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Book Review: Environmental Justice in New Mexico: Counting Coup

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BOOK REVIEW

Environmental Justice in New Mexico: Counting Coup by Valerie Rangel
(History Press, 2019)

New Mexico has a complex history, not only the cultural history but also the environmental history of the state. This can be seen distinctly in the arrival of the Spanish Colonialists. “While conquest by Spanish colonialists brought exotic goods and new technology, it also came with policies of extermination of Indian culture; suppression of language, religion and government; and slavery. Colonizers changed the environment in drastic ways . . .” *Environmental Justice in New Mexico: Counting Coup* is a collection of snippets of information that piece together a canvas that shows the acts of bravery in the face of the enemy that threaten our environment and disparately affect BIPOC communities in New Mexico.

The book is separated into three parts. Part I discusses the legacy of uranium mining on indigenous lands. The author walks the reader through hazardous waste contamination that occurred during the establishment and prolonged use of Fort Wingate Army Depot. This hazardous waste site has contributed to the legacy of environmental injustice in New Mexico. Adverse health effects have lingered in the surrounding communities after land repatriation and remediation. Then the author moves to the Church Rock Spill where “1,100 tons of uranium mining waste-tailings gushed through a mud-packed dam near Church Rock into the Rio Puerco. With the exception of bomb tests, Church Rock is the largest nuclear spill to have occurred in the United States.” The spill’s impact was felt beyond water pollution. For example, livestock became unsafe for consumption and the surrounding land was affected. Livestock that did not die after drinking the polluted water, showed high levels of radium in the kidneys and livers, as did cow’s milk. The surrounding soil showed contamination had penetrated thirty (30) feet into the earth and the hay grown was also contaminated. The author demonstrates a clear example of environmental racism by pointing out the lack of comparable media coverage between Church Rock and Three Mile Island.

Part II focuses on water justice. In the arid southwest, water is sacred. The author addressed the historical exploitation of the Animas River “when Anglo settlers began mining for gold and silver.” This historical abuse of the land eventually led to August 5, 2015, when “approximately three million gallons of wastewater and toxic sludge poured out of the dormant Gold King mine into Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River.” The author emphasizes the fact that the “sparsely populated” areas that mines have continuously dumped wastewater into are actually populated by “Hispanic, Ute, Pueblo of Picuris, Navajo, and Apache impoverished communities who consider the water and mountains to be sacred.”

Finally, Part III “What’s in your backyard?”, is about land contamination throughout New Mexico. The author provides illustrative maps that depict environmental issues around the state and how these sites intersect with the poorest communities. For example, it was eye opening to see how the area in the South Valley of Albuquerque where I grew up and continue to live is designated a “Superfund site.” The author establishes an impactful tone by reminding the reader

that “in every major city across the United States, there are instances of environmental injustice. Contamination finds its way into marginalized communities of color, and it seems that the brunt of human waste and industrial generation winds up in poor community’s backyard rather than in the most affluent neighborhood.” The author creates a clear visual of this by introducing the reader to Pronto site, one of several superfund sites in the South Valley. The Pronto Superfund Site was caused by a Texas Company illegally dumping PCBs and other volatile organic compounds.

Environmental Justice in New Mexico: Counting Coup provides a bird’s eye view of environmental issues in New Mexico with quick dives into specific areas and actions that devastated and continue to affect our environment. As a newcomer to environmental justice, I found that the book is a great overview of environmental issues in the state, and where the state stands on issues of inequality and environmental justice. It should be noted that readers should not rely upon the book for any legal facts or conclusions. Specifically, the author asserts that “[t]he Supreme Court’s decision ruled in favor of the Pueblo of Isleta” However, the Supreme Court did no such thing. The author may be confusing this matter with *Albuquerque v. Browner*, 97 F.3d 415 (10th Cir. 1996). Cert. was denied in this case, so there is no decision by the Supreme Court, much less a ruling in favor of the Pueblo of Isleta.

While health concerns caused by pollution, and impacts of contamination were mentioned, the author did not dive deeper into the ongoing environmental injustices occurring. Moreover, the author did not cover the plights of migrant farm workers in great detail, even though many of these communities are being exposed to pesticides throughout the state. With only short discussions about health impacts and exposure to harmful chemicals the reader is left without a complete picture.

This book is a great resource for people interested in an overview of how environmental racism has impacted indigenous people and Hispanic communities in New Mexico. Despite the legal inaccuracies, the organization of the book is such that it is easy for a newcomer to the environmental literature to follow. The author’s argument was clear and unambiguous, especially because the language used is not highly technical and is appropriate for all audiences, even non-expert audiences. The author achieves her goal of providing a broad overview of the history of events that have caused environmental harm in New Mexico and how those events have had an incredible unequal impact on indigenous communities and communities of color. Readers of all levels will gain valuable insight from this book, especially New Mexicans, to learn about issues that plague our state and use this as a springboard to discover where we can go from here to pursue environmental and racial justice.

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