratic austerity policies were presented as responsible, good governance. The documentary also makes clear that recognition of the water contamination was not an inevitable certainty: it took concerted organizing efforts for residents' water quality concerns to be validated and recognized by the state as an urgent problem. Watching local news footage, the viewer sees the slow unfolding of the crisis over the course of years before it is recognized as such. Hearing from activists and scientists, we see the work of proving harm, of identifying catastrophic conditions, in the face of a state that asserts all is functioning as it should.

Asserting the crisis reality involved interrogating practices of water quality testing used by the state. The film brilliantly portrays the political dimensions of scientific measurement. Sensitivity to the politics of measure (to borrow a term from Geoff Mann (2007)) is depicted not just as a tool of activism, but as part of the ongoing crisis ordinariness in everyday life in Flint. The film depicts how years after the initial contamination had taken place, residents struggle to have confidence in the water quality in their homes, faced with a variety of testing protocols yielding different results, which they must, often exhaustingly, make sense of. In this, *Nor Any Drop to Drink* captures one of the largest challenges in Flint's crisis recovery: the harm done was not just a technical problem with a technical fix. Residents were misled using epistemic tools of scientific testing, and many lack trust in state assurances that such tests demonstrate that their water quality is safe (see Morckel & Terzano, 2019). *Nor Any Drop to Drink* illustrates why recovery from the crisis will not be a singular, clear event as individual residents make different decisions about which institutions, water providers, and testing methods they can have confidence in.

Nor Any Drop to Drink focuses on the political and social dimensions of the crisis. The documentary does not provide much background on the technical aspects of the water contamination. For example, the film does not pause to explain that corrosion control was skipped during the treatment of the Flint River water, which allowed the water to corrode the pipes and break up the biofilm in the city's plumbing, releasing lead and biological contaminants into the water entering people's homes (see Masten et al., 2016; Pieper et al., 2017). Without this technical background, the nuances of the insights offered by interviewees may be lost on viewers. Still, these technical dimensions have been widely recounted elsewhere. When prepared with this context, the documentary is an excellent resource for those interested in the political, social, and epistemic dimensions of living with environmental racism.

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Ratings

- Technical quality: 3
- Academic interest: 4
- Societal interest 5