

WASTE, VALUE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE SOUTHWEST

By Elizabeth Ferry

March 15, 2016 — On August 5, 2015, a team contracted by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to investigate a leak at the Gold King mine in Silverton, Colorado, accidentally breached the mine, sending three million gallons of toxic wastewater in a foul yellow surge down the Animas River. The two nearest downstream communities are Silverton, a small town of 650 residents, mostly descended from the miners of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Durango, with a population of 17,000, most of whom are retirees or young people attracted to the natural beauty and recreational activities of the river and surrounding mountains. Not surprisingly, Silverton residents tend to support the local control, and perhaps even reopening, of the Gold King, while those in Durango push for environmental cleanup, including naming the mine a Superfund site, which would bring in federal monies but foreclose the chance of the mine ever opening again.

Soon after the spill, water from the Gold King joined the San Juan River and flowed into the Navajo Nation. “This disaster will last for decades,” said Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye. “This is unacceptable. The damages to our people will be long-term and the Navajo Nation will not settle for pennies.”¹ Many Navajo living along the river have lost crops and livestock. They are furious about yet another case of environmental damage of their lands and what they see as a delayed and insufficient response.

That October, federal investigators released a report saying that the spill was preventable, and further that the conditions that led to the spill “are not isolated or unique, and in fact are surprisingly prevalent.”² The same month, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) rejected the Navajo Nation’s appeal for assistance, prompting criticism from the Nation, Arizona senator John McCain, and beyond. One Twitter respondent expressed it well: “What in the actual fuck?? Yeah no emergency here, just some natives with no drinkable water.”³



The Animas River between Silverton and Durango in Colorado, USA, within 24 hours of the 2015 Gold King mine waste water spill. Photograph by Riverhugger / Wikimedia

In the introduction to an edited volume on resources and time, Mandana Limbert and I described these kinds of situations as “resource-making projects.”⁴ The phrase emphasizes that resources are not self-evidently “given” as natural, lying passively in the ground (or wherever), waiting for translation into the human and social world as inputs. The very act of calling something a *resource*, with all the practices of valuation, exploration, processing, and consumption implied by the term, are already intensely social and political. Thus resource-making is always a process of creating and extracting values, in the specific, economic sense captured in models of financial valuation such as net present value (NPV) and in the sense of the multiple values produced by the Gold King mine.

These three places—Silverton, Durango, and the lands in the Navajo Nation fed by the San Juan—have been brought together by the Gold King mine and its afterlife, and by the August 2015 spill in particular. The process of extracting gold also made these places, as themselves and in relation to each other. When the mine was in operation, and for decades afterward, gold mining also made different forms of value, including the values of jobs and local control (Silverton); recreation, nature, and “adventure” (Durango); and productive, irrigated land, anticolonial sentiment, and support for national sovereignty (the Navajo Nation). These forms of value do not exist before the making of resources but are created along with it.

In her recent book on the uranium economy in the Navajo Nation, Traci Brynne Voyles brings into focus the flip side of value-making, what she calls “wastelanding.” Wastelanding refers to patterns of words and actions that, as Voyles states it, “render certain bodies and landscapes pollutable.” This happens in two stages. First comes “the assumption that nonwhite lands are valueless, or valuable only for what can be mined from beneath them,” then comes “the subsequent devastation of these very environs by polluting industries.”



A warning sign placed near the Puerco River by the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division after the Church Rock Uranium Mill spill on July 16, 1979. Photograph by the EPA / Wikimedia

Noting that “the relationship of the United States to Diné Bikéyah [Navajoland] has most consistently been organized around resources: the desire for them, the perceived dearth of them in this high arid landscape,” Voyles begins her analysis with 19th-century settler accounts filled with disdain and distrust for the barren landscape of the Southwest. She cites, for instance, an 1849 account by Lieutenant James Simpson, in which he speculates on the possible links between “barren” land and “wicked” people.

The resulting conflation of valueless land and degraded people is a constitutive feature of wastelanding. As Voyles points out, the uranium industry is a particularly apt example of this isomorphic relationship between land and bodies, because of the multiscale characteristics of radioactive materials, which affect the atmosphere, earth, air, and the human body all the way down to the molecular level.

WASTELANDING REFERS TO PATTERNS OF WORDS AND ACTIONS THAT, AS VOYLES STATES IT, “RENDER CERTAIN BODIES AND LANDSCAPES POLLUTABLE.”

Voyles takes us through the first encounters between US observers of Diné Bikéyah (“empty except for Indians”) to the boom and bust of the uranium economy. She is especially good at showing the links between narrative, material, and bodily effects, especially as these occur in

the accounts of 19th-century military expeditions, efforts to promote the region to business interests and potential homebuyers in the mid-20th century, and origin stories of the discovery of “the yellow rock.” Her account passionately exposes the contradictions between the values created for others and the wastelanding of Navajo lands and bodies.

The making of “waste” is a social and political process just like the making of positive value. But Voyles’s work, viewed as a story of resource-making, elaborates on how value and waste are created in tandem. In order for uranium to be extracted and used in the constitution of modernity, underwritten by nuclear power and the presence of nuclear weaponry, Navajo lands and people must be constituted as polluted and further pollutable. Indeed, the dialectics of waste and value can be seen as a classic instance of the alienation of labor and extraction of surplus value. As Marx described it in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

The more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes. ...

... It is true that labor produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity.⁵

Voyles’s concept of wastelanding evocatively expresses this chiasmic process, extending into the context of mining. This allows her to think of the worthlessness that is produced through exploitation in terms of land as well as human bodies (in keeping with Marx’s inclusion of land along with labor and capital in the *Manuscripts*).

Andrew Needham’s *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* focuses on Arizona’s biggest city, its electrical grid, and the coal industry and Four Corners Power Plant in the Navajo Nation. Needham begins his book with a remarkable image of a midcentury housing development in Phoenix, describing it in historical, physical, and demographic terms, before exhorting the reader to “angle our line of sight slightly above the roofs ... [to see] a grid of electrical power lines.” The effect of this is oddly striking—we suddenly see Phoenix as a node of power and a way station for resources, both of which are constitutive, but often unrecognized, aspects of cities. This altered sightline is especially consequential in the case Needham explores. The development and boosterism of Phoenix as a place for a “clean” modernity, free of the congestion, pollution, and contaminated industry of the East, exemplifies “a style of modernity reliant on ready and inexpensive energy.”



Four Corners Power Plant. Photography by the EPA / Wikimedia

Examining the process that brings electricity to Phoenix, we see the tandem production of waste and value from the very beginning. It happens in a specific technical sense in the extraction of coal from earth and rock, which depends on distinguishing “economically viable” material from its surroundings. The conversion of coal into electrical power and its transportation from the Four Corners Power Plant to Phoenix perform the same kind of transformation, in this case moving between the wasteland of Navajo lands and the “clean” city of Phoenix, nestled in its “Valley of the Sun.” Within Phoenix itself, we see a similar process of discrimination. Needham writes that “Northern Phoenix, with its 99 percent white population defended by both state policy and popular violence, and southern Phoenix, where [longtime resident] John Camargo did not ‘remember any whites,’ replicated the patterns of growing metropolitan areas in the nation at large.” This, too, can be usefully read as a process of making and disposing of places and people as valuable and valueless.

THE MAKING OF “WASTE” IS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROCESS JUST LIKE THE MAKING OF POSITIVE VALUE.

Later in the book, Needham’s account of negotiations between the Navajo Nation, the US federal government, and coal and electrical companies, as well as his discussion of livestock reduction and uranium mining, which constituted the background to the negotiations, typifies the process Voyles has described as wastelanding, this time in the context of a lively and

cosmopolitan politics in the Navajo Nation. In particular, the resource nationalism of Navajo Nation chairman Peter MacDonald's administrations in the 1970s helped create the conditions under which the Navajo willingly entered into agreements for the production of coal and electrical current. However, because of the unequal degrees of power of the Navajo Nation and the US federal government, and because once the power plants and circuitry are built, they determine the paths that energy development will take, the leverage that MacDonald and his supporters hoped for never really materialized. Harm to the environment and to public health persisted. As one student wrote to the *Navajo Times*, "People across the Southwest destroyed our land so they can use electric can openers and tooth brushes."

The preceding quotation aptly captures the juxtaposition of wastelanding and making value that these books explore. It is not surprising that Needham includes it in the context of Navajo demands for more nearly equal compensation for the values extracted from their lands and the environmental damages created through coal mining. The "clean" coal-powered modernity of Phoenix may be far more visible than the damage to land and bodies in Navajo country, but the two are made together as part of the same process. The claims of the MacDonald administrations in the 1970s and the current claims for restitution for damages from the Gold King spill are both rooted in the basic inextricability of value and waste in resource-making.

Demands for financial recompense for damage to land and human bodies raise some interesting questions about how these could be priced, and what might be left out of that process. At the beginning of this essay, I described the diverse forms of value produced by the Gold King mine in Silverton, Durango, and the Navajo Nation. These may be created along with, but also in opposition to, the market. Certainly, those in Silverton who wish the mine to reopen, those in Durango who hope for environmental cleanup, and those in the Navajo Nation who demand restitution for the contamination of their water are interested in the economic value of their lands—as mines, sites for tourism, and for agriculture and grazing.

Frequently, however, other kinds of value are also invoked. These are sometimes expressed in monetary terms, but cannot be completely contained within them. For instance, in Needham's discussion of the early 20th-century forced reduction of Navajo livestock by the US government, he notes the ways in which sheep and goats not only provided physical sustenance and economic independence for the Navajo, but also formed an essential part of the Navajo concept of *hózhó*, or balance. These affective connections can and do exist perfectly well alongside economic understandings of value. And such concepts of value beyond the market are, of course, not limited to the Navajo. The notion of heritage that underlies the Gold King Mine Tour and displays of old photographs in Silverton, or the value of nature for environmentalists like those in Durango who seek to declare the Gold King a Superfund site, are equally distinct from the market, though in radically different idioms.

Places of resource extraction and its aftermaths, like Silverton, Durango, Phoenix, and Diné Bikéyah, are all entities carved out through the human process of making distinctions between signs. Through the ongoing, messy politics of creating stable forms of meaningful difference (otherwise known as value), we create multiple worlds. These worlds overlap with but cannot be reduced to each other. These worlds make up what has been described as the

pluriverse, a modish term for something anthropologists have been committed to from the beginning—the radical irreducibility of experience and meaning-making.

An article in the *Huffington Post* notes that there are an estimated 500,000 abandoned mines in the territory of the United States. Environmental activists call these “zombie mines” to point out the (frequently toxic) afterlives of these supposedly defunct sites of extraction. Such sites provide a fit image for the generative and destructive power of making resources and making worlds.

RELATED

Jordan Sand, “Global Warming and Network Thinking,” *Public Books*, December 15, 2014

Jack Utter, “Not an Owl, Crow, or Coyote Be: The Navajo Creation Narrative for Day and Night,” *Public Books* blog, March 3, 2015

Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, “Planetary Politics,” *Public Books*, June 15, 2015

Bradley Gorski, “Totalitarian Sprawl,” *Public Books*, November 15, 2015

1

Quoted in John Siciliano, “Claim: EPA Trying to Limit Navajo Compensation for Toxic Spill,” *Washington Examiner*, August 12, 2015.

2

US Department of Interior, “Technical Evaluation of the Gold King Mine Incident,” Bureau of Reclamation Technical Service Center (Denver, CO), October 2015, p. 1.

3

Quoted in Miriam Wasser, “FEMA Won’t Help the Navajo Nation with Gold King Mine Spill Cleanup,” *Phoenix New Times*, October 23, 2015.

4

Elizabeth Emma Ferry and Mandana E. Limbert, introduction to *Timely Assets: The Politics of Resources and Their Temporalities*, edited by Elizabeth Emma Ferry and Mandana E. Limbert (School for Advanced Research Press, 2008), pp. 12–21 passim.

5

Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated from the German by Martin Milligan (available [here](#) on Marxists.org).

Elizabeth Ferry is a professor of anthropology at Brandeis University and the author of *Not Ours Alone: Patrimony, Value, and Collectivity in Contemporary Mexico* (2005) and *Minerals, Collecting, and Value across the US-Mexican Border* (2013), and the editor, with Mandana Limbert, of *Timely Assets: The Politics of Resources and Their Temporalities* (2008).