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Welcome

to the eleventh edition of the Netherlands American Studies Review (NASR), the bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA). Our aim is to showcase excellent student work related to North American history, politics, literature, and society written at Dutch universities.

This issue represents a new departure for NASR—rather than covering the full range of American topics this edition of the journal is dedicated to a single theme: environment. Despite this specific focus, the six carefully selected pieces showcase the diversity of approaches that are possible under the rubric of ‘environment.’ The authors engage with the theme from a wide variety of perspectives, both in terms of content and methodological approach. More broadly, they highlight the fantastic work being done in the Netherlands at the intersection of the environmental humanities and American Studies, as well as the high standard of student work being produced in Dutch universities on environmental and American topics.

The United States is central to the history, present, and future of the climate crisis, and as that crisis grows ever more acute it becomes increasingly important that scholars explore the intersections between America and the environment. We are therefore very thankful for all the students who sent us their work and trusted us with it, for the editors who worked tirelessly to select and fine-tune these papers, and, of course, for the NASA Board, which has supported us throughout the process.

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Introduction

Special Issue of the *Netherlands American Studies Review* on 'Environment'

Editorial Board | *Netherlands American Studies Review*

Since its inception, the *Netherlands American Studies Review* (NASR) has sought to highlight the developing interests and trends among students studying North American politics, history, culture, and society in the Netherlands. For the current generation of students, the growing pressures of the climate crisis – alongside issues such as ecological degradation and water insecurity – mean that environmental questions loom increasingly larger across all these areas of focus.¹ These same preoccupations are shaping not only the work of students but that of scholars more broadly, with the environmental humanities – in various guises – becoming an increasingly central framework for scholars in a wide range of areas.² Scholars working on North American themes in the Netherlands are no exception to this broader trend, with crucial work being done in the environmental humanities from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. The growing importance of this approach in the Netherlands, and of Dutch scholarship to the field, was exemplified by the hosting of a major international conference on 'A Water's History of the United States' in Middleburg in May 2025, organized by the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA), the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, and the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University.³

This edition of NASR picks up on this focus, and the wider scholarly interest in the environmental humanities in the Netherlands, by devoting a special issue to the theme of 'environment.' The authors whose works are included in this edition demonstrate the richness of this scholarship, showcasing the variety of creative, ambitious, and novel ways in which connections between North American studies and the environment can be explored. The work highlighted in this issue therefore provides a unique insight into the range and quality of work being done on the environmental humanities in the Netherlands, a small taste of the fantastic work being produced by students working at the cutting edge of their scholarly fields.

Notes

¹ "What We Do," Fridays for Future, accessed June 23, 2025, <https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/>; Nancy G. Barrón, Sibylle Gruber, and Gavin Huffman, "Student Engagement and Environmental Awareness: Gen Z and Ecomposition," *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 219–32, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9481528>.

² See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>; Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (The MIT Press, 2017), 1–21; Dolly Jørgensen and Franklin Ginn, "Environmental Humanities: Entering a New Time," *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 2 (2020): 496–500, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-8623252>.

³ A conference report is available on the NASA website: <https://www.netherlands-america.nl/conference-report-a-waters-history-of-the-united-states/>

This special issue reflects the extent to which the ‘environmental turn’ in the humanities has engendered an explosion of new approaches and methodologies within existing disciplines, including American Studies. Sophie de Koning and Elliott Bickerton exemplify this in their historiographical papers, which trace the developing scholarship on, respectively, national parks in the United States and the role of animals in American colonial contexts. Both de Koning and Bickerton examine the key features and changes in each of these strands of scholarship while also advocating for approaches that deviate from the traditional historiography, for example through the incorporation of intersectional and non-human perspectives.

Water is a particular focus in many of the articles, with the drastic changes to watery landscapes due to anthropogenic intervention, and the often-conflicting encounters between local communities and the US federal government that result, explored in articles by Arnold Haverkort, Valérie Slijkerman, and Sterre Vos. All these authors demonstrate the extent to which focusing on the environment not only brings new topics into scholarly focus but facilitates innovative methodological approaches, with Slijkerman and Vos explicitly adopting ‘blue history’ lenses to critically examine federal policy in the cases of the Louisiana wetlands and the Kinzua Dam. Haverkort, in his analysis of the Gold Mine Spill’s effect on the Navajo people, also adopts a novel framework to assess an historical case of environmental injustice; in this case, using the lens of environmental democracy.

This special issue’s collection of environmentally oriented articles finishes with Tessa Karsten’s ecocritical exploration of the 2020 novel *Weather* by Jenny Offill. Through close readings, narrative structural analysis, and reflections on our contemporary moment, Karsten builds a compelling argument about the close linkage between the personal and the universal in an age of climate crisis. Karsten and the rest of the authors in this special issue demonstrate not only the necessity of engaging with the theme of the environment in a moment of diverse climactic and ecological crises but also the scholarly potential for new methods, approaches, and conclusions when ‘the environment’ – with all its various manifestations and implications – is taken seriously as lens in North American studies.

Paper

Breaking New Ground: Towards an Intersectional Historical Understanding of National Parks

Sophie de Koning | University of Amsterdam

This paper was written for the course 'American History' for the MA American Studies

The narrative that national parks are “America’s best idea” is deeply rooted in American cultural memory. Although the phrase was popularized by Ken Burns’s 2009 documentary, the sentiment underpinning reflects a long tradition of portraying America’s national parks as symbols of democracy, shared national pride, and natural beauty.¹ This celebratory narrative has often, however, obscured a more complex and contested reality, a fact which has only been reflected in historical scholarship since the 1960s. This historiographical essay examines this more critically engaged scholarship in relation to an earlier, more celebratory approach.

Prompted by emerging social justice movements from the 1960s onwards, including civil-rights and second-wave feminism, environmental historians began to redefine nature as a cultural and ideological construct shaped by political imaginations. Consequently, literature refocused from a materialist examination to an analysis of symbols and meaning making.² Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) was foundational in this shift and serves as the starting point in this article’s analysis of this scholarship’s evolution. Prior to Nash, national parks rarely served as a topic for academic research, at most functioning as static backdrops in ecological debates between conservationists and preservationists. As noted by Nash, preservationists such as John Muir advocated for the protection of nature, leaving it untouched in its spiritual value. In contrast, conservationist Theodore Roosevelt vocalized the importance of national parks in resource management and human recreation. Nash reframed wilderness, and by extension national parks, as constructed ideas shaped by American values, anxieties, and national identity.³ In doing so, he established a new way of seeing parks: not as neutral spaces, but symbolic landscapes embedded in cultural and political meaning. While his work was limited because of his celebratory and universalist framing, Nash’s cultural understanding of nature laid a foundation for other scholars to critically engage with, expand, and diversify.

This historiographical essay traces, and is structured around, the evolution of national parks scholarship from its romanticized and celebratory origins before the 1960s towards an increasingly critical understanding produced by Indigenous, feminist, and transnational historians in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. Scholars drawing on these three

Notes

¹ Ken Burns, “National Parks: America’s Best Idea,” PBS documentary series, September 27, 2009.

² Richard White, “From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History,” *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557.

³ Roderick F. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1967), 84-95, 122-140.

intellectual strands have shed light on the darker underpinnings of the previous idealized framing, focusing on exclusion and dispossession due to race, gender, and global imperialism. Each strand directly engages with Nash's legacy, addressing his limitations while offering alternative frameworks for historical understandings of national parks that are inspired by the cultural turn which he pioneered. Questions regarding how nature is defined, by whom, for whom, and at whose expense opened the door to a new generation of scholarship that sought to center the experiences and exclusions Nash's work overlooked.

Despite the development in these more recent, layered histories, however, this article argues that the scholarship remains fragmented; Indigenous, feminist, and transnational histories have developed in parallel, rather than in dialogue. This article argues for a more intersectional and integrated approach to the subject of national parks, in which the insights of these different scholars are understood as mutually reinforcing. Uncovering the shared logics of exclusion and the overlapping forms of oppression will facilitate a more comprehensive view of the lived realities and complexity of America's iconic landscapes.

Roderick Nash's seminal works, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) and "The American Invention of National Parks" (1970), laid the groundwork for understanding national parks from a cultural historical perspective, representing a critical place to begin scrutinizing the trajectory of national parks historiography. Before Nash, national parks literature, itself rather scarce, focused on policy practicalities, scientific conservation, and the economic significance of primarily individual parks. For instance, historian Carl P. Russell's seminal work *One Hundred Years in Yosemite* (1947), exemplifies earlier commemorative approaches to national park history, celebrating institutional progress, scenic beauty, and heroic pioneer traditions.⁴

Nash's works marked a significant shift in the way scholars thought about national parks: he introduced a cultural and intellectual understanding of these parks, resonating with the cultural turn in the field of environmental history and historical scholarship in general. Nash's work exemplified one of the cultural turn's central ideas: that nature was not static or separate from human culture, but rather that nature was symbolically and ideologically constructed. This suggested that how humans view and consequently utilize nature is often defined and expressed by those more abstract realms.⁵ His insights into how Americans historically framed nature to reflect their identity paved the way for scholars to begin analyzing parks not just as physical spaces, but as cultural texts.⁶

A central focus of *Wilderness and the American Mind* was the idea that wilderness is not a fixed category, but a concept shaped by cultural and historical interpretation and closely tied to the formation of American identity. This argument was powerfully introduced in the book's prologue, which functions as a tracing of wildernesses evolution in Euro-American thought from a feared, chaotic space to a romanticized ideal of freedom and industrial

⁴ Carl P. Russell, *One Hundred Years in Yosemite: The Story of a Great Park and its Friends*, (Berkely University Press, 1947).

⁵ White, 557-564.

⁶ Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 3.

escape.⁷ Nash's 1970 article "The American Invention of National Parks" complemented this idea by framing national parks as a uniquely American invention, explaining how their existence developed to express and harness American ideals. He argued that they served three functions: to preserve the values of the frontier, to embody a democratic ethos through public access, and to offer a model of preservation emulated by other countries.⁸ These arguments linked national identity, political values, and international influence directly to the symbolism and narrative of national parks.

Despite its radical implications, the methodologies and sources Nash employed to make his argument – primarily literary and philosophical writings by Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt – reflected and reinforced a white, male, Euro-American worldview. Although Nash acknowledged that these writings were ideological expressions rather than objective reflections of untouched nature, and that the idealization of wilderness could lead to Indigenous alienation, his focus remained on figures who celebrated nature's romantic and national significance.⁹ As a result, he reproduced rather than challenged dominant cultural narratives.

Later scholars, however, have engaged more critically with the exclusions embedded in Nash's framework. Indigenous, feminist, and transnational historians have counter-argued these claims about national parks representing democracy, unity, and American exceptionalism. While these scholarly critiques all challenged Nash's assumptions, they also engaged with his central insight: that nature and national parks are constructed through meaning and experience. Scholars from these diverse theoretical backgrounds offered frameworks, however, designed to highlight alternate experiences and perspectives that have purposely been suppressed but are crucial to a more holistic and inclusive understanding of national parks. Environmental historian William Cronon was one of the first to directly challenge Nash's ideas, with the critical insight that narratives of a romanticized wilderness obscure histories of exclusion. It marked a turning point in how scholars began to interrogate the politics of nature and exposed the limitations in Nash's approach.

While the value of Nash's work therefore lay in opening the history of national parks to questions of meaning, identity, and representation, his limited lens overlooked crucial structural exclusions. The following sections of this article engage with these more critical perspectives on national parks. This article takes Nash as both a crucial historiographic foundation and a point of contrast to argue for an intersectional approach that captures the complexity of the history of national parks. Only by doing so is it possible to examine the intertwined issues of representation, exclusion, and oppression that continue to shape these landscapes.

The historiographical contributions of *American Indians and National Parks* (1998), by Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, and *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (1999), by Mark David Spence, reflect a critical shift in how historians engaged with the intersections of

⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1-8, 84-96.

⁸ Roderick F. Nash, "The American Invention of National Parks," *American Quarterly* 22, no.3 (1970): 726-735.

⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American mind*, 120-140, 276.

Indigenous history, national parks, and environmental ideology.¹⁰ In the 1993 article “The Uses of Environmental History,” William Cronon’s observation that Euro-American’s perceptions and attitudes towards the natural world differed profoundly from those of Native people who inhabited these lands for millennia, revealed a tension in scholarship. At the time, the ‘why’ and ‘so what’ of this observation had not yet been addressed.¹¹ Only over the subsequent decade did works by Spence, Keller and Turek come to exemplify what Cronon identified as the environmental historian’s task of “historicizing everything,” be it human culture or natural systems.¹² Through such an approach, Spence’s and Keller’s and Turek’s works addressed crucial gaps in the scholarship on national parks by illustrating how the Euro-American view of wilderness preservation and the establishment of national parks was facilitated by colonial ideologies and dispossession of Natives.

While both Spence and Keller and Turek addressed the gap in Nash’s texts by uncovering Indigenous voices and perspectives, the ways in which they engaged with Nash’s arguments reflected their differing scholarly approaches. One focused on broader institutional exclusion and the other on the lived experience of Indigenous communities in specific parks. At the outset, *American Indians and National Parks* deployed Nash’s cultural understanding of wilderness as a framework, expanding it to include Indigenous perspectives.¹³ The purpose of this was to demonstrate how this traditional framing of wilderness shaped federal legislation and National Parks Service (NPS) policies, both of which negatively impacted Indigenous rights, lands, and cultures. The focus of this work by Keller and Turek’s was broad, and the historical analysis reached from mid-nineteenth century into the recent past of the late twentieth century. It demonstrated how tensions between the interests of these two groups was political, interdependent, and occurring in forms ranging from coercive land grab to stereotypical Indigenous representations. Most importantly, it argued that these trends were ongoing.¹⁴ To show how expansive the consequences are, they included a multitude of national parks case studies. While important to address an entire policy history in order to show the extent of Indigenous neglect, the study often lacked critical engagement with specific policies – such as land allotments or relocation programs – that could reveal their cultural and psychological impacts beyond administrative outcomes. By overlooking lived experiences, such as cultural displacement and identity loss, the work remained isolated from integration with other intellectual approaches, most notably gender and postcolonial theory.

Conversely, in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, Spence took a case study approach, limiting his scope to just three parks: Glacier, Yellowstone, and Yosemite National Park. The focus on these three parks allowed Spence to argue that the preservationist narrative of national parks, as representing an attempt to keep an uninhabited wilderness, is misleading.

¹⁰ Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Cronon, 11.

¹² Cronon, 11.

¹³ Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*, 241.

¹⁴ Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*, 232-238.

Spence was critical of Nash, arguing that his understanding of wilderness as ‘ideal’ was harmful, going hand-in-hand with removing Indigenous groups from their land to erase them from this narrative.¹⁵ Indigenous tribes lived in and managed those lands long before European settlement; the myth of uninhabited wilderness had to be created to justify preservation and became embedded in the first national parks.”¹⁶ Recognizing this contradiction is essential to understanding how national parks have historically excluded indigenous presence and why Indigenous perspectives must be central to their historiography.

Although these works did not directly engage with each other, the authors have later critiqued one another, revealing tensions in how Indigenous histories should be written and by whom. This also further enriched the dialogue between their contributions. For example, Spence acknowledged the originality of Keller and Turek’s scholarship, noting how “colonial underpinnings of environmentalist thinking” is just as present in the US as other countries.¹⁷ While Spence praised their attention to contemporary implications, he claimed that their reliance on archival legal and policy records as a methodological approach, led to sometimes obscure conclusions about the future.¹⁸ In his own book Spence took a different approach: ethnography. He accordingly examined the social and spiritual dimensions Indigenous life, what the land of national parks meant to them, and how that varied between Indigenous tribes. Keller, in turn, commented in his review that “conflict between Indians is often overlooked.”¹⁹ Their mutual critiques reflected historiographical development, marked by self-reflection, diverse perspectives, and methodological variety within a subfield. This methodological diversity has produced a more layered understanding of Indigenous histories, but the exchange would also benefit from being widened to include feminist and transnational perspectives. Such expansion can expose deeper, intersecting power dynamics that often remain unexamined.

In sum, these works complemented each other by pioneering the inclusion of Indigenous voices in national parks scholarship and reshaping how the idea of national parks was discursively constructed in the historiography of national parks. While subsequent scholarship on indigenous voices has been scarce, less groundbreaking, and primarily confirms a narrative of colonial dispossession, it has nonetheless advanced the field by broadening historical narratives and continuing to frame parks as contested spaces. The growing integration of Indigenous histories into this scholarship, viewing parks through the lens of Indigenous experience, has also mirrored broader intellectual trends sparked by the environmental justice movement. Gaining momentum in the 1980s, activists and scholars linked environmental harm with racial and social inequity, arguing that both environmental burdens and benefits are unequally dispersed and rooted in historical societal inequalities. In this view, environmental protection becomes a tool for social equity when it includes and

¹⁵ Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 3-8.

¹⁶ Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 4.

¹⁷ Mark Spence, “American Indians & National Parks,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no.3 (1999): 391.

¹⁸ Spence, “American Indians & National Parks,” 391-392.

¹⁹ Robert H. Keller, “Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no.2 (2000): 701-702.

empowers marginalized communities, ensures fair access to natural resources, and addresses the legacies of exclusion. This approach aligns with postcolonial scholarship from the 1960s and 1970s, which worked to recover suppressed histories to confront both historical injustices and contemporary systemic inequities. Keller and Turek's *American Indians and National Parks*, for example, advocates for reconciliation and equitable partnerships to compensate for the past and shape a sustainable future of national parks.²⁰ These contributions have therefore reshaped national parks historiography, exposing foundational myths and advancing more justice-oriented frameworks.

Just as Indigenous voices were long excluded, so too has the female experience in and around national parks often been marginalized, prompting another strand of scholarship that critiques and expands the historical narrative. Polly Welts Kaufman's *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (1996) marked a pivotal advancement for the historiography of national parks in its integration of feminist history into the existing male-centered narrative. Kaufman argued that women played a crucial but underrecognized role in the creation, preservation, and cultural understanding of national parks.²¹ Tracing more than a century of examples – from pioneering grassroots activism and environmental education outside the park service to influential leadership roles within – Kaufman brought long-silenced voices, and their various impacts on national parks, into focus. As with Indigenous histories, the emergence of Kaufman's work can be understood in the broader context of the social justice movements. Her devotion to feminism and environmental justice was demonstrated in the way she described how access to environmental benefits or an equal say in key issues was often denied to women.²² In challenging these exclusions both the women Kaufman documented *and* her scholarship itself helped redefine national parks from macho wilderness spaces to more inclusive gendered landscapes shaped by power, labor, and activism. This resonates with Kaufman's concluding call for the continuous expansion of inclusivity within the parks system. What follows explores Kaufman's groundbreaking contributions through three lenses: recovery of neglected subjects and voices, methodological innovation, and the groundwork she lay for an intersectional approach, one that remains underutilized in the field.

Kaufman's innovation first lay in its unprecedented singular focus on the role of women within and around the National Parks Service. Up until the 1980s, gender or women's studies were largely absent from national parks scholarship and their perspectives remain scarce to this day. Literature focused on conservation and preservation of wilderness has mainly described these practices as an expression of strenuous, elitist masculinity.²³ Carolyn

²⁰ Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*, 232-240.

²¹ Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (University of New Mexico Press, 1996), xi-xvi.

²² Schlossberg and Collins, "From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5, no. 3 (May 2014): 359-374.

²³ Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*, (Oxford University Press, 2012). Cited in Benjamin Johnson, "Environment" in *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, eds Christopher M. Nichols and Nancy C. Unger, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (University of Chicago Press, 1995). Cited in Benjamin Johnson, "Environment" in *A Companion to the*

Merchant was among the first to intervene by introducing feminist perspectives into environmental history. In *The Death of Nature* (1982), she argued that the scientific revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism reshaped both nature and women as passive resources to be controlled, linking the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature through patriarchal ideologies. While national parks are only a minor part of Merchant's analysis, her work introduced into the field of national park history a key debate about how the female relationship to nature differs from that of men as a result of women's historical roles as caregivers and nurturers.²⁴ Kaufman's work engaged with these tensions more pragmatically. Rather than making abstract claims about gendered ways of knowing, she focused on real-life examples, such as the women in the General Federation of Women's Clubs who actively shaped preservation efforts, policy debates, and the symbolic meaning of parks. These women lobbied for the creation of parks to preserve cultural and natural heritage.²⁵ Additionally, Kaufman, in contrast to Merchant, placed women on the preservationist side of the debate and centralized national parks as a core focus of her study.

Additionally, Kaufman's scholarship emphasized that women did not just have a participant or receiving role but framed them as actors driving the perception and future of the preservation of national parks.²⁶ She highlighted, for example, the efforts of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. These clubs' historical contribution mirrors the intervention Kaufman made herself in the historiography: just as women altered the dominant, male-centered narrative of national parks during these times, her work similarly challenged the male-dominated narrative of national parks scholarship. Moreover, Kaufman's emphasis on interpretation and how women attached meaning to landscape and redefined the value of these landscapes, reflects the continuous applicability of Nash's argument that nature was not merely an ecological space but an ideological construct. Kaufman's work underscores how identity, in this case gender, and perception actively shape the meaning and purpose of preserved landscapes.

Secondly, Kaufman's innovative and interdisciplinary methodology contributed to the advancement of the scholarship on national parks by recovering voices that have long been excluded. Over a period of ten years she collected oral histories, pages of photographs and service records, and interviews to center the experience of women in and around the parks.²⁷ This large body of evidence reveals the depth of women's involvement in national parks and aligns with Kaufman's aim to demonstrate the presence of a marginalized group in history. In a review, feminist historian Susan Armitage argued that such an approach is necessary when traditional archives have ignored or minimized women's roles. In such cases, the

Gilded Age and Progressive Era, eds Christopher M. Nichols and Nancy C. Unger, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017).

²⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, (Harper, 1982), 1-41; Benjamin Johnson, "Environment" in *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, eds Christopher M. Nichols and Nancy C. Unger, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017), 77-78.

²⁵ Johnson, "Environment," 77-78.

²⁶ Kaufman, xi-xvi.

²⁷ Kaufman, xi.

development of a new typology and expansive source bases becomes essential.²⁸ In this way Kaufman's methodological approach and findings directly critiqued Nash, as his work "does not present the roles of women, who most often worked at the grassroots level."²⁹ Kaufman therefore addressed a historical oversight, reframing the narrative by revealing how gender has shaped both access to and interpretations of these landscapes.

Although Kaufman's work provided a thorough and specialized history of women in the NPS, earning praise for filling a crucial gap in the historiography, it remains one of the few engagements with gender and the environment in national parks historiography.³⁰ As a result, the intersections of gender with other intellectual histories—including Indigenous, racial, or transnational perspectives—have not been fully explored in the scholarly. One notable exception is Nancy Unger's 2012 work *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. While Unger similarly highlighted women's active roles in environmental preservation and activism, her work adopts a much broader scope, exploring the environmental history of American women beyond national parks. In particular, she places significant focus on the broader social and political contexts that have shaped gendered environmental ideologies, such as globalization, race, and class.³¹ Kaufman's focused study and Unger's expansive analysis have the potential to complement one another. Bringing Kaufman's attention to national parks into conversation with Unger's analysis of race, class, and gender in broader environmental history offers a route towards a more intersectional understanding of exclusion within national parks. While important groundwork has therefore been laid, the intersection of feminist history with other strands of national parks' historiography remains largely unexplored, underscores this article's central argument: national parks historiography remains fragmented, with critical perspectives developing in parallel rather in dialogue. Like gendered narratives, transnational perspectives have offered essential insights, but their integration into the broader historiography remains uneven.

The historiography of national parks has evolved profoundly in recent decades, driven by critiques of American exceptionalism and the growing recognition of conservation and preservation as globally interconnected processes. Scholars such as Ian Tyrell, James Morton Turner, and Karen Jones have been central voices in this shift, each challenging Roderick Nash's framing of national parks as a uniquely American invention.³² While their arguments and methodologies vary significantly, they all lack a deep engagement with the other critics of Nash highlighted in this article, typically giving limited attention to the roles

²⁸ Susan Armitage, "National Parks and the Woman's Voice (review)," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no.3 (1997): 186.

²⁹ Kaufman, 246.

³⁰ Armitage, 186.

³¹ Unger, 4-11.

³² Ian Tyrrell, "America's National Parks: The Transnational Creation of National Space in the Progressive Era," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no.1 (2012): 1-21; James Morton Turner, "Rethinking American Exceptionalism: Toward a Transnational History of National Parks, Wilderness, and Protected Areas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed Andrew C. Isenberg, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 282-308; Karen Jones, "Unpacking Yellowstone: The American National Park in Global Perspective," in *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, eds Gissibl Bernhard, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, (Berghahn Books, 2012), 31-49.

of gender and race in the history of national parks, reflecting yet again the fragmented but promising potential of national parks scholarship.

Tyrell was among the first scholars to critique the exceptionalist narrative by situating the history of US national parks within a transnational framework. In “America’s National Parks: The Transnational Creation of National Space in the Progressive Era,” he argued that US park development was shaped by European preservation practices, colonial environmentalism, and international treaties. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including reports from the American Scenic and Historical Preservation Society and influences from institutions like the British National Trust, Tyrell argues that the construction of “American wilderness” was informed by globally circulating – not uniquely American – ideals of nature.³³ Despite this, his focus remained largely on how these exchanges influenced the US, particularly during the Progressive Era. While his work contributed significantly to the historiography by decentering the myth of originality in American environmentalism, it ultimately replicated a US-centric analytical frame.

Turner built on Tyrell’s work but pushed the critique further through the adoption of a comparative methodology. In his chapter “Rethinking American Exceptionalism: Toward a Transnational History of National Parks, Wilderness, and Protected Areas,” Turner analyzed conservation approaches in countries such as New Zealand and Mexico to demonstrate that no universal preservation or conservation models exist.³⁴ Rather, conservation approaches differ all over the world as they are shaped by specific cultural, political, and ecological contexts.³⁵ Turner’s comparative approach countered more comprehensively the narrative of American exceptionalism by decentering the US entirely. In doing so, he offers a global perspective that situates national parks within diverse local traditions.

Jones’s chapter, “Unpacking Yellowstone: The American National Park in Global Perspective,” contributed a balancing perspective. While Turner looked outward, Jones returned to Yellowstone as a case study that is both national and inherently global. She argues that Yellowstone has served as a “cultural and environmental signifier” of American ideals of wilderness, while also functioning as an export product but in turn also being “a product of globalized conservation.”³⁶ Global ideas such as romantic aesthetics and colonial ideologies shaped Yellowstone, but its influence, in turn, extended beyond the US border to Canada and beyond.³⁷ Contrary to Tyrell’s reading, which centered the US only as the recipient of transnational influences, Jones emphasizes the reciprocal nature of these exchanges; American national parks were both inspired by and became models for global conservation efforts. Jones’ work therefore highlights the imperial dimensions of national parks ideology, showing how the myth of American wilderness was used to legitimize both domestic and international land.

³³ Tyrell, 2-4.

³⁴ Turner, 284-298.

³⁵ Turner, 282-283.

³⁶ Jones, 32.

³⁷ Jones, 47.

This transnational shift in national parks scholarship emerged alongside broader scholarly and social movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Postcolonial critiques of imperial land use incentivized historians to question western-centric narratives and the colonial underpinnings of national parks. Additionally, globalization and international institutions such as UNESCO have encouraged the adoption of transnational frameworks. International conferences, for instance, have fostered dialogue on shared preservation strategies and global heritage management, prompting historians to examine how national parks operate across borders and within global systems.³⁸ This transnational shift in national parks scholarship has aimed to decenter national, elite, settler-colonial interpretations of nature and thus foreground questions of power and global exchange. While these works helped diversify the field, they also highlighted the fragmentation within national parks historiography. Tyrrell, Turner, and Jones each conceptualize the transnational dynamics of national parks differently, resulting in approaches that not only diverge from one another, but also overlook engagement with gendered and Indigenous perspectives. If considered together, however, this transnational strand challenges and complicates the nationalist and exceptionalist assumptions rooted in Nash's work. It represents a crucial dimension in developing a fuller, intersectional critique, one that captures the global entanglements of national parks. This is essential to understanding them as contested spaces shaped by overlapping histories of empire, displacement, and exclusion.

This article has demonstrated that national parks scholarship has evolved from romanticized, celebratory narratives to more critically and socially engaged approaches after the 1970s. Indigenous, feminist, and transnational scholars have each diversified the field by revealing the people and perspectives excluded from national parks and why. While these strands share common goals, they have often developed in isolation; bringing them into dialogue offers a more integrated understanding of national parks as contested landscapes shaped by power, exclusion, and lived experiences.

The potential of intersectionality has been explored through both theoretical and methodological comparisons between and within these three intellectual strands. Since these subfields emerged alongside environmental and social justice movements, the foundations for such a shift already exist. Merging these fields would therefore be a natural progression. Intersectionality has already gained traction in broader environmentalism scholarship. Scholars including Dorceta E. Taylor and Janae Davis have shown how race, class, and gender shape environmental access.³⁹ A more intersectional approach in writing the history of national parks would deepen our understanding of how overlapping systems of oppression function within national parks discourse and real-life policies.

³⁸ "Yellowstone National Park," World Heritage Sites, Unesco, Accessed 14 December 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en>

³⁹ Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York University Press, 2014); Janae Davis, "Black Faces, Black Spaces: Rethinking African American Underrepresentation in Wildland Spaces and Outdoor Recreation," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 2, no.1 (2019): 89-109.

Intersectionality's founding theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that as an approach it reveals how multiple forms of exclusion overlap and interact in ways that are often obscured.⁴⁰ In the context of national parks, intersectional scholarship will help to further reveal who these spaces were created for, who was erased, and how certain ideals and narratives of nature have served political agendas. Combining these sub-fields would reflect a more just version of the history of America's most celebrated landscapes. National parks may be "America's best idea," but, like many other great American ideas, it came with a fine print. Revisiting national parks through an intersectional historiography not only challenges how we rewrite their history, but helps rethink how justice, belonging, and access should be incorporated in the landscapes the United States claims to protect.

⁴⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

Paper

The Human Face in Animal Histories: Reaffirming the Hidden Historiographical Value of Animals in Histories of American Colonization

Elliott Bickerton | University of Amsterdam

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*"Can they be very poor, where for four thousand souls there are fifteen hundred head of cattle, besides four thousand goats, and swine innumerable?"*¹

— William Wood

*"'Tis true indeed, none of my deer are marked,' the Indian coolly replied, 'and by that [you] may know them to be mine; and when you meet with any that are marked, you may do with them what you please; for they are none of mine.'"*²

— Virginia DeJohn Anderson

European colonizers did not travel to the Americas on their own; they brought with them a host of living creatures, perhaps most infamously the microorganisms carrying the diseases that would wipe out vast numbers of Indigenous peoples.³ Equally influential, if less devastating, however, were the domesticated animals on which the colonizers depended for food, clothing, and muscular power. Since the early 1970s, these animals have become the subject of historians' research, both for the role they played in supporting and feeding European colonizers and for the substantial environmental consequences they set in motion following their introduction into the American ecosystem. In particular, Alfred W. Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* and William H. McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples*, published in 1972 and 1976 respectively, represented groundbreaking works in the early historiography of European animals' ecological effects on America.⁴

As the influential environmental historian William Cronon pointed out in 1983, however, the transfer of European animal species brought not only the animals' bodies and their environmental consequences to the American continent, but also the cultural conceptions surrounding them. In the words of Cronon, "the pig was not merely a pig but a creature bound among other things to the fence, the dandelion, and a very special definition

Notes

¹ William Wood, *New England's Prospects* (London, 1634), 49; Quoted in William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, 1st rev. ed. (Hill and Wang, 2013), 129.

² Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 217.

³ I have used the term "Indigenous" to describe the variety of groups originally inhabiting America, reflecting current scholarly usage. Most of the scholars discussed here use other terms, however, such as "Native," which were standard at the time they were writing – when quoting I have retained their original usage.

⁴ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30th anniversary ed. (Praeger, 2003); William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor Press, 1976).

of property.”⁵ What Cronon was implying was that to study an animal’s role in the history of American colonization, historians should, besides considering their ecological effects, always keep in mind the cultural systems—the political, economic, and cultural ideas—that determined the way humans viewed and related to these animals. In fact, by analyzing the different ways humans interacted with or utilized animals, historians could learn much about the attitudes and behaviors that shaped a people’s culture, offering historians of the colonial and post-colonial era a valuable avenue of inquiry.

In this article, I argue that focusing on the cultural examination of animals in the context of American colonization offers a unique, and scarcely recognized, insight into the way scholars have understood the relation between European colonizers and Indigenous Americans. Through an analysis of the prominent works within this historiographical subfield, I posit that studying the ways that both Indigenous Americans and Euro-Americans related to animals can reveal original insights or reemphasize existing understandings of the cultural systems underlying the conflict between colonizer and colonized. As such, the focus of this study is not on the environmental aspects of this historiography, although this has provided crucial insights, nor does it extensively discuss the animal-centered approaches that—as we shall see—have recently come to dominate the subfield, and which are aimed primarily at highlighting animals’ perspectives and emphasizing their individual agency in shaping history. The focus, rather, is on the way scholars have understood the cultural, and thus human, dimensions of this animal history. I argue that a recent decline in the production of animal histories aimed at unraveling the cultural conflict characterizing American colonization merits a historiographical review that showcases the continuing importance of this approach for its ability to deepen our understanding of the tactics of colonization and resistance.

No scholar has so far conducted such a review of animal histories in the context of American colonization, although one historian has provided a fairly recent overview of the historical research on animals in relation to global imperialism. In this historiographical essay, the modern Japanese historian Aaron Skabelund acknowledged the value of research by Virginia DeJohn Anderson and Jon T. Coleman, for the attention it gave to the relationships between animals and white settlers and Indigenous people respectively. Skabelund neglected to mention, however, how this might increase our knowledge of human cultures. Instead, he was more intent on emphasizing the need to accord animals historical agency, praising these scholars mainly for their focus on individual animals and devoting the majority of his narrative to promoting more recent histories which have worked to give animals a voice in mainstream history. As will be made clear in my analysis, both Anderson and Coleman utilized the interpretive framework devised by William Cronon, which was invaluable for showcasing the ability of animal histories to deepen the understanding of the cultures underlying American colonization. By disregarding early animal histories as being focused mainly on environmental consequences and not on actual relationships between animals and people, Skabelund entirely overlooked Cronon, and the method of analysis he passed down to

⁵ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 1983), 14.

Anderson and Coleman, which explains his lack of attention to the ability of animal histories to uncover cultural systems in imperialistic contexts.⁶

Although I devote greater attention to works that harnessed the potent cultural approach Cronon introduced into the field, my examination identifies chronologically the key historical studies conducted on the subject of animals in American colonization. Through an analysis of these historians' methods, interpretations, and findings, and the contexts in which they wrote, I trace the emergence, climax, and subsequent decline of animal histories committed to revealing the cultures guiding the troublesome relationship between Euro-Americans and Indigenous Americans.

The historiography of animals in American colonization was launched by Alfred W. Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Published in 1972, Crosby's influential monograph took a wholly new approach to the historical study of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the New World. An interdisciplinarian at heart, teaching history, geography and American Studies, Crosby believed that, before a historian could uncover a country's political, economic, or social history, he had to first understand how its people sustained and reproduced themselves, and, more importantly, "how their efforts in accomplishing these tasks affected their environments."⁷ Therefore, he set out to map what was, in his eyes, the most consequential effect of the European discovery of America: the extensive biological transformation it had caused.

For Crosby, one of the most significant ecological consequences of the Europeans' arrival in the Americas was the influx of the animals they brought with them. In studying the impact of these animals on the American ecosystem, alongside that of the many organisms that unintentionally travelled with them, Crosby established a shared task for historians examining the role of animals in American history. He highlighted how, through the introduction of domesticated animals native to Eurasia, the American ecosystem was "Europeanized."⁸ Horses, cows, pigs, and sheep came ashore in small numbers at first, but rapidly increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth century to form populations of hundreds of thousands. Wherever they went, these animals threatened the indigenous flora and fauna. Overgrazing led to the extinction of native grasses and the erosion of American soil, while the animals' competition for food and the diseases they brought killed many Indigenous people. Over time, the exponential growth of these domesticated animals meant they were hard to contain and would often roam to wherever fresh grass or crops could be found. Here, Crosby foreshadowed a trend that was to become popular among animal historians of the twenty-first century, namely, to accord animals historical agency. For example, he noted that many European quadrupeds slowly returned to nature and took up substantial roles in the American ecosystem.⁹

Crosby focused heavily on the environmental impact of animals in the Americas but

⁶ Aaron Skabelund, "Animals and Imperialism: Recent Historiographical Trends," *History Compass* 11, no. 10 (2013): 801-807.

⁷ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 15.

⁸ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 47.

⁹ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 62-68.

made sure not to forget the accountability of the ‘animals’ that had brought them there: humans. In accordance with his assertion that historians should study people’s efforts to stay alive first, alongside the ecological ramifications caused by those efforts, Crosby emphasized that the ‘Europeanization’ of the American environment was engendered primarily by the Spanish need for food, which was essential to their project in the New World.¹⁰ He does, at certain points in his narrative, broaden this exploration of European animals’ impact in America to include cultural causes and consequences, foreshadowing the approach Cronon would adopt. For example, he argues that the Spanish habit of seizing large tracts of Indigenous-owned land on which to graze their livestock showcased the expansionist ethos of Spanish colonizers, while his analysis of the Indigenous people’s adoption of horses revealed their cultural adjustment of traditional hunting practices and social systems in their attempt to resist invading Europeans.¹¹ However, his general conviction that the study of a people’s politics, economy, social relationships, and culture ought to be relegated to the secondary tier on historians’ to-do lists led Crosby to overlook the influential role these human structures play in a historical study of animals in colonization, leaving his foundational work open to later scholarly revision.

In his landmark 1983 book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, renowned environmental historian William Cronon undertook just such a revision, stating that Crosby’s animal history approach was “incomplete.”¹² By examining the human primarily as a biological being, whose methods of subsistence, including the animals from which he fed himself, caused alterations in the American ecosystem, Cronon suggested that Crosby had neglected to sufficiently highlight that humans are defined by more than their biology. Cronon foregrounded the argument that, besides biology, a peoples’ culture, politics, and economy are crucial to consider in studying the true effects of their animals on the environment. Cronon’s study represented an interpretive leap in animal history, expanding the field’s subject matter and extending it into new areas of scholarly debate.¹³

According to Cronon, the full effect of Europeans’ animals on the American ecosystem “becomes visible only when they are treated as integral elements in a complex system of environmental and cultural relationships.”¹⁴ Studying the environmental transformation brought about by the arrival of English colonizers and their animals in New England, Cronon argued that the cultural system underlying the European relationship to the environment strongly determined the extent to which the American ecosystem was transformed. In the case of the English colonizers, the “complex system of environmental and cultural relationships” referred to the European perception of animals, which was informed by capitalist ideas, and which viewed quadrupeds as commodities that could be owned and sold in the commercial markets of a rural economy. Compared to Indigenous Americans, who viewed animals primarily as a resource for subsistence, Cronon argued that this was a radical cultural change. The Indigenous need for animals, and specifically animal

¹⁰ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 47.

¹¹ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 62, 64.

¹² Cronon, 14.

¹³ Cronon, 13-14.

¹⁴ Cronon, 13-14.

meat, was satisfied when they had eaten enough. But the European relationship to animals was one of infinite need, since, according to their monetary culture, the wealth that animals produced conferred status, and neither wealth nor status had a limit. Alongside ecological factors, such as the Europeans' subsistence needs and the diseases their animals brought, this insatiable drive for expansion, which defined how Europeans viewed and related to animals, was crucial for analyzing the extent of the transformation and "Europeanization" of the New England ecosystem.¹⁵

Cronon was careful not to disregard ecological causality, but, more importantly, his assertion that cultural, political, and economic ideas played a key role in the impact Europeans and their animals had on the American ecosystem revealed the greater potential that a history of animals in American colonization harbored. While Crosby's study had laid the ecological groundwork for the subfield, Cronon contributed the notion that animals' impact on the environment was inseparable from the different ways in which humans related to their surroundings, and which, he emphasized, was apt to change over time. Accordingly, an examination of animals and their specific relationships to a group of people offered a valuable tool for unearthing the culture informing those peoples' attitudes and habits. This influential finding opened new avenues for historians interested in studying the two cultural systems underlying the conflict between, on the one hand, European colonizers with expansive and oppressive goals, and on the other, Indigenous peoples who were forced to adjust and resist. A study of animals and the specific ways in which these two groups related to them therefore offered original cultural insights that provided new ways of thinking about the epistemological instability inherent to the encounter of Euro-Americans and Indigenous Americans.

As discussed above, Crosby's narrative, at times, had showed signs of the "cultural turn" that Cronon was to announce in the historical study of animals, such as in his discussion of Spanish imperial land-grabbing practices in cattle husbandry, or in his exploration of Indigenous American cultural adjustments following the introduction of the horse.¹⁶ Cronon, however, was the first to fully recognize and underline the extent to which cultural dimensions governed the historical role of animals in American colonization. This is exemplified in his in-depth examination of livestock and fences in New England. Analyzing colonial legal sources, Cronon found many disputes between Indigenous and English settlers over the encroachment of English animals onto Indigenous croplands. According to the English rationale, the Indigenous peoples' lack of fences and livestock meant they were not improving the land, something that the English, with the help of their four-footed friends, would do. This, according to expansionist English reasoning, gave the colonizers the right to seize Indigenous' lands. However, in an ingenious form of resistance, Indigenous responded by using the English legal conception of property against the Europeans. Indigenous farmers argued that they *were* improving the land on which they grew crops, and the damage caused by the English-owned livestock intruding on it made the English legally responsible for those

¹⁵ Cronon, 159-167.

¹⁶ Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 62, 64.

damages.¹⁷ Cronon's use of episodes such as these, which showcased both the expansionism of English colonizers and the resistance offered by Indigenous Americans, exhibited the capacity of a history of animals in American colonization to uncover the culturally determined reasoning and practices of both Indigenous and colonizers in their conflict on American soil.

Alfred W. Crosby's second exploration of the animal's role in the European immigration to the New World followed three years after Cronon had labelled his work an "incomplete" history.¹⁸ Though Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe*, through its examination of the global dissemination of Europeans, did add important ecological findings to the history of animals in American colonization, the book would once again understate the importance of European culture, politics, and economy on the widespread success of humans and their animals in America. Crosby didn't mention Cronon's critique in this work, nor did he recognize and incorporate Cronon's influential findings on the cultural systems governing animal histories. He maintained his argumentative stance, positing once again that it was primarily environmental and biological factors which had caused the proliferation of European creatures in America.¹⁹

Andrew C. Isenberg, the environmental and Indigenous American historian, would become the first scholar writing after *Changes in the Land* to employ a similar perspective as Cronon in the study of animals in American conquest, successfully harnessing the subfield's potential to offer new ways of thinking about contrasting cultural systems. Writing in 2004, amid growing concerns over the human's destructive role in the deterioration of the planet's environment and the extinction of countless animals, Isenberg, in *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920*, chose to analyze the causes behind the tragic fate of North America's largest land mammal. Isenberg was careful to avoid an interpretation that several romantic ecologists had previously forwarded and which both he and Cronon labelled as incorrect; namely, that non-human nature would exist in equilibrium and harmony were it not for its disturbance by human actions. Nevertheless, he identified the nineteenth-century confrontation between Euro-Americans, the group that stemmed from Cronon's English colonizers, and Indigenous Americans on the Great Plains as the catalyst leading to the American bison's near-extinction. It was Isenberg's broad exploration of the developments succeeding this encounter, which included social, cultural, labor, and gender analyses, that made his work stand out in the historiography of animals in American colonization. Isenberg not only placed emphasis on the environmental factors causing the bison's decline, such as drought, cold, and predators, but also adopted Cronon's interpretative framework and unearthed Euro-American and Indigenous American cultural and economic forces that simultaneously reinforced the factors threatening the bison and brought to light the unstable relationship between colonizer and colonized.²⁰

¹⁷ Cronon, 130-132.

¹⁸ Cronon, 14.

¹⁹ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1-7, 171-194, 294-308.

²⁰ Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-12, 193-198; Cronon, 9-14.

First, Isenberg posited that certain environmental factors threatening the bison, such as disease and overgrazing, “were inextricably connected to the human economies that introduced domesticated species to the plains.”²¹ Here, Isenberg argued that the same monetary culture that Cronon had accorded agency—and suggested determined the relationship of English colonizers to animals and the New England environment—drove environmental changes on the Great Plains. Second, in studying the decline of the bison population, Isenberg highlighted various cultural trends that both grew out of and intensified the destructive relationship between Indigenous and Euro-American peoples and the bison. Environmental changes brought on by the Indigenous and Euro-American encounter, like the introduction of European horses, influenced the cultural systems of specific groups of Indigenous Americans and the way they related to the environment. These Indigenous populations adjusted their lifestyle, partly as a form of resistance against the advance of colonizers, from a predominantly sedentary one to an equestrian nomadic one. This equestrian way of life and the greater efficiency it enabled in the hunt for bison, moreover, impacted nomadic Indigenous culture by sharpening gendered labor divisions, with a growing number of women dressing bison skins, while the men went out to hunt. Ultimately, the encounter would inspire a process of mutual cultural change resulting in a commercially driven battle between Euro-Americans and nomadic Indigenous over the control of the valuable resource that was the bison.²² In uncovering various cultural developments which showcased both the evolving relationship between expansion-minded Euro-Americans and resisting Indigenous, and their respective impact on the American environment, Isenberg’s study of the bison’s role in American colonization speaks to the value of the historiographical subfield of animal history in exploring the complexity of the Indigenous encounter with Europeans.

Both Cronon and Isenberg successfully implemented the study of animals in the history of American colonization to reveal not only ecological consequences, but also the cultural systems underlying the human conflict between European colonizers and Indigenous Americans. That historiographical trend continued with colonial historian Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s 2004 work *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, which aimed to generate further “understanding of the process of colonization” by examining the differing ways in which English colonizers and Indigenous Americans related to European animals.²³ Her method was an innovative one. Analyzing colonial sources, in which she found countless mentions of domesticated animals, Anderson traced both Indigenous and English responses to the unpredictable actions of European quadrupeds. In doing so, Anderson brought to light the way in which the two cultural systems operated in an atmosphere of colonization, while, at the same time, being one of the first historians to place animals in the role of historical subject. Curiously, though Anderson acknowledged that Crosby preceded her in according animals historical agency, as indeed he had done, her narrative contained an incorrect reading of Cronon’s work, which presented his contribution

²¹ Isenberg, 6.

²² Isenberg, 2, 47, 197-198.

²³ Anderson, 4.

to animal history as a mere underscoring of European animals' influence on environments inhabited by humans. Anderson also completely omitted Isenberg's work. Doing so led her to wrongly declare that her examination of animals in the Indigenous-colonizer encounter, due to its unearthing of cultural systems that determined the differing ways humans related to animals, was the first to go beyond studying purely animals' environmental impact and the effects this had on humans. In reality, her research was less a groundbreaking shift in the historical study of animals in American colonization than an innovative continuation of the valuable historiographical trend set in motion by Cronon and Isenberg.²⁴

Despite this, Anderson's findings were noteworthy additions. Her narrative centered on the reactions of both Indigenous Americans and English colonizers to the problems engendered by the unpredictable actions of animals, which, Anderson stressed, "became a reliable indicator of the tenor of their relations with one another."²⁵ From the outset, these reactions showcased the uneven balance existing between European oppressor and Indigenous oppressed. European responses to these situations were informed by cultural ideas, such as Christian beliefs which affirmed the divine good of human dominion over animals, and the conviction that pastoral farming automatically improved land. This cultural reasoning slowly harmonized with and grew into imperialistic logic, with colonizers enforcing Indigenous Americans to either adjust their ways and take up livestock, which would lead them on a path towards civilization and Christianity, or allow the English to seize their land, which was a righteous act since they would improve it. Although Indigenous American culture prescribed a very different relationship between human beings and animals, namely one of mutual harmony, Indigenous peoples at least initially adjusted their habits to European ways in an effort to resist encroachment. Over time, however, a European unwillingness to accept the Indigenous' adaptations, alongside the irrepressible expansive ambitions of colonizers, would lead them to view the encroachment of one of their animals onto Indigenous land as an ideal opportunity to seize Indigenous soil.²⁶ Thus, Anderson's exploration of animals' roles in European colonization and Indigenous American resistance confirmed what Cronon had stated and Isenberg had echoed: animals were inseparably linked to cultural systems. This was powerfully demonstrated by the frequent killing of European animals by Indigenous peoples, which they viewed as "symbols of American encroachment."²⁷

Anderson was not the only historian to highlight animals' perspectives and their instrumental role as agents of historical change that year. Jon T. Coleman's *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* studied the unstable relationship between wolves and humans in American history and frequently accorded either wolves or European domesticated animals' historical agency in his narrative. An historian known for combining social, cultural, and environmental approaches, it is no surprise that Coleman's objective in the adoption of this methodological framework was to uncover the cultural reasoning behind the widespread, and

²⁴ Anderson, 1-5; Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 52, 54, 58, 60-62.

²⁵ Anderson, 5.

²⁶ Anderson, 1-11, 44-45, 243-246.

²⁷ Anderson, 245.

often excessively brutal, killing of wolves by Euro-Americans. However, although Coleman wrote about the colonial era and intended to unearth cultural characteristics of Euro-American conquest, his focus on the balanced encounter between humans and wolves, to whom he gave similar predatorial traits, indicated a growing shift in American animal histories. It was one that moved away from human-centered analyses of the conflicting cultures governing how Euro-Americans and Indigenous Americans related themselves to animals and each other, and towards animal-centered examinations which accorded animals agency, considered their perspective, and placed them on a more equal footing with humans, in this case Euro-Americans.²⁸

Borrowing from William Cronon's theories about the cultural systems underlying humans' relationship to their environment, Coleman underscored the influence of Euro-American colonialist concerns on the evolutionary contest between wolves and men. European desires to achieve the political, economic, religious, and cultural colonization of the American mainland imbued what should have been a purely biological showdown with cultural determinants. Even though humans and wolves naturally feared and kept their distance from one another, moments of contact occurred regularly. Specifically, untended Euro-American livestock, accorded agency by Coleman, formed an appetizing opportunity for wolves, and one they frequently indulged in. Being the property of Euro-Americans and seen as crucial to the realization of their colonial project, an attack on the domesticated animals they held dear meant an attack on them. Coleman argued that wolves thus became folkloric villains, the embodiments of factors hampering Euro-American colonial success, some of which had nothing to do with wolves. The interests of Euro-American colonizers legitimized not only the killing of the canine predators, but stimulated the creation of legends, rituals, and folklore about doing so in a brutal way.²⁹ Coleman's work, once again, proved the capacity of animal histories to reveal cultural currents pervading American colonization, contributing valuable insights about mythmaking to knowledge of the colonial Euro-American cultural system. However, the fact that Coleman solely aimed to unravel human-animal relations—dealing, in this case, with Euro-Americans—and opted not to employ Cronon's potent method of cultural analysis to map the human conflict between European colonizer and Indigenous colonized foreshadowed a new, more animal-centered, era in the historiography of animals in American colonization.

Given the effectiveness of animal histories in uncovering the cultural systems underlying Indigenous American and Euro-American conduct and attitudes in the context of American colonization, it is notable that since the early 2000s the production of such histories has dwindled. During the two decades that followed the publication of Anderson's and Coleman's studies, only one book, written by Andrea L. Smalley, harnessed the strong cultural analysis with which Cronon had imbued the subfield of animal history. Smalley's 2017 *Wild by Nature: North American Animals Confront Colonization* followed in the methodological footsteps of Coleman and Anderson in its accordance of animal agency and

²⁸ Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (Yale University Press, 2004), 3-4; "Jon T. Coleman," University of Notre Dame, accessed December 18 2024, <https://history.nd.edu/people/jon-t-coleman/>.

²⁹ Coleman, 1-15, 228-232.

its examination of Euro-American—and, to a lesser extent, Indigenous, sources—showcasing their handling of unpredictable wild animals. But, even more so than her methodological ancestors, Smalley adopted an animal-centered approach—her commitment to telling “the animals’ side of the story” indicating contemporary currents in society which advocated for animals’ rights and strove to place them on an equal footing with humans.³⁰ Aside from Smalley, only a handful of journal articles utilized the valuable interpretive framework discussed in this article. These include Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman’s study into colonizers’ employment of Indigenous labor to manufacture animal products and support the Euro-American economy, and Robert Michael Morrissey’s examination of the role of the bison trade in Indigenous-colonizer diplomacy in Illinois.³¹

This historiographical ebb suggests two trends are affecting historians’ research. First, it seems that there exists a growing contemporary consensus discouraging scholars of American colonization to study historical human-animal relationships from a one-sided perspective of ‘superior’ humans imposing their cultural meanings onto animals. Though it is effective in revealing differing Indigenous and Euro-American cultural systems, historians may feel that adopting this method of analysis will uphold the historical schism in ‘Western’ thought between humans and the natural world, which has justified centuries of anthropogenic exploitation and destruction of the environment and its wildlife. Historians across the past two decades have therefore been careful to avoid approaches that accept this schism, opting to highlight instances presenting a more balanced and equitable relationship between human and non-human animals. Diana L. Ahmad’s close analysis of personal letters written by travelers on the Overland Trail, highlighting the emotional connections between humans and animals, is a fine example.³²

Second, there is likely a growing awareness among non-Indigenous historians over the thorny nature of taking on the task and assuming the capacity of interpreting and defining Indigenous American culture. Given all the historians discussed above are of non-Indigenous descent, changing attitudes towards writing from the perspective of another identity may help to explain the twenty-first-century decline in histories investigating the cultural system underlying Indigenous American attitudes towards animals.

Aaron Skabelund rightfully advocated for the importance of inclusive animal histories, which have grown in popularity over the past decades, and which centralize the animals’ perspective and acknowledge both their agency in shaping history and the natural equality they share with humans.³³ These animal-centered approaches, together with the continuing ecological examinations of European animals’ impact on the American ecosystem, do much to assert

³⁰ Andrea L. Smalley, *Wild by Nature: North American Animals Confront Colonization* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 10.

³¹ Smalley; Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman, “Rendering Economies: Native American Labor and Secondary Animal Products in the Eighteenth-Century Pimería Alta,” *American Antiquity* 76, no. 1 (2011): 3-23; Robert Michael Morrissey, “‘The Country Is Greatly Injured’: Human-Animal Relationships, Ecology and the Fate of Empire in the Eighteenth Century Mississippi Valley Borderlands,” *Environment and History* 22, no. 2 (2016): 157-190.

³² Diana L. Ahmad, *Success Depends on the Animals: Emigrants, Livestock, and Wild Animals on the Overland Trails, 1840-1869* (University of Nevada Press, 2016).

³³ Skabelund, 805.

the value of colonial and post-colonial American animal history. They raise awareness for the animals with which humans cohabit the past and present, and increase our knowledge on the transformation of the American environment in the centuries following Columbus' landing.³⁴ There is a troubling absence, however, of human thoughts, feelings, and habits in these narratives. While not all historical research should have to revolve around humans, having exhibited, over the past pages, the great potential with which William Cronon imbued the historical study of animals in American colonization, and which was echoed by Andrew C. Isenberg, proven by Virginia DeJohn Anderson, and kept alive by Jon T. Coleman and Andrea L. Smalley, it is disappointing to see the usage of his groundbreaking human-centered framework decline. Cronon's analytical innovation transformed the study of animals in histories of American colonization, so that it became not only a lens on ecological issues but also a highly effective method of unearthing the cultural systems underlying the Euro-American and Indigenous American relationship to animals and, more importantly, to each other. Cronon, and his scholarly inheritors, found the human face in animal histories.

Any historiographical subfield which harbors the potential to add original insights or renewed emphasis to the problematic relationship which characterized the encounter and subsequent cohabitation of Europeans and Indigenous on the North American continent is worth continuing to develop. Histories such as Cronon's, Isenberg's, Anderson's, and, to a lesser extent, Coleman's and Smalley's remain necessary for broadening our understanding of this crucial period. Historians' scrutiny of colonizer-colonized relations must be relentless, as any novel research reminding us of the unjust and oppressive nature of Euro-American conduct is a crucial reminder of the fractured foundations on which modern America rests.

³⁴ Nicole M. Mathwich, "Range Limits: Semiferal Animal Husbandry in Spanish Colonial Arizona," *American Antiquity* 87, no. 4 (2022): 724-742.

Paper

The River that Turned Yellow: Examining Environmental Democracy for the Navajo Nation Following the 2015 Gold King Mine Spill

Arnold Haverkort | Leiden University

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On August 7, 2015, on the banks of the San Juan River in New Mexico, it was peak growing season for the Diné, the Indigenous people of the Navajo Nation, when the water suddenly turned yellow. Two days earlier, on August 5, an accident involving the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at the Gold King Mine in Colorado led to the release of over 11 million liters of water contaminated with heavy metals into the Animas and San Juan rivers.¹

The consequences were manifold: that year, some 12,000 acres of crops were lost and the scarce water supply of the Diné and their livestock was no longer drinkable. Additionally, the spill disrupted *Hózhó*, the sacred balance of the river in Diné belief. The EPA apologized for its costly mistake and promised the Diné people that their lands would return to normal and that the agency would “do the right thing.”² Years later, however, corn farmer and Diné tribe member Shawn Mike told the Guardian: “We feel neglected, not heard, disrespected.”³ Along with Mike, many of the Diné still feel the effects of the Gold King Mine Spill and are searching for answers about the spill’s impact on their lands, health and way of being.⁴

The accident has been examined from numerous perspectives by scholars. Those working in several interrelated fields, notably environmental health and sociology, have underscored the cultural and spiritual impact of the Gold King Mine Spill on the Diné, including a sharp decline in river-based activities, the spiritual disruption, and a growing distrust of US institutions.⁵ These responses are rooted in the central place the river holds in

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¹ “How Did the August 2015 Release from the Gold King Mine Happen?,” US Environmental Protection Agency, last modified November 4, 2024, <https://www.epa.gov/goldkingmine/how-did-august-2015-release-gold-king-mine-happen> ; Michael Benanav, “We feel disrespected: Navajo farmers wait for justice years after EPA disaster,” *The Guardian*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/aug/04/navajo-farmers-epa-disaster-new-mexico>

² Heath Haussamen, “NM leaders slam EPA after agency says it won’t pay Gold King Mine spill claims,” *NMPolitics.net*, January 13, 2017, <https://nmpolitics.net/index/2017/01/nm-leaders-slam-epa-after-it-says-it-wont-pay-gold-king-mine-spill-claims/>

³ Benanav.

⁴ Yashira van Horne, et al., “Impacts to Diné activities with the San Juan River after the Gold King Mine Spill,” *Journal of exposure science and environmental epidemiology* 3 (2021): 852–866.

⁵ Rebecca Clausen, et al., “Diné-Centered Research Reframes the gold king mine spill: Understanding social and spiritual impacts across space and time,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 97 (2023): 449–457; van Horne, et al., “Impacts to Diné activities,” 862–864; Nicolette Teufel-Shone, et al., “Development of a culturally anchored qualitative approach to conduct and analyze focus group narratives collected in Diné (Navajo) communities to understand the impacts of the gold king mine spill of 2015,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 17 (2021): 1–16.

Diné life, not just as a resource but as part of *Hózhó*, a state of balance that is disrupted when the river is harmed. The river is used in prayer, daily routines, and spiritual practices, and its disturbance affects both physical and ceremonial life. Meanwhile, public administration scholars Jonathan Fisk, A.J. Good, and Steven Nelson have approached the events of 2015 from a very different perspective, focusing on institutional collaboration between the EPA and the Navajo Nation but giving little attention to the accident's cultural dimensions.⁶

This article brings these two approaches together, offering an analysis that takes both institutional functioning and the views of the Diné people into account. In doing so, I argue that the discrepancy between the EPA and the Diné people's interpretation of the EPA's response to the Gold King Mine Spill is indicative of an institutional failure that is rooted in ineffective communication structures, limited Indigenous participation, and a persistent disregard for cultural and historical contexts in environmental governance. The case of the Gold King Mine Spill therefore reveals how standardized approaches to transparency, participation, and justice often fall short of meeting the needs of affected Indigenous communities when applied to contexts shaped by historical injustices, cultural differences, and systemic inequalities.

To understand the institutional response to the Gold King Mine Spill and its consequences for Diné, I apply the framework of environmental democracy as an analytical lens. While environmental democracy is described in normative terms as striving for transparency, participation, and justice, it also functions as a tool to assess to what extent these goals are achieved. This paper uses the framework in that latter sense to evaluate how environmental decisions following the spill impacted communities and how effectively institutions ensured open information, public participation, and fair treatment.

This paper is therefore divided into three sections, each addressing one of the core dimensions of environmental democracy: transparency, participation, and justice. First, I explore how information about the Gold King Mine Spill was communicated to the Navajo Nation and examine the role of trust, timing, and cultural context in shaping perceptions of transparency. Second, I analyze the forms of participation available to the Diné in the aftermath of the spill, using the EPA's own model to assess how accessible and meaningful these forms of involvement were. Third, I consider how justice was pursued and experienced, focusing on the legal and institutional pathways through which the Diné sought recognition and compensation. Together, these sections offer a layered understanding of how the framework of environmental democracy can help evaluate institutional responses to environmental harm.

Following the Gold King Mine Spill, the EPA insisted it was being transparent in its communication, but for many Diné these official statements only deepened existing mistrust. This section argues that the EPA's transparency was inadequate because it prioritized the release of technical information over meaningful, culturally-grounded communication.

⁶ Jonathan Fisk, A.J. Good, and Steven Nelson, "Collaboration after disaster: Explaining intergovernmental collaboration during the EPA Gold King Mine and TVA coal ash recoveries," *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 10, no. 6 (2018): 52-73.

According to the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Declaration, transparency means “appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities.” This requires timely, understandable, and accessible communication. Although the EPA emphasized data sharing, many Diné did not believe the agency’s information, revealing a discrepancy between formal transparency and how it was experienced on the ground. This section further argues that this discrepancy can be traced back to three interrelated factors: historical injustices that shaped patterns of distrust, a mismatch between scientific and cultural standards of safety, and significant delays in communication. When transparency is narrowly defined as access to data, public authorities overlook how information is communicated, received, and trusted by communities with long-standing experiences of environmental harm.

For the Diné, San Juan River is not merely a source of water but a sacred being that sustains life and balance. This relationship is reflected in everyday and ceremonial practices, such as praying with river water and using sediment as sunscreen.⁷ Central to Diné philosophy is *Hózhó*, the concept of living in balance within a larger system of harmony. When the river is polluted, it disrupts not just the ecosystem but the spiritual and physical order of Diné life. As Karletta Chief, Diné and professor of environmental science, explained, “it’s a complete system, all interconnected. Because the river was imbalanced, even the corn pollen was disrupted.”⁸ The spill did not only damage the ecosystem but also unsettled the spiritual order of Diné life. For many, the disruption extended far beyond the physical contamination of water.

While the spiritual significance of the river shapes how the Diné experience environmental harm, their historical experiences with government neglect and ecological injustice explain why trust in official information is so fragile. Many Diné view the spill in light of earlier experiences with uranium mining, when toxic exposure and government silence caused lasting health and ecological damage.⁹ As one Diné individual told the *Navajo Times*, the Gold King Mine Spill immediately reminded them of that history of withheld information and unacknowledged suffering.¹⁰ This longstanding distrust is reflected in multiple studies in which Diné participants describe the spill as part of a larger pattern of environmental injustice and broken promises.¹¹

Following the spill, the EPA, along with several scholars, claimed that the agency’s response was adequate by emphasizing procedural compliance and institutional protocol.¹²

⁷ Yoshira van Horne, et al., “A Community-Based Health Risk Assessment Following the Gold King Mine Spill: Results from the Gold King Mine Spill Diné Exposure Project,” *Exposure and health* 16 (2024): 643-660.

⁸ Benanav.

⁹ Rebecca Holmes, Adrienne Kroepsch, and Kamini Singha, “River communities, disaster science, and the politics of water safety: Understanding water quality debates in the aftermath of the gold king mine spill,” *Environmental Communication* 18, no. 8 (2024): 12.

¹⁰ Patrick Armijo, “Navajos relate cultural, spiritual wounds from spill from Gold King Mine Spill,” *Durango Herald*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.durangoherald.com/articles/navajos-relate-cultural-spiritual-wounds-from-spill-from-gold-king-mine-spill/#slide=1>

¹¹ Clausen, et al., 62; van Horne, et al., “A Community-Based Health Risk Assessment.”

¹² “Roles of EPA and Other Responders After the 2015 Gold King Mine Release,” US Environmental Protection Agency, last modified November 4, 2024, <https://www.epa.gov/goldkingmine/roles-epa-and-other-responders-after-2015-gold-king-mine-release> ; Karletta Chief et al., “Understanding the gold king mine spill | superfund,” *Superfund Research Program* (2016)

In 2017, a report on the EPA's handling of the spill stated that the agency had acted in accordance with the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and the National Contingency Plan.¹³ Fisk, Good, and Nelson similarly conclude that the EPA followed the proper notification procedures, explaining that as soon as the spill occurred, the agency informed the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Water Quality Control Division, which then passed the information on to downstream parties.¹⁴ From this perspective, the EPA's response can be considered adequate because it notified the relevant institutions in a timely manner, in line with formal emergency regulations.

While the EPA emphasized its efforts to inform affected communities, leaders from the Navajo Nation pointed to serious delays and a lack of direct communication. President Russell Begaye stated that "it took the EPA almost two full days to notify Navajo Nation officials about the spill." The Navajo government only learned of the incident from New Mexico's Technical, Construction and Operations Branch, after the contaminated water had already reached Navajo land.¹⁵ Located about 185 kilometers downstream, the Navajo Nation received word through a chain of at least three intermediaries, which delayed communication by two days. In the *Navajo Times*, Begaye remarked that "it is unfortunate that we have to once again tell our people to stay away from the river," referring to earlier incidents such as the 1979 Church Rock uranium mill spill, where 100 million liters of radioactive water polluted Navajo Nation waters.¹⁶ The memory of such events underscores why delayed communication is especially sensitive for the Navajo Nation.

While it is true that the EPA responded immediately after the spill, the conclusion by both the EPA and Fisk, Good, and Nelson that the response was adequate simply because it complied with US emergency regulations is problematic. As a result of the need for intermediaries and the subsequent delay in information reaching the Navajo Nation, both they and other downstream communities had little time to respond, contributing to widespread distrust toward the EPA and other US government institutions. This case shows how involving multiple institutional actors in environmental crises can lead to inefficient communication and delayed responses. Communicating directly with local leaders can reduce delays and ensure that essential information reaches those most affected first. For marginalized communities such as the Navajo Nation, delayed or indirect communication reinforces historical distrust and undermines the credibility of official information. The fact that the EPA's actions followed a formal procedure but were nonetheless perceived as inadequate is indicative of a systemic flaw, one that Fisk, Good, and Nelson fail to address.

https://superfund.arizona.edu/sites/superfund.cals.arizona.edu/files/understanding_the_gold_king_mine_spill_v13_preamble_final_0.pdf

¹³ Inspector General and Tina Lovingood, et al., "Gold King Mine Release: Inspector General Response to Congressional Requests," (2017) https://www.epaoig.gov/sites/default/files/2017-06/documents/_epaoig_20170612-17-p-0250.pdf

¹⁴ Fisk, Good, and Nelson, 67-68; Clausen, et al., 62.

¹⁵ Russel Begaye, "The EPA has failed the Navajo Nation," *The Hill*, December 7, 2015, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/energy-environment/253857-the-epa-has-failed-the-navajo-nation/>

¹⁶ Russel Begaye in Alastair Bitsoi and Terry Bowman, "Contaminated water on its way to Navajo," *Navajo Times*, August 7, 2015, <https://navajotimes.com/reznews/contaminated-water-on-its-way-to-navajo/>

Conflicting and incomplete information about water safety also created confusion and mistrust among the Diné during the coordinated response to the spill. After the relevant parties were notified, a collective cleanup and monitoring effort was organized between the Navajo Nation, the EPA, and other agencies such as Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Although the various organizations worked together in monitoring the water quality of the contaminated rivers, they issued separate and sometimes contradictory reports. This made it difficult for downstream communities to assess whether the water was safe to use again. Whereas the states of Colorado and New Mexico declared the water safe to use on, respectively, August 14 and 17, the Navajo Nation waited until August 21 to declare the water safe for irrigation and until August 28 to declare it safe for livestock.¹⁷ These declarations were not only confusing for the public because they were issued up to two weeks apart, but also because they did not clarify whether the water being ‘safe’ meant that it was safe for drinking, recreation, agriculture or irrigation.¹⁸

The confusion surrounding the safety of the river was compounded by the inaccuracy of EPA tests, which focused only on surface water and failed to account for contaminants in riverbanks and sediment. While the agencies claimed the water had returned to pre-event levels, the river remained visibly yellow, reinforcing public doubt. Many did not believe the water was safe to use again. Hydrologic scientists Rebecca Holmes et al. note that these signs were ignored in official assessments, even though they were obvious to river users.¹⁹ For any community, such a disconnect between visual evidence and official claims would be confusing, but for the Diné, whose trust in federal institutions was already weakened by a long history of environmental harm, it reinforced mistrust. As Diné farmer Allen Etsitty stated, even years later many people still did not trust that the water was safe.²⁰ This loss of trust might have been reduced if the EPA had sought direct contact with the Navajo Nation and tried to gain a better understanding of local concerns and risk perceptions.

While the EPA’s water quality measurements met federal standards, they did not align with Navajo Nation standards of safety, revealing a mismatch between scientific risk assessments and Indigenous worldviews.²¹ Research from the Diné-centered Gold King Mine Spill Diné Exposure Project shows that the EPA’s assessment overlooked that the Diné use river water not only for practical purposes but also for cultural and spiritual activities.²² After the yellow sediments left, many non-Diné regarded the river as restored, but Diné communities remained hesitant. This is reflected in a 56.2% decline in Diné activities connected to the San Juan River since the spill.²³ This response aligns with the belief that restoring *Hózhó* requires more than a technical cleanup; it also calls for ceremony, ritual, and the restoration of spiritual integrity, which are part of a long-term process. This

¹⁷ Holmes, Kroepsch, and Singha, 8; Bitsoi and Bowman; Fisk, Good, and Nelson, 67-68; Clausen, et al., 63.

¹⁸ Holmes, Kroepsch, and Singha, 8-10.

¹⁹ Holmes, Kroepsch, and Singha, 8-10.

²⁰ Benanav.

²¹ Holmes, Kroepsch, and Singha, 8.

²² van Horne, “A Community-Based Health Risk Assessment.”

²³ van Horne, “A Community-Based Health Risk Assessment.”

discrepancy illustrates a fundamental mismatch between federal environmental assessments and Diné views of what it means for the river to be truly safe and whole.

The fact that many Diné people did not trust the EPA's information that the water was safe demonstrates that transparency, as outlined in the 1992 Earth Summit, cannot be achieved simply by providing access to information. Instead, it is crucial to consider the affected communities' historical background and culture-specific perspectives on what is considered safe in order to estimate how information is perceived. If the EPA had taken these things into account, they could have met the needs of the Diné people rather than the requirements of protocol.

While the EPA did notify several institutions shortly after the spill, the communication chain that followed resulted in the Navajo Nation's government being informed relatively late about the contamination of the San Juan River. This delay highlights a critical flaw: the contaminated water moved faster than the warning about it. A change in emergency reaction policy to inform downstream communities earlier could improve institutional efficiency. Information regarding contamination levels was released up to two weeks apart and communicated unclearly. These factors compounded pre-existing mistrust stemming from the historical trauma related to uranium mining and widened discrepancies between Diné and non-Diné perspectives. They highlight that government agencies must interact directly with the population for communication to be transparent, and that whether information is trusted depends on how it is received and by whom. The communication of standardized measurements from the EPA to the Navajo is an example of how uniform protocols may overlook the needs of communities that do not conform to standard assumptions.

Infrastructural inequality, historical distrust, and a lack of cultural understanding meant that Diné voices were often sidelined after the Gold King Mine Spill, despite formal opportunities for participation. This section argues that, although the EPA engaged with the Navajo Nation through various mechanisms, these efforts were limited in scope and accessibility. To examine these limits, this section uses the EPA's "spectrum" of public participation, which outlines five escalating forms of engagement: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering the public. The analysis focuses on key participation moments, including early information-sharing, consultation on the Draft Monitoring Plan, and collaboration during cleanup and water distribution. While these mechanisms aimed to increase participation, meaningful involvement came largely from grassroots Diné initiatives rather than institutional processes. This highlights how standardized models of participation often fail to adapt to Indigenous contexts.

A key problem with the EPA's participatory model is that it assumes all members of the public have equal power and access to policymaking processes, while in reality participation is shaped by structural inequality. This became clear in 2005, when the EPA considered listing the Gold King Mine as a Superfund site. Inclusion would have enabled cleanup of the mine and required responsible parties to cover the costs. The nearby and mostly white community opposed the designation, however, fearing it would harm property

values and tourism. Their opposition prevailed, and the site was not listed.²⁴ This case shows how the EPA prioritized the short-term interests of politically influential local communities over the long-term needs of downstream Indigenous populations. It reflects two failures: the lack of additional protections for marginalized groups and the failure to recognize that, because pollution travels downstream, environmental policies should account for the needs of the people living downstream too. In this case, those most affected by the Gold King Mine had the least say.

In the immediate aftermath of the spill, participation for the Diné was restricted to the lowest level of engagement, highlighting how earlier failures in transparency limited their ability to take part in policymaking. After the spill, there were different ways in which the public was able to participate in policymaking processes. In the short run, the Diné were primarily limited to receiving information, which represents the most basic form of participation. This limited form of participation was a direct result of earlier problems with transparency, since the public can only participate effectively in policymaking when it is adequately informed. In this regard, immediately after the spill, the Navajo Nation was at a disadvantage because, as illustrated above, communication was not transparent.

The EPA's attempt to consult the public after the spill, the second step on the "spectrum" of participation, shows how formal consultation can fall short of providing meaningful engagement when it fails to address the culture-specific needs of affected communities. On September 17, 2015, one month after the spill, the EPA sought input on the Draft Monitoring Plan Following the Gold King Mine release. On its website, the agency stated that it had "recently held a call with tribal, state, and local officials to discuss the draft plan and solicit their input."²⁵ This was a long-term plan to assess the next safety steps based on the samples taken from the river water. Interpreting this call as sufficient engagement, the EPA appeared to believe it had provided the Diné with access to participation. Many Diné argued, however, that the agency largely neglected their needs in assessing the long-term effects of the spill.

Many Diné felt unheard because government agencies did not account for the cultural and spiritual impacts of the spill. According to Karletta Chief, a Navajo tribal member and assistant professor in the Department of Soil, Water, and Environmental Science at the University of Arizona, agencies focused only on the economic consequences of the disaster. They failed to consider the spiritual and cultural damage experienced by the community. Chief emphasized that community-led initiatives such as the Diné Exposure Project helped bring these dimensions to the attention of the EPA.²⁶ This suggests that meaningful public participation came from grassroots efforts rather than institutional structures designed for Indigenous consultation.

²⁴ Chief, et al.

²⁵ "Press update: September 17, 2015: EPA Seeks Input on Draft Monitoring Plan Following Gold King Mine Release," US Environmental Protection Agency, effective September 17, 2015, <https://www.epa.gov/goldkingmine/september-17-2015-epa-seeks-input-draft-monitoring-plan-following-gold-king-mine>

²⁶ Armijo.

The EPA's consultation strategy was poorly aligned with the infrastructural and geographic realities of the Navajo Nation, which may have hindered community participation. The EPA relied on online platforms and held only a few public meetings, which may not have reached much of the population. Over a third of Navajo homes lack internet, and even those with access often face unreliable connections and limited electricity.²⁷ Combined with the Nation's vast and remote geography, these barriers likely made participation difficult. This suggests that standard federal consultation systems are not well suited to the realities of tribal communities like the Diné.

Collaboration was the most developed aspect of the participation "spectrum" after the spill, but the strained relationship between the EPA and the Navajo Nation limited its effectiveness. The EPA worked with representatives of the Diné, including the Navajo Nation government and its Environmental Protection Agency (NNEPA), yet trust issues undermined the partnership. Although both agencies monitored water quality, the NNEPA conducted separate measurements alongside the EPA's efforts. Navajo Nation President Begaye told the *Navajo Times*: "This is another familiar story of the US government's lax oversight responsibility," referring to long-standing distrust toward the EPA.²⁸ The existence of separate monitoring efforts created confusion and contributed to the lack of transparency in the information shared after the spill. The EPA and NNEPA could have mitigated this by working on a shared report to present unified findings.

The EPA's approach to water distribution after the spill further illustrates how key logistical decisions were made without meaningful input from the Navajo Nation. Joe Ben Jr., a representative of Shiprock's farm board, noticed signs of contamination in the water delivered to his community. When President Begaye investigated the incident, EPA officials blamed Ben Jr., accusing him of intimidating personnel. The EPA claimed that the barrels used were steam-cleaned and inspected. However, when Begaye visited the site himself, he observed that the water contained oil and later stated that he "couldn't believe the EPA's higher-ups basically told [him] a lie."²⁹

The EPA's decision to entrust Triple S Trucking, a company primarily engaged in oil and gas transport, with the responsibility of delivering drinking water raises serious questions about whether the EPA prioritized safe access to water or simply relied on the most readily available contractor. The Navajo Nation was not involved in this decision, nor consulted about how water would be distributed. Although the water was contaminated, it was still used by Diné farmers to feed their cattle, revealing both their dependence on the supply and the institutional dependence of the Navajo Nation's government on the EPA.³⁰ This case reflects the paradox faced by semi-autonomous Indigenous nations: while they are politically self-determined in theory, they remain dependent on federal agencies that do not consistently act

²⁷ Elliot Ross, "This Is Life in America's Water-Inequality Capital. It Might Be About to Change," *Time*, September 19, 2024, https://time.com/7019660/colorado-river-water-drought-navajo-nation/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁸ Begaye in Bitsoi and Bowman; Begaye in Cindy Yurth, "Begaye calls on EPA to bring water," *Navajo Times*, August 5, 2015, <https://navajotimes.com/reznews/begaye-calls-on-epa-to-bring-water/>

²⁹ Taflin Laylin, "Navajo leader feels betrayed by EPA over 'contaminated' water supply," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/aug/21/navajo-nation-epa-contaminated-water>

³⁰ Laylin.

transparently or accountably. In this instance, the lack of meaningful participation in a basic logistical decision had tangible consequences for the health and trust of the community. At the very least, the EPA should have warned Diné farmers not to use the water for their cattle.

The case of the Gold King Mine Spill shows that, although the EPA formally facilitated various means of participation, these did not result in meaningful inclusion of the Diné people. Structural inequality, historical distrust, and a lack of cultural and geographic awareness limited the effectiveness of each step on the EPA's participation spectrum. Decisions were often made without input from those most affected, reinforcing existing power imbalances and leading to confusion, mistrust, and tangible harm. This section has shown that meaningful participation requires more than procedural inclusion, it requires context-sensitive engagement, trust-building, and recognition of Indigenous perspectives.

Although environmental justice promises both accountability and redress, what happened after the Gold King Mine Spill shows that these are not always provided. As the Rio Declaration defines it, environmental justice is the public's right to access judicial and administrative procedures in order to seek redress and remedy for environmental harm or violations of environmental law.³¹ This section argues that, for the Diné, access to justice was delayed, incomplete, and shaped by legal and institutional obstacles. The EPA initially accepted responsibility and offered ways for people to claim compensation, but the process that followed revealed large discrepancies between how justice is understood and experienced. By looking at how the Diné sought recognition and compensation, this section shows that environmental justice does not always work for Indigenous communities like the Navajo Nation.

The aftermath of the spill revealed stark inequalities between those who had and did not have access to justice and compensation, with many Diné individuals left without support despite formal mechanisms in place. On August 16, 2016, the Navajo Nation filed a lawsuit against the United States and the EPA, which led to a 28 million dollar settlement for restoration and damages. Diné farmers, livestock owners, and others did not see the EPA's promise fulfilled. In April 2016, Council Delegate LoRenzo Bates stated that the Diné had received nothing, stressing the spiritual and cultural impact of the spill.³² The EPA rejected 73 claims totaling \$1.2 billion, citing sovereign immunity. EPA spokesperson Nancy Grantham explained, "our hands are tied," referring to the Federal Tort Claims Act, which allows lawsuits against federal agencies but also grants them legal protections.³³

³¹ "UNEP implementing Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration," United Nations Environmental Program, accessed April 13, 2025, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/unep-implementing-principle-10-rio-declaration#:~:text=Principle%2010%20sets%20out%20three,inclusive%20and%20accountable%20environmental%20governance.>

³² "Examining EPA's Unacceptable Response to Indian Tribes," United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, effective April 22, 2016, https://www.navajonationcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Speaker_LoRenzo_Bates_SCIA_Examining_EPA_Unacceptable_Response_to_Indian_Tribes.pdf

³³ CBS, "EPA says it won't repay claims for spill that caused yellow rivers," *CBS News*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gold-king-mine-spill-colorado-rivers-epa-claims/>

The fact that the EPA cited sovereign immunity shows that legal frameworks such as CERCLA, which are designed to ensure responsibility and redress in cases of environmental harm, do not always apply when the harm is caused by federal agencies themselves. Although these frameworks are intended to protect affected communities, they contain legal protections that can exempt the government from accountability. This creates a structural contradiction: the very institutions meant to uphold environmental justice can also invoke immunity to avoid responsibility. For the Diné, this meant that the protections promised by these laws were hard to access, showing how frameworks such as CERCLA can end up repeating the very injustices they are meant to fix.

Institutional and legal barriers made it especially difficult for the Diné to receive timely compensation. After the spill, different actors within the US government shifted accountability rather than taking concrete action. The EPA initially accepted responsibility, but later pointed to Congress as the reason financial compensation was not possible, citing inadequate Superfund funding.³⁴ At the same time, state officials publicly criticized the EPA, despite their limited role in the cleanup process.³⁵ This pattern of blame-shifting across agencies and levels of government is indicative of a systemic problem: when responsibility is diffused across institutions, it becomes difficult to hold any single actor accountable. For the Diné, this meant years of waiting, unanswered claims, and a deepening sense that justice would not be delivered.

Why the EPA went back on its promise to compensate the victims of the spill can be seen as part of a pattern of shifting priorities once the immediate crisis passed. In the first months following the spill, the EPA took responsibility and promised to make things right. This initial stance can partly be explained through the work of Fisk, Good, and Nelson, who argue that, during the initial stages of the response to disaster, actors tend to collaborate to preserve their reputation and to effectively solve the problem.³⁶ However, when after a year the immediate crisis was over and the Navajo Nation pursued judicial steps for compensation, these interests shifted. This shift illustrates how public agencies often prioritize reputational management over long-term accountability.

Although the EPA eventually reached a settlement with the Navajo Nation in 2021 and 2022, the long delay and narrow focus of the compensation highlight ongoing limitations in the pursuit of environmental justice. A 2021 settlement with Kinross and Sunnyside Gold Corporation granted the Navajo Nation ten million dollars, followed by a \$31 million settlement with the EPA the next year.³⁷ However, these agreements focused mainly on funding cleanup, not on repairing the cultural, spiritual, and social damage experienced by the Diné. The words of Shawn Mike, the Diné farmer who had earlier expressed his frustration in *The Guardian*, capture the lingering sense of neglect: “We feel neglected, not

³⁴ Jesse Paul, “Many hoped the Gold King Mine spill would bring change. Five years later, they’re still waiting,” *The Colorado Sun*, August 5, 2020, <https://coloradosun.com/2020/08/05/gold-king-mine-spill-five-years-later/>

³⁵ Paul.

³⁶ Fisk, Good, and Nelson, 66.

³⁷ “Navajo Nation settles claims against mining companies arising out of the August 2015 Gold King Mine Spill,” Navajo Nation Department of Justice, effective January 13, 2021, <https://nndoj.navajo-nsn.gov/Portals/0/Press%20Releases/2021/2020.1.13%20DOJ%20Press%20release%20re%20GKM%20settlement%20with%20mining%20companies.pdf>

heard, disrespected.”³⁸ His voice reflects distrust of US institutions and the sense that justice, when it comes, arrives too late and falls short of what is truly needed.

Compared to non-Diné claimants, the Diné were more severely affected by the spill, not only financially but also because of the cultural and spiritual value they attach to the river. The disruption of *Hózhó* and their use of the river for cultural and spiritual purposes were not considered when their claims were assessed. Additionally, many individual claims were rejected because the EPA would only compensate for physical damage, not for loss of business.³⁹ This applied to both Diné and non-Diné claimants. Beyond these business-related losses, however, the Diné experienced a distinct form of harm: their deep reliance on the river for fishing, drinking water, and traditional practices was not recognized in the compensation process.⁴⁰ The way the Diné’s claims were assessed highlights how institutional frameworks for compensation often fail to account for Indigenous worldviews, resulting in a lack of recognition for non-material forms of loss.

Even when compensation was eventually granted, the long wait and the limited scope of the settlement made justice feel incomplete for many Diné farmers. In November 2022, the US government reached a settlement with 224 out of the 295 individual Diné farmers, in which the government admitted negligence. The farmers had to wait seven years for compensation. The amount each farmer received varied based on the extent of the damage. According to the farmers’ attorney, Kate Ferlic, the reaction to the settlement was positive, but the victory bittersweet: “Fields go fallow, people sell equipment in order to survive.”⁴¹ The judicial system is a slow-moving mechanism, which is especially impactful for communities such as the Diné, who are heavily dependent on the resources of the San Juan River. Although it is not unusual for the judicial system to work slowly, it is particularly frustrating for communities for whom receiving recognition and justice has been an uphill battle.

The EPA’s initial acknowledgment of responsibility and promises of compensation created expectations that went largely unmet for a long time. The involvement of multiple actors, slow-moving judicial system, and cultural ignorance compounded the challenges faced by the Diné, illustrating the systemic barriers faced by minority communities in seeking justice. The justice that the Navajo Nation and Diné people have received mark an important step, but the long delays, limited recognition of cultural harm, and systemic barriers leave it an incomplete victory.

The Gold King Mine Spill reveals how standardized approaches to transparency, participation, and justice often fall short of meeting the needs of those most affected, especially in contexts shaped by historical injustices, cultural differences, and systemic inequities. These factors shape the complex dynamic between the US government and a tribe

³⁸ Shawn Mike in Benanav.

³⁹ Rick Sallinger, “Environmental Protection Agency denies two-thirds of claims for damages tied to Gold King Mine Spill,” *CBS News*, August 28, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/environmental-protection-agency-denies-two-thirds-claims-damages-tied-gold-king-mine-spill/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴⁰ Benanav.

⁴¹ Diane Joy Schmidt, “New US government settlement for individual Navajo Farmers,” *Navajo Times*, November 10, 2022, <https://dianejoyschmidt.com/2022/11/11/new-u-s-government-settlement-for-individual-navajo-farmers/>

with a long and troubled history in relation to that government. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate shift toward frameworks that actively consider and incorporate the historical, cultural, and social dimensions unique to each community. Without such adaptations, government responses risk perpetuating mistrust and exclusion, undermining efforts to achieve genuine environmental democracy and equitable outcomes for affected Indigenous populations.

In engaging with scholars such as Clausen et al. and Chief, who focus on the social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of the spill, and placing their work in conversation with the institutional analysis by Fisk, Good, and Nelson, this research shows the need for more interdisciplinary approaches to environmental governance. The case of the Gold King Mine Spill makes clear that neither technical institutional studies nor culturally grounded accounts alone are sufficient to understand how environmental policy is shaped and experienced in the aftermath of environmental harm. By bringing these strands together, this paper argues for an approach that centralizes Indigenous perspectives in evaluating and rethinking the democratic and political dimensions of environmental governance.

Paper

Rising Tides: Louisiana's Coastal Wetlands During the Reagan Administration – Responses and Actions

Valérie Josephine Slijkerman | Leiden University

This paper was written for the course 'A Water's History of the United States' for the MA History: Politics, Culture and National Identities, 1789 to the Present

Louisiana hosts the world's seventh-largest wetlands and 40% of the coastal wetlands in the United States. These vital ecosystems support wildlife, protect coasts, and filter river pollution, but they are vanishing fast. Public concern over the loss of wetlands rose in the 1970s, leading to new regulations, though progress stalled due to weak funding and fragmented policy. A major restoration effort did not begin until 2007, despite decades of warnings from experts.¹ This delay, and the wider loss of Louisiana's wetlands, reflects in part the broader impact of federal policies during the Reagan Administration (1981-1989). During this period the focus of the federal government shifted from proactive environmental safeguards to deregulation and a focus on economic growth, creating lasting tensions between the administration's national priorities and local environmental needs.

Scholars have given considerable attention to the environmental impact of Reagan-era policies, often viewing his administration as a turning point in federal environmental regulation. Political scientists Michael Kraft and Norman Vig, for example, argue that Reagan sought to reverse the established environmental policy by prioritizing deregulation and budget cuts, despite opposition from environmental organizations, Congress, and the public.² Other scholars, such as legal scholar Daniel Farber, note a shift from earlier Republican conservative environmentalism to anti-environmental views, fueled by business interests, conservative donors, and other groups dissatisfied by the previous environmental regime.³ Indeed, numerous scholars have argued that the Reagan Administration laid the groundwork for strategies later continued by other conservative Republicans.⁴ Notably, sociologist Riley

Notes

¹ Rebecca B. Costa, *Policies of Loss: Coastal Erosion and the Struggle to Save Louisiana's Wetlands* (Louisiana State University, 2016), vii-1.

² Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig, "Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 3 (1984): 415-416.

³ Daniel A. Farber, "The Conservative as Environmentalist: From Goldwater and the Early Reagan to the 21st Century," *Arizona Law Review* 59, no. 4 (2017): 1007. Other relevant literature on Reagan and the environment includes: Daniel Nelson, *Nature's Burdens Conservation and American Politics, The Reagan Era to the Present* (Utah State University Press, 2017); Jessica Hejny, "The Trump Administration and environmental policy: Reagan redux?," *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2018): 197-211; Donald Sharpes, "Nixon and Reagan on the Environment," *White House Studies* 14, no. 1 (2024); James Morton Turner, "The Specter of Environmentalism', Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right," *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (2009): 148.

⁴ James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 14.

Dunlap argues that while environmental support grew during Reagan's tenure, economic concerns overshadowed environmental issues in elections.⁵

In Louisiana, with its vulnerable coastal marshes, these shifts in national environmental policies had significant impacts. Rapid marsh loss spurred research into the causes and consequences, as well as the possibility of restoration efforts. What began as a scientific debate on wetland loss became a political issue, however, with the oil industry in southern Louisiana often blamed as the main culprit. According to historian Rebecca Costa, the national political and economic climate significantly influenced wetland conservation efforts.⁶ Furthermore, geographer Craig Colten argues that changing coastal management in Louisiana also limited resource access and disrupted traditional lifestyles, while largely ignoring the social and cultural needs of coastal communities and fishing communities.⁷

Despite this previous research, the regional perceptions of, and reactions to, Reagan's environmental policies and their relation to national trends remain understudied. As such, the case study of Louisiana's coastal wetlands at the heart of this article explores how national policies resonated locally in a region sensitive to both ecological and social concerns, highlighting the interplay of politics, economics, and ecology. The focus is on how Reagan's environmental policies affected coastal wetland policies and attitudes in Louisiana between 1981 and 1989, and how these local responses compared to those at the national level in the United States.

This study analyzes Reagan's two terms in office, taking a chronological approach to explore developments in policy and responses over the course of this period. The focus on the Louisiana wetlands builds on the recent focus on blue history in the wider field of environmental history. In particular, this study is informed by Steve Mentz' concept of the 'blue humanities,' which explores human relationships with water in all its forms and underscores the importance of water-centered perspectives in humanities scholarship.⁸ Drawing on Mentz' work, this article uses a blue history approach that centers the interplay between water, power, and policy. It examines how decisions concerning the environment during the Reagan Administration, particularly the weakening of federal regulations and cuts to conservation funding, reshaped the balance of power between federal and state authorities in wetland management. Focusing on coastal Louisiana, it explores how the Gulf Coast was affected by these shifts and how those living in the affected regions responded to political decision-making. The historical method used is therefore both contextual and comparative; it situates Louisiana's environmental policies within broader national trends while also analyzing the state's distinct ecological and socio-political landscape.

This study is based on a range of primary sources drawn from the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies in the Netherlands, specifically the database *Trends & Policy: US*

⁵ Riley E. Dunlap, "Polls, Pollution, and Politics Revisited: Public Opinions on the Environment in the Reagan Era," *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 29, no. 6 (1987): 36.

⁶ Costa, 239-242.

⁷ Craig E. Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana: A Historical Review," *Journal of Coastal Research* 33, no. 3 (2017): 708.

⁸ Steve Mentz, "Blue Humanities," in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, ed. S. Herbrechter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 959.

Environment. Key sources included *Status and Trends of Wetlands* (1983), a study conducted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as part of a congressionally directed effort to inventory the nation's wetland loss and degradation, offering pre- and early-term context for understanding federal and Louisiana-specific environmental policy. Furthermore, the *1980 Presidential Election Report* outlines the Republican Party's platform, and provides insights into Reagan's early environmental outlook. Meanwhile, the *Hearings on the status of the nation's wetlands and laws* (1989) and the *Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing* (1989) reflect late-term policy developments and capture testimony presented before the US House of Representatives.⁹ These hearings document debates and responses from a broad range of stakeholders—including environmentalists, wetland scientists, oil industry representatives, residents from Louisiana, and public officials—highlighting the complex tensions surrounding wetland conservation. Furthermore, to analyze both local and national perceptions and responses, the study incorporates newspaper coverage from 1980 to 1989, drawing on *The New York Times* and various Louisiana-based newspapers. These sources offer varied insights into how environmental policies were received, debated, and resisted at the local and national level, capturing shifts in public sentiment as well as tangible actions, such as protests, hearings, and community advocacy.

The historical trajectory of coastal wetland policy in Louisiana indicates the difficulties encountered by both state and federal governments in reversing or halting wetland loss. Louisiana's coastal wetlands, shaped by a unique ecological landscape dominated by salt-tolerant black mangroves, have long been subjected to human interventions. From the colonial period onward, levees were constructed for flood control, and, in the nineteenth century, large swaths of wetlands were drained for agricultural expansion, a practice that continued into the twentieth century under the guise of environmental management.

By the late 1940s, however, the effectiveness of such strategies was increasingly being questioned, as failed drainage projects, repeated floodings, and mismanagement led to growing public skepticism. Wetland degradation stemmed from a combination of natural processes and human activity, including irrigation projects, canalization, disrupted sediment flow, and oil and gas extraction. Coastal erosion gained official attention after a 1957 dispute between Louisiana and the federal government over offshore oil and gas rights, despite which industrial expansion continued to take precedence. The canal networks built to support the oil and gas industry inflicted long-term ecological damage, accelerating land subsidence and habitat loss.¹⁰ In response, Louisiana began to confront coastal wetland loss more directly in the 1970s. The Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) of 1972 marked the start of a more coordinated conservation effort. Furthermore, in 1978, Louisiana passed the State and Local Coastal Resources Management Act, establishing a two-million-acre coastal zone managed

⁹ *Environment: Status of the Nation's Wetlands and Laws related thereto: Hearings before the subcommittee on water resources of the committee on public works and transportation, house of representatives* (1989).

¹⁰ Colten, 699-705.

by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR).¹¹ These measures reflected a shift in policy focus and a growing awareness of wetland value, yet economic priorities and industry interests continued to dominate at both state and federal levels.¹² Despite some positive outcomes, therefore, this legislation proved insufficient to halt ongoing wetland loss.

In 1980, President Carter signed the Coastal Zone Management Improvement Act, strengthening federal-state coastal protection efforts concerning the coastal ecology of the United States.¹³ The amendments reaffirmed existing law, introduced new grant programs, revisited performance and funding provisions, and authorized program funding through the end of fiscal year 1985.¹⁴ In connection with this, Louisiana was taking steps in advancing conservation efforts. On October 2, 1980, the Louisiana newspaper *The Town Talk* reported that Louisiana had secured federal approval for its wetland's conservation development plan, unlocking over nine million dollars in funding.¹⁵ This approval gave the state more authority and funding to manage wetland loss.

The Reagan administration marked a shift from Carter's environmental policy, a change which aligned with Reagan's broader regulatory reform agenda as outlined in the 1980 Republican platform.¹⁶ The platform criticized rigid regulations that were framed as hindering innovations and economic growth, and stated that environmental protection should not be used to block development.¹⁷ Reagan's 1980 campaign rejected environmental regulations as excessive, linked economic growth to freedom, dismissed science, and criticized environmental laws and activists.¹⁸ This change in environmental policy was noted by the *New York Times*. On April 26, 1981, it reported that Reagan proposed cutting coastal protection funding for 25 states, ending coastal management programs, marking a stark policy change from the Carter administration use of federal support with states now increasingly expected to bear the coast.¹⁹

Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, along with Republican control of the Senate, seemed to mark the end of the environmental movement's momentum. Reagan appointed loyalists to key government posts in environmental agencies, cut agency budgets, centralized decision-making, and revised regulations. He rejected environmental regulation and instead advocated for free markets and technology over government intervention. He also downplayed concerns over resource depletion and pollution, dismissing environmentalists as alarmists. From the 1980s, conservative think tanks increasingly challenged environmental policies, while opposition to regulations from citizens, workers, farmers and business leaders

¹¹ Charles J. Killebrew and Syed M. Khalil, "An Overview of the History of Coastal Restoration Plans and Programs in Louisiana," *Shore & Beach* 86, no. 1 (2018): 31.

¹² Costa, 103-108.

¹³ R. Severo, "Environmentalists Hail Passage of Act: But They Doubt That Coastal Zone Protection Will Be Sufficient for Enormity of the Task," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1980.

¹⁴ Camilo M. Botero et al., "50 years of the Coastal Zone Management Act: The Bibliometric Influence of the First Coastal Management Law on the World," *Marine Policy* 150 (2023): 2.

¹⁵ "Worth Waiting For," *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, October 2, 1980.

¹⁶ Kraft and Vig, 422.

¹⁷ "The 1980 Presidential Elections," report no. 80-180 GOV, 1980.

¹⁸ Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 51-53.

¹⁹ "Coastal Programs Face Cut," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1981.

further weakened regulations.²⁰ Over a period of two years, Reagan reduced the EPA workforce from 4,700 to 3,500, and he halved funding for pollution control and research between 1980 and 1984. By 1983, the EPA budget was 23% lower than in 1981.²¹ Furthermore, the US Army Corps of Engineers (or Corps), the military's engineering branch, did not help with environmental policy either. On July 16, 1982, Philip Shabecoff reported in *The New York Times* that the Corps proposed rules to exclude millions of acres of wetlands from protection, despite objections from the EPA and Interior officials.²²

Reagan's approach to environmental issues sparked public controversy. Environmental groups drew significant attention to Reagan's policies in his first year, especially after the Superfund Scandal at the EPA in 1982-1983, which involved mismanagement and budget cuts to the hazardous waste cleanup program. In *The New York Times* of March 11, 1984, journalist Peter Geller highlighted how cuts limited wetland oversight, allowing violations to go unnoticed. With a rise in development requests near wetlands and a reduced staff, wetland programs struggled to enforce regulations.²³ The debate over wetland development in 1984 was intense, with state environmental agencies, environmental advocates, and other stakeholders presenting conflicting economic, ecological, and property rights arguments, both in court and in broader discussions.²⁴ Polls showed, however, that public support for environmental protection grew during Reagan's presidency, despite public skepticism about government overreach.²⁵

In Louisiana, Reagan's 1980 presidential victory significantly strengthened the state's Republican Party, which had previously been a minor political force with little influence at the local or state level. Dave Treen, who became Louisiana's first Republican governor in 1972, served as Reagan's honorary campaign chair during the 1980 election. Reagan's broad appeal among Louisiana voters played a key role in advancing the Republican Party's presence in the state.²⁶ Nevertheless, several state officials in Louisiana pursued efforts to protect its coastline. Sam Hanna reported on May 13, 1981, in *The New York Times* that Treen represented a new vision for Louisiana, focused on a healthy environment, in contrast to Reagan's program of reduction in federal spending and tax cuts.²⁷ With Act 41, a Coastal Environment Trust Fund for restoration was created. Moreover, a 10-year Coastal Protection Master Plan was adopted in 1985, but limited funding and scope hindered its effectiveness.²⁸ Meanwhile, on August 29, 1983, the National Wildlife Federation and fifteen conservation

²⁰ Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 9-14.

²¹ Hejny, "The Trump Administration and environmental policy: Reagan redux?" *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 8 (2018): 201-202.

²² P. Shabecoff, "Wetlands To Lose Some Protections: Army Engineers Change Rules to Allow More Permits for Waterway Development," *The New York Times*, July 17, 1982.

²³ P. Geller, "Cutback Curtails Watch on Wetlands," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1984.

²⁴ "Debate Grows on Wetlands Development," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1984.

²⁵ Dunlap, 32-33.

²⁶ Matthew David Caillet, "Are You Better Off"; Ronald Reagan, Louisiana, and the 1980 Presidential Election" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 2011), v, 16, 116.

²⁷ "Louisiana Searches for Way to Save Coastline: Low-Lying Ridges Sinking Filling of Canals Recommended," *The New York Times*, August 29, 1981.

²⁸ Killebrew and Khalil, 31.

groups filed a lawsuit against the Administration, stating that wetland development threatened both wildlife and the environment.²⁹

In addition to state-level resistance to Reagan's policies, Congress commissioned a study called *Wetlands Trends and Factors Influencing Wetland Use in the Lower Mississippi River* by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) in 1982. The study highlighted wetlands' crucial roles in water storage, flood control, water purification, ecosystems, and recreation, but emphasized their decline, particularly in Louisiana.³⁰ The report called for stricter enforcement and clearer regulations. It also highlighted the EPA and COE's limited resources, which it suggested were hindering their regulatory ability.³¹ In addition, the study noted that public support for coastal protection laws was strong, with polls showing broad backing for enhancing water quality regulations.³² Deregulation of oil and gas prices likely increased production in coastal wetlands, exacerbating environmental damage, while regulators' reluctance to deny permits worsened environmental issues.³³ The report reveals that, despite public support, financial and jurisdictional constraints were hindering effective conservation efforts.

In the late 1980s, both national and local approaches to wetlands protections shifted toward greater state involvement, driven by the urgent need to address coastal wetland loss. Despite backlash over his environmental policies, Reagan was re-elected by a landslide in 1984. Environmental issues were not a decisive factor in the election, with other concerns, particularly the economy, taking precedence.³⁴ After 1984, however, federal agencies did shift their approach to environmental reforms, for example the Department of State planned to expand the network of protected, ecologically sensitive coastal areas.³⁵ During his second term, Reagan also supported various international environmental agreements. For example, in 1985, the United States signed the International Tropical Timber Agreement, and Reagan backed the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. The United States even took action to ban ozone-depleting chemicals before the 1987 Montreal Protocol. Scholars suggest that this shift stemmed in part from Reagan's reduced dependence on industrial allies compared to his first term, and in part from the way his presidency inadvertently galvanized the environmental movement by sparking widespread opposition.³⁶

By the late 1980s, nation-wide wetlands protection was gaining momentum. A Congressional hearing on the topic was held on April 12, 1989. Due to rising tensions and the need for better management, former EPA administrator Lee Thomas urged the

²⁹ "The Worth of Wetlands," *The Times*, August 29, 1983.

³⁰ "Wetlands Trends and Factors Influencing Wetlands Use in the Area Influenced by the Lower Mississippi River: A Case Study," 1982, a study reproduced by the National Technical Information Service of the US Department of Commerce.

³¹ "Wetlands Trends and Factors," 2.2-2.10.

³² "Wetlands Trends and Factors," 3.13-3.15.

³³ "Wetlands Trends and Factors," 3.34-3.37.

³⁴ Dunlap, 35.

³⁵ C.D. May, "U.S. Coastal Plan Seeks To Expand Protected Areas: Acreage of Fragile Shore Land Would Triple in Program to Curb Development," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1987.

³⁶ Johns, *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 262.

Conservation Foundation to establish a Wetlands Policy Forum. This forum aimed to create a more balanced approach to wetland management, preserving overall integrity while allowing limited development. The hearing report notes that the forum's findings gained broad support from both development and conservation interests, marking the beginning of a potential bill that would balance wetlands protection with economic growth and property rights.³⁷

On May 12, 1987, Senator John Breaux of Louisiana wrote a letter to *The New York Times*, calling coastal wetland erosion, particularly in Louisiana, a crisis. He introduced legislation to support restoration projects.³⁸ Another article stated that in Louisiana even schoolchildren write science fair papers on coastal erosion, but noted that despite years of concern, little effective action had been taken to prevent wetland loss at the state or national level.³⁹ These articles indicated growing recognition of wetland loss as an urgent issue that required immediate action.

The press also reported on grassroots activism on environmental issues. According to Robert Suro, for example, writing on July 1, 1989, in *The New York Times*, there was a rise in grassroots environmental protests in the U.S. Thousands joined local groups, he noted, often led by individuals with no prior interest in environmental issues, focusing on pollution from nearby industrial plants. These movements, growing from 600 to 1,300 groups in two years, reflected broader public concern. The article also stated that a recent *New York Times* poll showed 80 percent of Americans considered environmental protection essential. The article argued that environmental priorities and strategies were shifting, as communities pursued relief through lawsuits, petitions, and negotiations and by confronting industries directly.⁴⁰ Certainly, Reagan's election sparked renewed collaboration among environmental groups, leading to significant growth in membership and influence. Ironically, much of the support came from large companies seeking to promote eco-friendly initiatives. This marked a shift toward mainstream politics and corporate partnerships. Moreover, activists gained new allies in Congress and the courts.⁴¹

The 1989 Senate hearing on Louisiana's coastal wetlands revealed growing concern over rapid coastal land loss and called for stronger, coordinated action. Senator John Johnston emphasized that Louisiana was losing more wetlands than other states, calling it a major issue. He urged action and advocated for joint state and federal funding. In addition, he proposed legislation to fund priority projects through a tax on natural gas production.⁴² Several witnesses testified at the hearing on Louisiana's wetland issues. For example, Dr. Paul Templet, Secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality in Baton Rouge, warned that federal policies, in which billions were spent on river control while little was invested in

³⁷ "Status of the Nation's Wetlands and Laws Related Thereto: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, House of Representatives," 1989.

³⁸ J. Breaux, "How to Turn the Tide in Wetlands Crisis," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1987.

³⁹ "Coastal Law Needed," *Southwest Daily World*, April 2, 1987.

⁴⁰ R. Suro, "Grass-Roots Groups Show Power Battling Pollution Close to Home: At the Grass Roots a War on Pollution," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1989.

⁴¹ Johns, 263.

⁴² "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources United States Senate," Augusts 31, 1989.

environmental issues, were contradictory and could lead to ecological disaster. He called for policy changes to balance navigation and wetland conservation.⁴³ The hearing highlighted several federal wetland conservation proposals from the EPA and George Bush, Reagan's successor. Early in 1989, the EPA introduced the Wetland Action Plan, with over 100 actions to improve protection and permitting. The plan aimed for no net loss of wetlands and restoration where possible. Wetland loss, it suggested, should be addressed through the permitting process, allowing economic activities to continue while focusing on coastal restoration, local projects, and regulating development without prohibiting it.⁴⁴

Another panel during the hearing reflected a growing consensus on the urgency of wetland preservation, even as debate continued over how best to achieve it. Robert Thomas, Executive Director of the Louisiana Nature and Science Center, highlighted public division, poor coordination, and mistrust between industry and environmental groups.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Paul Kemp of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, presented a petition from 5,700 New Orleans residents urging federal commitment to coastal restoration.⁴⁶ Oliver Houck, Professor of Law at Tulane University, discussed the role of oil and gas companies and called for full federal responsibility.⁴⁷ Jim Porter, president of Mid-Continent Oil and Gas, acknowledged the problem but called for federal funding from a broad tax base, not the oil and gas industry.⁴⁸ Finally, Ronald Anderson, president of the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation, warned that wetland loss threatened farmland. He called for economic incentives to restore wetlands, supported strengthening the USDA Soil Conservation Service, and argued that agricultural exemptions in Section 404 should remain.⁴⁹ The hearing shows how Louisiana sought a balance between conservation and economic development, while environmental groups argued against an overemphasis on cost-benefit analysis. Many witnesses called for more federal support and a shift in the Corps' mission toward environmental restoration.

In 1989, Louisiana, once known for heavy pollution, embraced a 'new philosophy,' at least according to *New York Times* journalist Mary Bounds. The state was seeking a balance between addressing pollution and retaining businesses. A new toxic chemical regulation, currently challenged by the chemical industry, was, Bounds claimed, considered one of the strictest in the nation.⁵⁰ Since the 1980s, the article noted, ecological restoration of coastal wetlands had been a priority in Louisiana. In the late 1980s, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) proposed a restoration plan focusing on sediment supply, wetland and barrier island restoration, and reduced canal construction. The 1990 Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act recognized the impact of oil and gas activities and provided permanent funding, gaining broad support for its role in flood protection.⁵¹

⁴³ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 35-37.

⁴⁴ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 104-105.

⁴⁵ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 121-123.

⁴⁶ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 124-126.

⁴⁷ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 134-137.

⁴⁸ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 207-208.

⁴⁹ "Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Hearing," 229-234.

⁵⁰ M.C. Bounds, "Louisiana's New Philosophy," *The New York Times*, 1989.

⁵¹ Colten, 705.

Nationally and locally, differing interests shaped reactions to environmental initiatives. Reagan's policies prioritized economic growth, weakening regulations and limiting federal action, drawing criticism. In Louisiana, the urgency of coastal wetland erosion spurred stronger local efforts. Despite frustrations, Louisiana pursued state-level restoration efforts which balanced environmental restoration with its specific economic needs. By the late 1980s, state engagement grew, alongside new state-federal partnerships to tackle wetland loss.

In conclusion, this study has situated Louisiana's coastal wetlands within the broader context of Reagan-era deregulation, showing how local and state responses at times challenged federal environmental trends. While much scholarship focuses on federal rollbacks, this research demonstrates how Louisiana's ecological realities, such as wetland loss, directly shaped political debates, policy innovations, and activism. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that Louisiana uniformly adopted a progressive environmental stance by the end of the 1980s. The state has long been shaped by competing interests, with many stakeholders, including powerful industries and political actors, prioritizing economic growth over environmental protection. These tensions persisted through the decade, limiting the effectiveness of reform. Yet, by the late 1980s, the scale of environmental degradation was undeniable, prompting several state officials, scientists, and grassroots activists to push seriously for coastal protection and restoration.

This article therefore challenges the idea that environmental policy was shaped solely in Washington. It shows instead how regional ecological crises could generate local initiatives that deviated from federal inaction, and how ecological and political specificity mattered in shaping responses. Louisiana's long history of promoting activities that contribute to coastal erosion, and the difficulty in reversing these policies, emphasizes the need for different political, economic and social choices to achieve a sustainable coast⁵² Ultimately, this research underscores the difficulty of environmental policymaking in regions where ecological urgency collides with entrenched economic interests, and a shifting federal political landscape. Achieving sustainable solutions requires navigating both local conflicts and broader national policy dynamics.

⁵² Costa, 239-242.

Paper

Waters of Displacement: The Kinzua Dam Controversy and Its National and Local Legacies (1936-1965)

Sterre Vos | Leiden University

This paper was written for the course 'A Water's History of the United States' for the MA History: Politics, Culture and National Identities, 1789 to the Present

After the great 1936 St. Patrick's Day flood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the United States Congress answered with concrete and control: the Kinzua Dam, authorized in 1930 and eventually completed in 1965. For the Seneca – an Indigenous tribe which was the largest of the six Nations comprising the Iroquois Confederacy, a democratic government that predates the United States Constitution – the dam was a symbol of broken treaties, displacement, and a continued disregard for Indigenous sovereignty.¹ Promised as a guardian against flood and pollution, it swallowed more than water; 600 Seneca lives were uprooted, together with 10,000 acres of sacred land lost to the depths.² Ironically, it was the Senecan language which gave the dam its name: Kinzua means “fish on spear” in Senecan, and refers to a site on the river 198 river miles above Pittsburgh, just south of the New York state line, where the dam was built.³

This article examines the Kinzua Dam as a symbol of America's uneven water management – i.e., the unequal distribution, access, and control of water resources across regions and communities, often shaped by race, class, and politics – by analyzing its broader implications through a blue history lens. Developed over the previous decade, blue history is an approach to environmental history which examines water as an active historical agent that shapes human societies and power structures.⁴ The construction of the Kinzua Dam and the controversy it generated illustrate this approach through an examination of the conflicting relationships that different groups had with the Allegheny River: to the Seneca Nation, the river was a sacred, living entity; to Pittsburgh businessmen, it was a resource to be controlled for economic growth; and to the federal government, it was a tool for demonstrating technological superiority and national progress. The dam, therefore, exemplifies how federal infrastructure projects prioritized national and regional development while disregarding Indigenous sovereignty and environmental concerns.

Notes

¹ “A Proud and Rich History,” Seneca Nation of Indians, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://sni.org/about/>.

² “The complicated history of the Kinzua Dam and how it changed life for the Seneca people,” Allegheny Front, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://www.alleghenyfront.org/the-complicated-history-of-the-kinzua-dam-and-how-it-changed-life-for-the-seneca-people/>.

³ Alvin M. Josephy Jr., “Cornplanter, can you swim?” *American Heritage* 20 (1968): 1.

⁴ Gaetano Di Tommaso and Dario Fazzi, ‘Blue Paper #12: Blue History – A research agenda.’ PortCityFutures, accessed on November 22, 2024, <https://www.portcityfutures.nl/news/blue-paper-12-blue-history-a-research-agenda>.

This article bridges literature on the political, cultural, and societal consequences of the Kinzua Dam with broader historical examinations of dam-building as a tool of modernization and state control. Historian Paul C. Rosier emphasizes how the dam disrupted the socio-ecological balance of the Seneca Nation, focusing in particular on the environmental and cultural dislocation it produced.⁵ Building on this perspective, anthropologist Joy Bilharz explores the long-term and intergenerational effects of this disruption.⁶ In contrast, historian Laurence M. Hauptman has shifted the focus toward the political sphere, examining how the dam project reflected and reshaped federal-state power dynamics.⁷ These studies focusing in particular on the Kinzua dam need to be situated within a wider historiography – notably represented by engineer David P. Billington, historian Donald C. Jackson, and geographer Christopher Sneddon – that interprets large dam projects as emblematic of twentieth-century modernization efforts and examines the assertion of federal authority over nature and marginalized communities. Such broader histories on the politics of US public water works are crucial in helping to understand how the Kinzua Dam fits into wider national and global trends in water management, which historians have argued the US government exploited to consolidate its power both at home and abroad. While these scholars have documented the political negotiations, legal battles, and historical context surrounding the Kinzua Dam and its impact on the Seneca Nation, this article adds to the scholarly debate by foregrounding the dam's long-term human cost. It emphasizes the lived experience of displacement and the symbolic dimensions of infrastructural power, illustrating how the project exemplifies a persistent disconnect between federal authority and the well-being of marginalized communities. By situating the Kinzua Dam within a broader framework of uneven water management and settler colonial control, this article contributes a more nuanced understanding of how large-scale environmental interventions can reinforce structural inequalities.

In particular, this article argues that the Kinzua Dam project functioned as a manifestation of American technological control over nature, enacting and reinforcing specific forms of governance in US-Native American relations. I argue that the federal government's technocratic control of water resources exacerbated a deep disconnection between the United States' public institutions and its people, especially marginalized and underrepresented communities. In relation to this argument, three areas of research that can be looked at through a blue history lens are relevant: patterns of governance, modes of production, and paths of resilience. These areas are tied to the dam's origins, its legacy, symbolism, broader implications for federal power, environmental justice, as well as Indigenous resistance.⁸

⁵ Paul Rosier, "Dam building and Treaty breaking: The Kinzua Dam Controversy, 1936-1958," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119 (1995): 345-368.

⁶ Joyce Bilharz, *The Allegany Senecas and Kinzua Dam: Forced relocation through two generations* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

⁷ Laurence M. Hauptman. "General John S. Bradgon, the office of public works planning, and the decision to build Pennsylvania's Kinzua Dam," *Pennsylvania History: A journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 53 (1986): 181-200.

⁸ Di Tommaso and Fazzi.

In making this argument, I ground my claims in the analysis of several reports by the US Army Corps of Engineers, Congressional hearings and records, presidential correspondence and letters. Additionally, I draw on a burgeoning literature examining the long-term impact of the dam, most notably in a documentary by Paul Lemont called *Lake of Betrayal*, which puts the Seneca perspective on the Kinzua Dam on the foreground. These sources will be used to interpret the relationship different stakeholders had with water and the environment in relation to the Kinzua dam, and the ways in which these relations shaped power dynamics in the region. Importantly, I deploy the term “Blue acceleration,” which is used to describe a period in which economic and industrial growth has irreversibly and uniquely impacted water ecosystems and humans’ relationships with them, in relation to the Kinzua Dam project’s impact on the Seneca Nation.⁹

Given this article’s concern with how the federal government’s disregard for local concerns in modernization projects reflects an institutionalized and systematic pattern, I begin with a short overview of US dam building in the twentieth century, focusing on the relation between technological prowess and conflicts between local stakeholders and the federal government. The article will then take a deep dive into the correspondence regarding the construction of the Kinzua Dam between the parties involved during the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Finally, the dam’s symbolism and legacy will be discussed by looking at acts of resistance from the Seneca Nation against infrastructure projects in the twenty-first century.

The large scale dam-building era in the United States spanned the 1930s to 1960s and was driven by New Deal policies that sought to harness rivers for economic growth, hydroelectric power, and flood control.¹⁰ Proponents viewed dams as solutions to growing demands for energy and agriculture, aiming to control nature for human benefit, while critics highlighted the damaging ecological and social impacts, including displacement and environmental loss.¹¹ The Hetch Hetchy dam, built in 1919 in Yosemite National Park, sparked a debate which exposed the growing tensions between conservation and urban needs, foreshadowing broader controversies over damming as a public good. This controversy anticipated later debates over large-scale water management projects, where environmental degradation and displacement were justified in the name of progress.¹² Later, the Hoover Dam, built on the Colorado River in 1936, symbolized the federal government’s growing authority over natural resources and its belief in technological progress as a path to national recovery. It marked a turning point in federal water management, helping to justify increased government intervention through projects carried out by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).¹³ As the federal dam-building agenda expanded during this period, it sparked regional debates over

⁹ Di Tommaso and Fazzi.

¹⁰ David Billington and Donald Jackson, *Big Dams of the New Deal Era* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹ Christopher Sneddon, *Concrete Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-6.

¹² Elmo R. Richardson. “The struggle for the Valley: California’s Hetch Hetchy Controversy, 1905-1915,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 38 (1959): 249-258.

¹³ Billington and Jackson, 71.

who truly benefited from these massive undertakings and whether their economic gains outweighed their environmental and social costs.¹⁴ The TVA embodied tensions between regional development, corporate resistance, and environmental impact – altering river flow, damaging ecosystems, and redefining federal authority. While supporting urban growth and agriculture through hydroelectricity and irrigation, it also caused environmental concerns, changing the Colorado River’s course, affecting fish habitats, sediment structures, and water quality.¹⁵

Beyond environmental concerns, federal dam projects like the Hoover Dam and the TVA displaced Native communities, prioritizing national goals over local voices.¹⁶ The TVA, while bringing electricity and development, uprooted thousands of Native Americans, reshaping the region’s social fabric.¹⁷ Its projects revealed the federal government’s disregard for Indigenous livelihoods and ecological sensitivity. These initiatives, though framed as modernization, often marginalized local communities and bred mistrust. The lobby to bypass Mexico with an “All-American” canal further illustrates how water enabled political control. Scholars like Jackson and Billington highlight technological progress and national pride, overlooking the social and environmental costs of river basin development. In *Concrete Revolution* on the other hand, Sneddon highlights that these dams, framed as feats of technological advancement, overlooked or even worsened social and environmental consequences. This contrast in scholarly focus is particularly relevant to the case of the Kinzua Dam, where federal ambitions for regional development through dam construction came at the expense of Indigenous communities and local ecologies. Studying how these dams have been presented reveals the persistent tension between narratives of progress and realities of displacement and environmental degradation.

The Flood Control Acts of 1936, 1938, and 1941 signaled a further evolution in policy, representing an increasing focus on large-scale, federally led infrastructure projects aimed at controlling nature for economic development, national security, and regional planning. This legislation authorized the Kinzua Dam as part of these broader flood management plans. Thus, the Kinzua Dam was a project that reflected a seemingly worthwhile and justifiable goal, at least according to federal agencies. Like the Hoover Dam, however, it displaced Indigenous communities, highlighting the human cost of federal water management. Envisioned as a tool for flood control, economic growth, and water security, the dam embodied mid-twentieth-century ideals of progress and control over nature, while

¹⁴ Gabriel Lee, “Overview: The Big Dam Era,” *Energy History Online*, Yale University, 2023, <https://energyhistory.yale.edu/the-big-dam-era/>.

¹⁵ Billington and Jackson, 117-125.

¹⁶ “What was a dark side of the Hoover dam?” Maxtour, accessed on December 12, 2024, <https://www.maxtour.co/what-was-a-dark-side-of-the-hoover-dam/#:~:text=The%20construction%20of%20the%20Hoover%20Dam%20and%20the%20subsequent%20formati on.and%20traditional%20ways%20of%20life.>

¹⁷ Congressional Record – House, 24 May 1960, Vol. 106, Part 8, House Pages, 11014, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, United States Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/86/crecb/1960/05/24/GPO-CRECB-1960-pt8-12-2.pdf>.

its construction disrupted lives and ecosystems, exposing the disconnection between federal planning and local realities.¹⁸

The fact that the Kinzua Dam is often referred to as the *Kinzua Dam Controversy*, shows how deep the disputes were over its technical, political, and moral legitimacy. Historian Michael Frisch argues that at least one key issue was whether the dam was even the best solution for flood control.¹⁹ The dam cost 125 million dollars, violated the 1794 Canandaigua Treaty, flooded 10,000 acres of Seneca lands, destroyed a ceremonial center, and displaced 130 indigenous families.²⁰ Yet General John S. Bragdon, Eisenhower's public works advisor, defended it as politically inevitable and convenient, suggesting financial compensation to the Seneca would suffice.²¹

Between the authorization of the dam in 1936 and the start of the actual building of the dam in 1960, the Seneca Nation attempted to prevent the dam from being built through several initiatives.²² Arthur E. Morgan, a leading engineer who had been a chairman and chief engineer of the TVA, was a central actor in delaying the flooding of the Allegheny reservoir. Although not officially employed by the Seneca, Morgan was the sole public representative for the Seneca in the early 1960s.²³ Together with Morgan, the Seneca proposed an alternative plan, the Conewango Basin reservoir, which offered superior flood protection, saved costs, and preserved Seneca lands. However, the US Army Corps of Engineers dismissed Morgan's proposal. Morgan, the Seneca leaders, and the Corps eventually came to the agreement in 1958 to let the independent civilian engineering firm Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton (TAMS) review the project. The TAMS ruled in that same year that the Kinzua Dam plan was the superior one, a fact which some historians have attributed to their close ties to the Army Corps.²⁴ This, however, did not halt Morgan's opposition to the dam. In a May 1958 letter to Emerson C. Itschner, General of the Corps of Engineers, Morgan criticized the Kinzua Dam as a flawed proposal with limited flood control potential. He publicly challenged the TAMS report, claiming it misrepresented data crucial to understanding his alternative plan.

The Seneca also pursued legal avenues, arguing in court that although they acknowledged that Congress had the authority to abrogate treaties, treaty rights cannot be undone through implication, executive action, or vague legislation. In the case of the Kinzua Dam, Congress did not clearly state its intent to override the treaty, making the violation

¹⁸ Rosier, 345-368.

¹⁹ Paul Lemont, "Lake of Betrayal: The story of the Kinzua Dam," documentary, 2017, posted June 17, 2024 by Mitch Troutman, YouTube, 58:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u7dEYNDIIo&t=3334s>.

²⁰ Hauptman, 183.

²¹ Staff Memos (1)(2) [memo of conference, DDE and Bragdon re water resources policy; civil works; Indians and Kinzua Dam; congressional survey FOIA, trade policy, July 1957, box 25, Campaign Series, Natural Resources and the Environment, Dwight D. Eisenhower presidential Library, Abilene, KS.

²² Hauptman, 183.

²³ Aaron Purcell, *Arthur Morgan: A progressive vision for American reform* (University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 265.

²⁴ Purcell, 267.

illegitimate in the Seneca Nation's view.²⁵ On April 14, 1958, however, the district court of Columbia ruled that the government could seize Seneca land for public use. The ruling of Judge McGarraghy stated that the US government, having the power to make treaties, also held the authority to break them, thereby justifying the engineers' right to take reservation land.²⁶ On November 25, 1958, a federal appeals court upheld Judge McGarraghy's ruling, denying the Seneca injunction against the Corps of Engineers.²⁷

Despite these legal setbacks, Morgan continued advocating for his Conewango plan, including by presenting it to congressional subcommittees, he again emphasized its urgency, repeating key arguments in the hope to stop the Kinzua Dam from being built. Although evidently the federal government wanted to continue with the construction of the Kinzua Dam, there were strong disagreements between members of the House of Representatives. Senator Charles Goodell (R-NY) stated in a congressional hearing on May 24, 1960, that the Conewango plan could store three times more water and provide better flood protection than the Kinzua Dam. A 1958 study confirmed the Conewango plan's feasibility, though cost concerns remained. Morgan estimated Conewango at \$105 million, while Kinzua was projected at \$119 million.²⁸ During the hearing, several New York representatives supported the Conewango plan, while Ivor David Fenton (R-PA) defended the Kinzua Dam, citing extensive studies and its economic advantage. He quoted the Seneca president as accepting land loss if Kinzua were the only viable solution.²⁹ As a former Army medical officer, Fenton trusted the Corps' expertise.³⁰ In contrast, representatives Goodell, Becker, and Taber criticized the dam's low benefit-cost ratio, lack of support, and limited flood control value, arguing it primarily served private interests rather than the public good.³¹

Despite this controversy, preliminary construction at the Kinzua Dam site began in 1960, after which Morgan and the Seneca Nation attempted several new approaches to stop the project. In a letter written in February 1961 by Basil Williams, the president of the Seneca Nation, he appealed to claims made during President John F. Kennedy's earlier election campaign, reminding the president of his promises that no treaty made with Native American tribes would be changed. He emphasized that the 1794 treaty was not "just" a treaty, but a way of life, and that although the tribe still had to deal with discrimination and poverty, its population had been sustained by a promise of protection, unbroken – until then – by the

²⁵ *Seneca Nation of Indians v. Brucker* 162 F. Supp. 580 (D.D.C. 1958), 24-03-1958, District of Columbia, Justia, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/162/580/2141332/>.

²⁶ *Seneca Nation of Indians v. Brucker*.

²⁷ *The Seneca Nation of Indians, Appellant, v. Wilber M. Brucker, Secretary of the Army, and Emerson C. Itschner, Major General, United States Army Corps of Engineers, Appellees*, US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, 25 November 1958, 262 F.2d 27 (D.C. Cir. 1958), D.C. Circuit, Justia, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/262/27/55095/>.

²⁸ Congressional Record – House, 24 May 1960, Vol. 106, Part 8, House Pages, 11014, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, United States Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/86/crecb/1960/05/24/GPO-CRECB-1960-pt8-12-2.pdf>.

²⁹ Congressional Record – House, 24 May 1960.

³⁰ "Fenton, Ivor David 1889-1986," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed on December 12, 2024, <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/F000075>.

³¹ "Fenton, Ivor David 1889-1986."

federal government.³² A second letter to Kennedy followed just a few days later, wherein Oliver La Farge, the president of the Association on American Indian Affairs, emphasized the feasibility of Morgan's plan and asked Congress to authorize it as a substitute for the presently planned Allegheny River Project.³³

Elmer Staats, the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Budget, stated in a response to the letters that although it was the goal to minimize inconvenience for the Seneca Nation, the approval of the Dam had been through years of planning.³⁴ Indeed, after a flurry of correspondence between the parties and a discussion of Morgan's alternative sixth plan, Kennedy's advisor, Lee White, pointed out that Congressional committees had supported the dam, that the Supreme Court had affirmed the government's right to seize Seneca lands, and that millions of dollars were already issued in contracts. The proposal for one more independent review was denied by White in a memo, because it would be inappropriate to halt construction.³⁵

Kennedy's response to Basil Williams illustrates how federal authority framed displacement as both inevitable and manageable, prioritizing national infrastructure over Indigenous sovereignty. In a letter on August 9, 1961, he insisted that halting the construction of the Kinzua Dam was impossible due to the urgent need for flood protection and the conclusion that alternative proposals were inferior. He offered assurances that the federal government would help the Seneca Nation adjust.³⁶ This letter reflected a shift toward political pragmatism, emphasizing administrative solutions to the relocation rather than engaging with the broader implications of breaking a treaty. While Kennedy gave reassurances that assistance would be provided to the Seneca Nation, his response marked a departure from his earlier commitments to non-interference in Indian affairs.

A response to Kennedy's letter came from archeologist and anthropologist Walter Taylor, who was a Friends Representative to the Seneca Nation of Indians. He criticized the lack of transparency from the Corps and argued that most water resource agencies were neither organized nor properly staffed to assess alternatives. Although Kennedy demanded the matter be closed, Taylor pushed for reconsideration because the Seneca believed that the Corps was in no position to provide impartial judgment on the "thoroughness and fairness" of its own examination of Morgan's alternatives.³⁷ Taylor did not understand how the need for flood protection downstream had been real and immediate for at least a quarter of a century, while the delay for an impartial review would be modest with little cost. He went on: "the fact remains, that regardless of the complaints by the Corps against Arthur Morgan, he did find an admittedly feasible alternative in a couple of years with limited resources - an

³² Basil Williams to John F. Kennedy, 22 February 1961, Kinzua Folders, Folder 1 out of 5, resources: Kinzua Dam, 1961 JFK Papers, John F. Kennedy presidential library, Boston, MA.

³³ Oliver La Farge to John F. Kennedy, 28 February 28, 1961. Kinzua Folders, 1 out of 5.

³⁴ A letter to Basil Williams from Elmer B. Staats, March 1961. Kinzua Folders, 1 out of 5.

³⁵ Memorandum from advisor Lee White to President John F. Kennedy, August 8, 1961, Kinzua Folders, Folder 3 out of 5. resources: Kinzua Dam, 1961 JFK Papers, John F. Kennedy presidential library, Boston, MA.

³⁶ Letter from John F. Kennedy to Basil Williams, August 9, 1961, Kinzua Folders, Folder 3 out of 5. resources: Kinzua Dam, 1961 JFK Papers, John F. Kennedy presidential library, Boston, MA.

³⁷ Letter from John F. Kennedy to Basil Williams.

alternative which the powerful and infallible Corps of Engineers did not discover in three decades!”³⁸

Cost considerations were often cited as decisive in decision-making, but a conversation between General William F. Cassidy and Blair T. Bowler suggests they were invoked selectively to justify predetermined outcomes.³⁹ Taylor expressed strong opposition, highlighting concerns about the Corps’ arrogance, as well as their insensitivity to Native American rights and culture. He referenced opposition to the project from prominent figures, organizations, media outlets, and civil rights groups.⁴⁰ The letter further argued that Native American land disputes should be handled by culturally informed diplomats and expressed hope that Kinzua would mark the end of centuries of broken promises. No reply can be found, but a 1962 exchange between Lee White and Walter Taylor confirmed that alternatives had been reviewed and Congress had made its decision. Like Kennedy’s earlier letter, this signaled that the dam’s construction would proceed.

Kennedy’s approach to the Kinzua Dam controversy therefore exemplifies the broader tendency of the federal government to marginalize Indigenous communities in the pursuit of large-scale infrastructure and modernization. Despite his reputation as a president who supported liberal causes, Kennedy’s deference to bureaucratic momentum and congressional priorities underscored the limitations of his administration’s commitment to Indigenous rights. This example of blue acceleration within blue history shows how large dam projects often celebrated engineering and national pride while overshadowing Indigenous relationships with water and land. This relationship with land and water differ for certain groups, revealing social and political inequality. Basil Williams emphasized that treaties were not just legal documents but expressions of cultural life. The federal dismissal of the viable Conewango alternative reveals a reluctance to cede control over Seneca land. The entrenched authority of the Corps and political interests that ensured the project’s continuation can be seen in a speech by Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence, in which he praised the Corps for their objective research and their concern for all groups in the affected areas, calling the Kinzua Dam an example of good government.⁴¹ Although Lawrence complimented the Corps for their so-called objectivity, looking more deeply into the decision-making process highlights the limitations of public transparency and accountability in major infrastructure planning.

The federal government’s control over natural resources not only displaced the Seneca Nation but also left a lasting legacy as a symbol of government disconnection, coming to represent both the technological triumphs and human costs of America’s dam-building era. This legacy and ongoing symbolism of the dam furthermore serves as an important historical link to contemporary debates on sustainability and sovereignty.

³⁸ Letter from Walter Taylor to John F. Kennedy, August 15, 1961, Kinzua Folders, Folder 3 out of 5. resources: Kinzua Dam, 1961 JFK Papers, John F. Kennedy presidential library, Boston, MA.

³⁹ Letter from Walter Taylor to John F. Kennedy.

⁴⁰ Letter from Walter Taylor to John F. Kennedy.

⁴¹ Purcell, 269.

On August 31, 1964, payment for the Seneca Nation to provide for relocation, rehabilitation, social and economic development was authorized. The Seneca Nation was compensated a total of \$15,000,053 for direct and indirect damages, loss of river access, the loss of homes, family relocation and settlement, including infrastructure development.⁴² many felt, however, that these measures were not enough to address the cultural, spiritual and economic loss. For millennia, the river flowed freely, providing life to a thriving ecosystem and the Seneca people, who also considered the marine life culturally and spiritually important.⁴³ In a documentary from 2017, *Lake of Betrayal: the story of the Kinzua Dam*, members of the Seneca explained how they grew up with the feeling that the river is a being and that it has power, and that language, culture, and a sense of community cannot be compensated with money.⁴⁴ For the Seneca, the reservoir has become a resource to generate an instinct for survival and creativity, mobilized in the decades since. For federal authorities, the dam exemplified the prioritization of national interests over local needs. Werner Loehlein, Chief of Water Management with the US Army Corps of Engineers in the Pittsburgh District, stated in *Lake of Betrayal* that the Kinzua Dam had already in 1972 prevented \$250 million dollars in flood damage and reduced the peak depth at Pittsburgh by four feet.⁴⁵ Historian Michael Oberg, speaking in the documentary, confirmed that although the Dam did serve its purpose, there still were good alternatives available. According to him, widespread public and political support for the displacement or elimination of Native Americans must be understood as directly connected to the events surrounding the construction of the Kinzua Dam.⁴⁶

This disconnection and dual symbolism continues to shape perceptions of the dam today. While it still serves its original purposes of flood control and water management, it faces criticism for its environmental impact, including sediment buildup and altered ecosystems.⁴⁷ Ecological changes, such as altered fish habitats and sedimentation, have impacted local livelihoods and deeply affected downstream communities. Despite this, the relationship with the Allegheny river remains important to the Seneca Nation, and value and respect for mother nature is something they still treasure.⁴⁸ In recent decades, growing recognition of the ecological costs of large dams has led to a global trend of dam

⁴² An Act to authorize payment for certain interests in land within the Allegheny Indian Reservation in New York to provide for the relocation, rehabilitation, social and economic development of the members of the Seneca Nation, and for other purposes, 31 August 1964, H.R. 1794, No. 88-533, Public Law, United States Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/88/statute/STATUTE-78/STATUTE-78-Pg738.pdf>.

⁴³ "Ohi:yo, Kinzua Dam exhibit. Seneca," Iroquois National Museum, accessed on December 18, 2024, <https://www.senecamuseum.org/portfolio/kinzua-dam/>.

⁴⁴ Lemont.

⁴⁵ Lemont.

⁴⁶ Lemont.

⁴⁷ "Function of the Kinzua Dam," Warren County Pennsylvania, accessed on December 18, 2024, <https://www.wcvb.net/kinzuadam>.

⁴⁸ WGRZ-TV, "Kinzua Dam and the Seneca Nation," news item, posted by WGRZ-TV on June 3, 2017, 6:01 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToGeLwIaP9>.

decommissioning and river restoration.⁴⁹ In the US, the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams in Washington State were dismantled in 2014 and 2011 respectively to restore salmon migration and rehabilitate tribal lands.⁵⁰ Similarly, in Europe, the removal of the Sélune River dams in 2020 in France reflects a broader shift toward prioritizing ecological health over the technological imperatives of the past.⁵¹ Situating the Kinzua Dam within this context highlights the enduring consequences of such infrastructure and the relevance of its contested legacy today.

Despite continued controversy and lasting distrust toward the federal government, the Seneca Nation began participating in a project in 2014 – Section 1135 – which explores alternative and ecological restoration efforts for the Allegheny River on Seneca territory, including potential modifications to the Kinzua Dam’s structure and operations. The Seneca Nation is also now actively involved in watershed protection through their own advisory body, the Watershed Resources Working Group.⁵² In 2018, a proposal to dump fracking wastewater into the river near Coudersport, PA, again threatened Seneca territory.⁵³ The Nation was not consulted by the state’s Department of Environmental Protection, prompting President Todd Gates to urge its rejection.⁵⁴ In an interview, Gates cited the legacy of the Kinzua Dam as a source of enduring distrust.⁵⁵ The proposal was ultimately dismissed, showing how the dam’s legacy continues to shape contemporary struggles over environmental justice and Seneca sovereignty.⁵⁶ The Kinzua Dam thus still plays an important role in contemporary debates, influencing the battle over sovereignty the Seneca Nation still faces in the twenty-first century.

The Kinzua Dam epitomizes the tension between technological progress and cultural loss. Monetary compensation failed to replace the spiritual and ecological connections severed by its construction. Despite the benefits of flood control and water management, the dam’s environmental and social costs remain significant. As the Seneca continue to honor their

⁴⁹ “New Report: Dam removal movement breaks barriers and records,” Dam Removal EU, accessed on April 20, 2025, <https://damremoval.eu/dre-report-2023/>.

⁵⁰ “Elwha River Restoration,” National Park Service, accessed on April 20, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/olym/learn/nature/elwha-ecosystem-restoration.htm#:~:text=After%20two%20decades%20of%20planning,Strait%20of%20Juan%20de%20Fuca.>

⁵¹ “Sélune River Dams, Normandy, France,” Dam Removal EU, accessed on April 20, 2025, <https://damremoval.eu/portfolio/vezins-and-la-roche-qui-boit-dams/#:~:text=The%20Vezins%20dam%20and%20its,reworked%20throughout%20the%20old%20reservoir.>

⁵² “Kinzua Dam Today: the Section 1135 Study,” Seneca Iroquois national museum, accessed on December 18, 2024, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/ohiyo/kinzua-dam-today-the-section-1135-study?path=ohiyo-restoration-projects>

⁵³ “Fighting for the Water: Fracking Wastewater in Ohio,” Seneca Iroquois national museum, accessed on December 18, 2024, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/ohiyo/fighting-for-the-water>

⁵⁴ Kristina Marusic, “Seneca Nation takes on Pittsburgh startup to defend the Allegheny River,” Environmental Health News, March 30, 2018, <https://www.ehn.org/new-york-tribe-takes-on-pittsburgh-startup-to-defend-the-allegheny-river>.

⁵⁵ Marusic, “Seneca Nation takes on Pittsburgh startup.”

⁵⁶ Kristina Marusic, “Watch: the Seneca Nation celebrates after fracking water treatment permits are revoked,” Environmental Health News, April 13, 2018, <https://www.ehn.org/seneca-nation-wastewater-fracking-2559683428.html>.

heritage and resist erasure, the dam serves a lasting reminder of the need for equitable and inclusive approaches to infrastructure projects that respect Indigenous rights and sovereignty. This case illustrates how large-scale infrastructure projects were used to assert federal control over both nature and marginalized communities. More than an engineering feat, the dam became a site of contested meaning – spiritual loss for the Seneca Nation, economic promise for developers, and bureaucratic power for the state. Through a blue history lens, this article has shown how shifting justifications obscured alternatives and internal dissent. The dam disrupted cultural continuity and reinforced patterns of exclusion, leaving a lasting legacy in debates over sustainability, Indigenous rights and water management.

Paper

What if the Center Holds? An Ecocritical Reading of Character and Form in Jenny Offill's *Weather*

Tessa Karsten | Leiden University

This paper was written for the course 'American Climate Fictions' for the MA North American Studies

"I've changed my mind," announces Lizzie, the protagonist of Jenny Offill's 2020 novel *Weather*, to her young son Eli.¹ "You can have a child," she notes decisively, "it will be small and cat-eyed. It will never know the taste of meat."² The child she describes takes the form of an amalgamation of the oft-imagined survivalist adaptations in case of a climate disaster, echoing the possibility of human engineering as introduced by bioethicist S. Matthew Liao, transhumanist Anders Sandberg, and philosopher Rebecca Roache. In their 2012 paper "Human Engineering and Climate Change," they argue that re-engineering humans could provide a solution for climate disaster. One of the examples they give is the introduction of "patches" that make the immune system react to proteins present in red meat, inducing "unpleasant experiences" after "eating 'eco-unfriendly' food."³ I would suggest that, by making this statement, Lizzie steers her understanding of the world towards an existential sense of sublimity, creating a coping mechanism for overcoming the reality of what the future might hold. This process of overcoming eco-anxiety is echoed throughout the novel, where a sense of panic continuously creeps to the surface, an omnipresent affect that houses itself in *Weather*'s cast of characters, albeit in different iterations. Lizzie, once a promising grad student, now works in a university library and moonlights answering mail for *Hell and High Water*, a podcast hosted by her former thesis advisor Sylvia. What begins as a comforting side gig—offering advice and an obligatory hint of hope—soon spirals, as Lizzie becomes increasingly consumed by climate anxiety, survivalist thinking, and the fragile balance of her own domestic life with her husband Ben, son Eli and brother Henry. As her grip on daily rhythms loosens, *Weather* captures the unsettling ways personal and planetary crises collide.

While existing scholarship—notably by Wilson McBee, Ismail Muhammad, and Maggie Toole—has highlighted the novel's treatment of intimate domestic narratives and affective dread, this article contributes a new perspective by analyzing how *Weather* can be read as systematically deconstructing binary oppositions (e.g., nature/culture, parent/child, woman/man) to render ecological crisis as a communal phenomenon. In doing so, I position Offill's work as a literary intervention into cultural ecology, resonating with Hubert Zapf's model of literature as a medium for ecological thought, but also extending it by showing how narrative form itself performs a critique of modern identity structures.

Notes

¹Jenny Offill, *Weather* (Vintage, 2020), 198.

²Offill, 198.

³S. Matthew Liao et al., "Human Engineering and Climate Change," *Ethics, Policy and Environment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 208.

The personal and planetary panic central to the novel is reflected through the fragmentary form Offill employs, a collection of small bursts of ideas, wisdoms, and worries. The novel is made up of small paragraphs interspersed with questions and answers in bordered boxes; italicized lines and paragraphs giving way to Google search results and ellipses indicating elapsed time. Concerns about the future of the planet in the Anthropocene mirror and intensify parental anxiety about their child's well-being. Lizzie's fear of environmental collapse is not abstract; it is deeply personal, rooted in her role as a mother trying to raise a child in an unstable world. The novel blurs the line between ecological and familial concerns, suggesting that the emotional weight of parenting in the Anthropocene is inherently tied to global uncertainty and environmental collapse.

Historically speaking, notes literary scholar Marco Caracciolo, literary criticism that deals with the environment—commonly known as ecocriticism—has occupied itself mainly with nature writing “à la Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez.”⁴ This early strand of ecocritical writing has been succeeded, however, by what Lawrence Buell has called a “second-wave” of ecocriticism, which considers the interplay of nature and human culture across a range of literary genres beyond nature writing.⁵ Analyzing the form of these literary works, suggests Caracciolo, can “steer the audience’s interpretation productively and expands the emotional resonance of narrative—its capacity to speak to the ecological crisis and negotiate its profound uncertainty.”⁶ As such, in this article I argue, through a close reading of its form and characters, that fragmentary novels such as Offill’s *Weather* provide a new way of dealing with the eco-anxiety of the Anthropocene.

Lizzie has an unrelenting tendency to recognize patterns in herself and others, which allows for the incorporation of a wide array of people—members of her family as well as the strangers she advises for her role at *Hell and High Water*—into *Weather*’s stream of consciousness narrative mode.⁷ By employing a fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the development of her characters’ inner lives, Offill explores how planetary and parental panic refigure themselves outside the realm of the personal, extending beyond individual experience to reveal a larger, communal sense of eco-anxiety. I thereby illustrate how this adheres to Zapf’s ideas about the effectiveness of literary texts intervening in ecological cultural debates. A successful exploration of the uncertainties of climate change, notes Zapf, is one that strays from narrative convention, presenting new ideas through unfamiliar form.⁸

In *Weather*, both the intra- and interpersonal structures—in particular family units and neighborhood relationships—are permeable. Boundaries between individuals and their environments are constantly shifting; responsibilities are not contained within isolated roles (like ‘mother’ or ‘neighbor’) but instead spill over. In highlighting the permeable nature of these structures, this article unearths these arbitrary boundaries and ideas that society has put

⁴Marco Caracciolo, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 9.

⁵Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Blackwell, 2005), 8.

⁶Caracciolo, 7.

⁷Ismail Muhammad, “A Ballad of Unchecked Dread,” *Dissent* 67, no. 2 (2020): 113.

⁸Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 261.

in place. Furthermore, this article deconstructs the binary oppositions present in *Weather* such as nature/culture and woman/man. By looking at planetary and parental panic as interrelated notions that bridge the distance between us and them, this article shows how moving beyond the domain of the personal—overcoming arbitrary boundaries and binary oppositions—will overcome the core delusion that “I am here and you are there,” illustrating how literary fiction can be a meaningful tool to navigate the climate anxiety of the twenty-first century.⁹

Offill uses the form of *Weather* as a direct reflection of the themes it discusses, providing the novel’s structure with the ability to comment upon both planetary and parental panic. The six parts, which become increasingly shorter and more fragmented as the narrative unfolds, are representative of the “worry over the future” that contemporary society faces, argues Muhammad.¹⁰ What Offill manages to achieve with this form is not a mere representation of this worry on an individual level, but an exploration of how this issue is inherently one of shared perception. Throughout the first part of the novel, Lizzie’s observations emphasize how *she* perceives planetary and parental panic. Upon listening to the latest episode of *Hell and High Water*, Lizzie wittily notes that the title of the latest episode, “The Center Cannot Hold,” should be the title of all the episodes.¹¹ The title is taken from Irish poet William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” a poem that uses Christian imagery about the Apocalypse and Second Coming to allegorically refer to post-war Europe. For Lizzie, this pessimistic view of the future is transposable onto contemporary American society, where environmental collapse, social fragmentation, and parental inadequacy intertwine. She considers her son Eli to be her chance at redemption for her planetary and parental paranoia about this world; a way to make amends for her perceived failures. When under the assumption that she has failed at this—for example, through something as mundane as arriving late at school pick-up—she asks herself “Why didn’t I have more kids so I could have more chances?”¹² The rhetorical question underscores Lizzie’s conflation of parenting and planetary salvation, illustrating how eco-anxiety at this point in the narrative is situated in the realm of the personal. The global crisis becomes an intimate one, the fear for the planet manifesting in her own perceived insufficiency as a mother.

Once Lizzie starts working for *Hell and High Water*, the focus slowly shifts, and the understanding of this eco-anxiety broadens. The form of the novel changes, as well as the kind of observations present within. In one of the questions posed by a listener of *Hell and High Water*—inserted by Offill throughout the novel in a Q&A format—the worry of having children in the Anthropocene is centralized: “Q: What are the best ways to prepare my children for the coming chaos?”¹³ Lizzie provides the listener with an answer, stating how “You can teach them to sew, to farm, to build. Techniques for calming a fearful mind might

⁹Offill, 201.

¹⁰Muhammad, 111.

¹¹Offill, 10.

¹²Offill, 14.

¹³Offill, 93.

be the most useful though.”¹⁴ Lizzie continues to ponder this question throughout the novel, increasingly becoming more aware that this is not a panic she is facing alone, but one that is omnipresent and communal.

In interspersing these Q&A fragments into the narrative, Offill is able to meet the mood of the moment, creating a direct link between the novel’s form and the uncertain nature of eco-anxiety. In doing so, McBee argues, *Weather* shows how “the world has intruded upon the domestic sanctum.”¹⁵ Or, in other words, that the political has intruded upon the personal. The domestic realm can no longer be regarded as a separate unit, and this notion is reinforced through the shifts in form which Offill employs. The shift in narrative that accompanies the novel’s change in form—increasingly implementing more unconventional structures such as Q&A fragments and questionnaires—is subtle. This allows for the narrative’s gradual formal shifts to mirror how awareness of climate change has slowly permeated the cultural consciousness. For McBee, this is connected to the idea that an Offillian individual or family unit can never be fully separated, always appearing porous in nature.¹⁶ The outside world always intrudes into the realm of the personal, and vice versa; they are in constant conversation with one another. As a result, the fragments in the novel increasingly invite observations made by others into the narrative, taking the planetary and parental panic out of the realm of the personal and into the broader narrative.

Contributing to this reading is a cast of characters in *Weather* that become a “fragmentary diary of a neighbourhood.”¹⁷ As the novel unfolds, Lizzie is no longer preoccupied solely by her own eco-anxiety, but increasingly observes that of others, thereby exploring the penetrable nature of both intra- and interpersonal structures. Echoing John Donne’s “no man is an island” by illustrating how one’s life always interacts with that of others, *Weather* broadens the scope of personal parental and planetary panic.¹⁸ Several intra- and interpersonal relationships in *Weather* are representative of this notion, and each in their own way contributes to the idea that one is never solely “here and [the other is] there.”¹⁹ While Lizzie’s life at home proceeds calmly throughout most of the novel, she continuously finds herself grappling with the emotional turmoil that her brother Henry experiences. “I keep having this thought, Lizzie,” Henry confesses on a walk with his sister.²⁰ Henry believes that he might have sold his soul to the devil as a child, convinced of the fact that the unrest in the world is being caused by his personal Faustian bargain. Henry wonders what would happen “if [he] did but [doesn’t] remember it.”²¹ While Lizzie reassures him that this is not the case, the underlying idea stays with her regardless. She is confronted with the planetary panic treading into the realm of the domestic, influencing the interpersonal sibling relationship between her and her brother.

¹⁴ Offill, 93.

¹⁵ Wilson McBee, “Jenny Offill: The Kid Stays in the Picture,” *Southwest Review* 105 (2020): 61.

¹⁶ McBee, 62.

¹⁷ McBee, 61.

¹⁸ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Death’s Duel* (Vintage, 1999), 108.

¹⁹ Offill, 201.

²⁰ Offill, 26.

²¹ Offill, 26.

Henry's unfettered sense of panic is only strengthened once he becomes a father, as the eco-anxiety treads into the realm of the personal by shifting from an abstract concern about the planet's wellbeing to a personal fear for his child's future. Fatherhood brings the climate crisis into sharper focus; Henry is no longer merely worried about the world in general, but about the specific world his child is set to inherit. Henry tells Lizzie "[he's] going to do it wrong."²² "I can feel all the wrong thoughts coming," says Henry, "what if I mess it up?"²³ Even with his "sleeping baby strapped to his chest," he soberly states that "nowhere feels like home anymore."²⁴ Henry deals with the impending doom by conceding to the panic, thereby, according to McBee, embodying the extremity of a "dark view" of the future.²⁵ Henry notes how "eventually all those who are unnerved by what is falling away will be gone, and after that, there won't be any more talk of what has been lost."²⁶ The anxiety is no longer merely about the environment—it is about the erasure of memory and meaning in a world that is steadily slipping away.

In seeing Henry being confronted with a sense of parental and planetary panic in this manner, Lizzie starts to uncover a pattern of observation. This pattern similarly resurfaces in her interaction with the hosts of a private dinner Lizzie attends with Sylvia after one of her public appearances. Over dinner, the hosts – "gentler sorts, longtime listeners"²⁷ – ask Lizzie what the "clustering patterns" regarding climate change are among academics, noting how they are "not asking for ourselves, but we have children, you understand."²⁸ Lizzie here, as in her interaction with her brother Henry, realizes that the planetary panic is innately linked to the parental panic, and that the interpersonal relationships in her life are shaping her intrapersonal view on this. She describes these questions as "nagging," noting how a "straight answer" to these questions does not exist.²⁹ "Your people have finally fallen into history," notes Lizzie's friend when she recounts this sense of frustration to him, "the rest of us are already here."³⁰

Where does one go from here? *Weather* appears to provide an answer to this question by means of Sylvia, who bitingly suggests that "of course, not having children" is the best way to get the future generation ready for continuing to live in the Anthropocene.³¹ According to Toole, however, Offill subverts this notion and instead represents children as "the opportunity for unalienated life rather than the catalyst of it."³² This idea is most clearly illustrated in the passage describing a back-to-school concert organized by Eli's school. In Eli's favorite song, the children "sing that their lives are like a drop of water, no more, in an endless sea. Whatever they make will not stand; it will crumble to the ground before their

²²Offill, 77.

²³Offill, 78.

²⁴Offill, 141.

²⁵McBee, 62.

²⁶Offill, 38.

²⁷Offill, 52.

²⁸Offill, 53.

²⁹Offill, 53.

³⁰Offill, 113.

³¹Offill, 189.

³²Maggie Toole, "The Obligation to Tear Through the Veil," *Meliora* 1, no. 2 (2022): 18.

very eyes. And all the money in the world could not buy them a moment more.”³³ While Lizzie takes this to mean that “nothing lasts forever,” this can also be read as the children providing their audience with an understanding of their relationship to the natural world.³⁴ Complacency to the idea of not having children will only confirm that the planet is unsalvageable, but mankind does not have the power to “determine when the sentiment of not having children is justified.”³⁵ Culture is not any wiser than nature in this regard; “just as no one can guarantee the future, no one can guarantee its absence.”³⁶ Lizzie thereby starts to observe the panic as something larger than herself. In observing this shift in others too she is able to see the communal nature of eco-anxiety; one that binds a community—like a school class—together.

This passage further illustrates the notion that man-made binaries—in this case that of culture/nature—are no longer able to endure in this contemporary climate. Observing the human world as something that is not in strict opposition to the natural world will, according to this reading, help the eco-anxious to navigate life in the Anthropocene. Following Derridean thought, each pole of a binary opposition at all times participates in the other and thus assumes that which it is not.³⁷ By being “itself and another,” both ends of a binary opposition – in the case of *Weather* importantly also father/mother and child/adult – interact with one another.³⁸ This idea can be coupled with the notion of *différance*, which Derrida coined in his 1972 work *Positions*. In this work, Derrida argues that linguistic meaning is something that is created rather than given to a term. Derrida argues that “at the point at which the concept of *différance* ... intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions ... become nonpertinent.”³⁹ It therefore encourages readers to observe the two poles in a binary opposition as associated instead of opposing.

Society inherently relies on the constructed structure of these binary oppositions, and the inability to rectify the man-made problems that result from this is demonstrated clearly in *Weather*. Sylvia’s foundation—a project complementing the goals of her podcast—wants to “rewild half of the earth” in order to undo the changes brought about by man-made climate change.⁴⁰ The investors that she needs in order to realize this plan, however, “are not interested in such things. De-extinction is a better route, they think. Already they are exploring the genetic engineering that would be necessary.”⁴¹ The donors are of the belief that culture is inherently separate from nature, and culture will be able to solve the issues society is facing. From their perspective, nature needs man in order to survive; culture is imposed on nature. Sylvia subverts this notion, and her character therefore represents one of the possible solutions for the crisis that mankind is facing. For Sylvia, nature should be

³³ Offill, 99.

³⁴ Offill, 99.

³⁵ Toole, 19.

³⁶ Toole, 19.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 49.

³⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 29.

⁴⁰ Offill, 37.

⁴¹ Offill, 38.

considered as working in tandem with culture. Only then will the planet stand a chance at redemption. With this character, Offill illustrates how having the planetary and parental panic only play out in the domain of the personal will not provide an adequate solution to the crisis at hand. Lizzie shares this assessment, noting how the ideas presented by the Silicon Valley “techno-optimists” sound bad to her.⁴² The fragmentary form, introducing bursts of thoughts, here functions to couple together Sylvia, Lizzie, and the investors’ opinions, placing them in conversation with each other and thereby illustrating how binary oppositions no longer endure and thus demand to be deconstructed.

Sylvia’s character further seems to subvert binary oppositions by overriding the gendered dynamics of the man/woman divide. To understand the position Sylvia takes up in the narrative, it is necessary to include a discussion about gender essentialism, put forth by, for example, anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner in her 1972 essay “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” “Woman,” notes Ortner, “is being identified with, or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture.”⁴³ A successful role for women in society, Ortner continues, can however be one of “synthesizing ... between nature and culture.”⁴⁴ Women are often tasked with translating and mediating between nature and culture. For example, when women are tasked with feeding the family, they are taking raw food and turning it into the cultural ritual of family dinner. When this discussion about gender essentialism is thus taken together with Derridean thought, it illustrates that both sides of the binary oppositions of woman/man and nature/culture should be inherently linked, not mutually exclusive.

Through her work in academia, Sylvia appears to take on this synthesizing role of ‘the woman’ but ultimately considers herself to have failed and commences an Emersonian retreat to nature. Disillusioned by the inefficiency of society to address the climate crisis adequately, Sylvia perceives her efforts to be futile. Sylvia tells Lizzie that “of course, the world continues to end” before hanging up the phone and going back to tending her garden.⁴⁵ This act marks an abandonment of cultural participation. By stepping outside of the traditional role of ‘the woman’ as outlined by Ortner, Sylvia’s character illustrates that the binaries are no longer able to endure in the Anthropocene. The woman/man and nature/culture binaries are thus complicated: Offill insinuates that these categories are no longer viable in an age of contemporary crises. While Sylvia remains aware of the inadequacies of the current climate and the way in which society deals with the issues at hand, if nobody seems to listen, is it still a cause worth fighting?

In addition to nature/culture and /woman/man, the binary oppositions of child/adult and father/mother and their deconstruction, are likewise central in *Weather*. Mothers and the concept of motherhood continuously resurface throughout *Weather* as a vessel of estrangement, illustrating how a reconceptualization of the role is needed in contemporary society.⁴⁶ As previously mentioned, the fragmentary form results in a tone that meets the

⁴²Offill, 38.

⁴³Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 25.

⁴⁴Ortner, 25.

⁴⁵Offill, 198.

⁴⁶Toole, 13.

mood of the moment. Looking at how these binary oppositions are represented in the text and how these interact with the intra- and interpersonal structures contributes to the exploration and effect of planetary and parental panic. In *Weather*, the experiences of children and adults are positioned to be in conversation with each other, not situated on opposite sides of an abstract and arbitrary binary axis. The questions and answers that are continuously moving back and forth between Eli and Lizzie are woven into the text, and the form thereby fuels the process of deconstruction. Lizzie is not only teaching her son about the world and helping him come to conclusions about what it means to be a person today, but the process also works the other way around. At bedtime, Eli starts to ask his mother questions; “Will he still be alive when I die? If not, what will he do?”⁴⁷ Lizzie replies with “that old dodge,” but “this is not what he wants to know.”⁴⁸ In recounting this interaction, Lizzie is deconstructing the binary opposition between child/adult, illustrating how the two ends should not be structured so rigidly. Similarly, Lizzie recounts a conversation she had with Eli after he lost his lunch box. She explains how he had “turned to [her] and said, Are you sure you’re my mother? Sometimes you don’t seem like a good person.”⁴⁹ Lizzie concedes that “he was just a kid, so I let it go” but admits that she “probably only think[s] of it, I don’t know, once or twice a day.”⁵⁰ The two ends – child and adult – are influencing each other’s intrapersonal spaces, deconstructing the binary opposition to which they seemingly belong.

One interpersonal structure that is linked closely to the binary opposition of child/adult is that of the family unit, in particular the binary opposition of father/mother. Lizzie notes that “Buddhists practice includes the notion that we have all been born many times before and that we have all been each other’s mothers and fathers and children and siblings. Therefore, we should treat each person we encounter as if they are our beloved.”⁵¹ For Toole, this illustrates that the structure of the family needs to persist seeing as “we as humans need the tangible connection it provides.”⁵² Ben is conscious of this idea too, telling Lizzie that she has “obligations to this family too” when she continuously talks about Henry and the issues he faces when they are spending time as a couple.⁵³ In this way, however, both Toole and Ben in their thinking seem to adhere to binary oppositions. The fallacy that Lizzie cannot be a good member of her immediate family once she spends more of her attention on her brother promotes this reading. Offill, however, can be understood as attempting to subvert these othering effects of motherhood in *Weather*. Lizzie is not only taking up the role of the mother. The previously mentioned passage on Buddhism, for example, can be read in another manner than Toole’s. If we “have all been each other’s mothers and fathers and children and siblings,” the absolute divide between father/mother and child/adult seems contradictory.⁵⁴ Instead, the Derridean notion of being associates instead of oppositions fits

⁴⁷ Offill, 136.

⁴⁸ Offill, 136.

⁴⁹ Offill, 23.

⁵⁰ Offill, 23.

⁵¹ Offill, 156-7.

⁵² Toole, 18.

⁵³ Offill, 149.

⁵⁴ Offill, 157.

better in this line of thinking that Offill offers. Lizzie asks herself “What if we were to tear through [the veil]?”⁵⁵ The structure no longer works, and Lizzie calls for a deconstruction; a transformation of the idea of motherhood.

The development of Lizzie’s character thus mirrors the narrative shift in form that Offill employs. Lizzie, argues Muhammad, can be seen as a “synecdoche for the panic” that American society faces in the first half of the novel.⁵⁶ She represents the planetary and parental panic that is experienced by society, and Offill’s representation of this eco-anxiety enables her to discover certain structures within intra- and interpersonal relationships. Halfway through the narrative, Lizzie explicitly states how she no longer concedes to this planetary and parental panic: “You’re never going back to that website where you put in the year Eli was born and then watched the numbers go up, up, up,” states Lizzie, “No. never.”⁵⁷ Offill here switches to second person narrative, and thereby uses the form in order to shift the planetary and parental panic out of the realm of the personal. Lizzie’s interpersonal relationships have shaped the domain of the intrapersonal, and the use of second person narrative at this covert climax endorses the reader to do the same.

In *Weather*, Offill thus questions the idea of community—both how it is created and reimagined—in order to reveal its limitations and possibilities with regards to combatting eco-anxiety. “I thought you wanted community,” Ben says to Lizzie when she dismisses the idea of going to church.⁵⁸ “But not so much. Not like that,” Lizzie thinks, “Not my tribe.”⁵⁹ Lizzie’s tribe, instead, is constructed out of the diffuse cast of characters with which she surrounds herself. Offill’s *Weather* is not intended as a guide on how to deal with the staggering planetary and parental panic that shapes life in the 21st century. What Offill does manage to achieve with *Weather*, however, is to provide her readers with a better understanding of how this eco-anxiety can be interpreted through looking at the intra- and interpersonal structures that dominate all our lives. When the binaries that result from these structures are re-evaluated, this planetary and parental panic will become perceivable outside of the realm of the personal. Once this is achieved, the panic becomes one of shared perception, and this communal essence helps one overcome the delusion that “I am here and you are there.”⁶⁰

In short, this article has argued that *Weather* is compelling in the way in which it illustrates to the reader that the stark divide between nature/culture, children/adult, and father/mother can no longer endure. As this article has illustrated, these boundaries in *Weather* disappear as a result of the ways in which Offill uses the form of the novel and the position of her characters. In doing so, Offill is able to present the planetary and parental panic as interlinked, as issues of shared perception. What, she suggests, might happen if we tear through the veil? Perhaps, taking Offill’s *Weather* as a point of inception, the center will then be able to hold for the eco-anxious.

⁵⁵ Offill, 198.

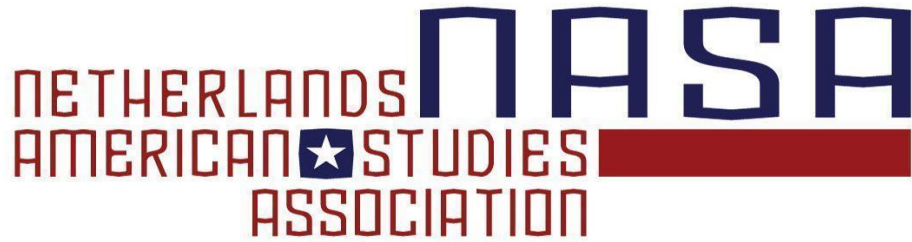
⁵⁶ Muhammad, 113.

⁵⁷ Offill, 89.

⁵⁸ Offill, 138.

⁵⁹ Offill, 138.

⁶⁰ Offill, 201.



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