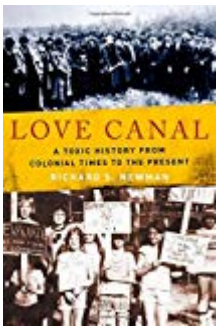
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard S. Newman. *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xvii + 306 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-537483-4.

Reviewed by Raechel Lutz

Published on H-Envirohealth (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Michitake Aso (University at Albany, SUNY)

Located in the Niagara Falls region of New York, Love Canal is perhaps the most famous contaminated landscape in America. In his new book, Richard S. Newman takes his readers on a journey through the environmental history of this infamously toxic place and shows how it connects to broader American history. Love Canal's legacy goes beyond being a symbol of toxic places that have left scars on communities. Instead, Newman argues, "Love Canal protestors made us peer into a polluted past" (p. 7).

Newman starts his critique of the existing historiography on Love Canal by asking several questions: Why did Love Canal happen? Why was a neighborhood built on a chemical waste dump? How did those chemicals dissipate in time? In previous work, he charges, "Love Canal is often portrayed in relatively flat terms as a crisis flowing from a compact history of industrialization and chemical use in the mid- to late-20th century" (p. 8). For him, an analysis of Love Canal must begin with the region's environmental history and the events that led not only to the dumping of chemicals in an abandoned canal, but also "Native-colonial land disputes, Americans' attempts to build out the 19th-century American environment via massive infrastructure projects, and the transformations of environmental journalism in the 1970s" (p. 9).

Newman uses this longer perspective on what has too often been a twentieth-century story to argue that at Love Canal protestors and residents were the first to successfully resist the all-consuming idea that landscapes could be sacrificed to progress and profit without consequence. He asserts, "Love Canal activists offered the most penetrating and sustained challenge to unbridled commercial and industrial development, especially the legacy of toxic waste that undergirded the miracle of the American Chemical Century" (p. 10).

Newman further holds that Love Canal contributed to a "fundamental redefinition of landscape" and of environmentalism itself (p. 10). Scholars now understand the term landscape to

signify a place where human begins have altered the environment. That landscapes are no longer inert, abstract, or distant is partly due to the role Love Canal activists played in highlighting how the environment they lived in had been irreparably damaged by human activity. He argues that starting to view landscapes in this way made it okay for environmentalists to push for the protection of vernacular landscapes as well as more traditionally protected spaces like wilderness areas. For Newman, Love Canal is at the heart of modern America's relationship with nature.

Love Canal includes nine chapters divided into three chronological parts along with an introduction and epilogue. Part 1 consists of the first four chapters of the book and explores the environmental history of Love Canal before the 1970s. Newman's main goal with this section of the book is to demonstrate how, "from the 17th century on, a succession of European and then American explorers, entrepreneurs, and developers plotted massive projects in the greater Niagara region generally--and the Love Canal landscape in particular--that defined the local environment as a useable and even disposable commodity" (p. 18). Throughout the nineteenth century, Newman explains, Americans living in the Niagara region pushed for the development of the Niagara Ship Canal, a massive, never-built project that would enable large ships to bypass Niagara Falls. To these nineteenth-century dreamers and industrialists, the landscape around Niagara was ripe for development.

In chapter 2, readers meet the area's namesake. Newman describes surveyor and entrepreneur William Love's failed canal, and argues that understanding this history "sheds light on turn-of-the-century environmental debates in the Niagara region" (p. 37). Naturalists faced off against industrialists, hoping to rein in the latter's desire to reshape the region with hydropower. Though Love got some portions of his canal dug, he eventually ran out of both money and supporters.

Environmental historians such as Neil Maher and Mark Fiege have recently published synthetic works connecting events in environmental history to American history more generally.[1] Likewise, Newman's ability to tie the events of Love Canal to events in American history, particularly in chapters 3 and 4, is one of the book's strengths. Hydropower from Niagara Falls sustained Hooker Chemical's forays into electrochemistry and "helped launch the American Chemical Century" (p. 58). Newman's analysis of Hooker's midcentury advertisements situate this story within the optimism many people held about the ability of chemical products to remake the world into a better place. And he is fair to the company by admitting that its use of Love Canal as a dumping ground for toxic waste was in line with industry standards at the time. Another story Newman invokes is postwar suburban expansion, which demanded large tracts of land for residential development. Like many other places across the country that had an industrial past, suburbs in the Niagara Falls region were built on land already dramatically reshaped by human hands.

Part 2 introduces readers to the more familiar story of the chemical contamination occurring at Love Canal in the late 1970s. In Chapter 5, Newman purposefully highlights activists' agency and persistence in the face of widespread contamination and the tragic consequences of toxic exposure for many families. Conflict between official and expert diagnoses of the site and the problems of toxic exposure contrasted with residents' deep-seated fear for the health and safety of their families. Newman maintains, "that disconnect between official understanding of a 'problem' to be contained and grassroots understanding of a looming public health crisis framed everything that followed" (p. 108). Activists like Lois Gibbs, Luella Kenny, and others in the Love Canal Homeowners Association insisted that the entire neighborhood needed to be evacuated and that Love Canal was a public health crisis. The Concerned Love Canal Renters Association forced authorities

to address the concerns of African American renters nearby. Both the LCHA and the CLCR made it clear that they believed "environmental health was very nearly a human right" (p. 124).

Newman describes in chapters 6 and 7 how, from the end of 1979 and into 1980, the protests at Love Canal expanded. Although remediation efforts continued, activists framed Love Canal as a case highlighting both environmental degradation and the grave need for reforms. Love Canal activists represented, Newman states, "an environmental vanguard," showing the real potential of grassroots environmentalism to bring about change (p. 145). If Love Canal needed environmental protection as activists claimed, other places needed protection, too. In one section of chapter 6, Newman recounts how activists used images of the remediation and toxic waste at Love Canal to demonstrate their plight to others. Images of chemicals hazards at Love Canal reshaped the narratives around environmental protests in the United States. In chapter 7, Newman argues that "Love Canal transcended itself," by becoming more than a symbol, but also a way of thinking about the practices involved in environmentalism.

Part 3 investigates the influx of new residents and the legacy of Love Canal. As activists left Love Canal after 1980, the energy of the movement they created often went with them. In chapter 8 Newman analyzes how Love Canalers shared their practical knowledge of organizing with other concerned citizens across the country. Gibbs created the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes as an information center about how to create and sustain grassroots environmental movements. By the end of the decade, officials and developers pushed for the resettlement of Love Canal. Newman argues that resettlement proved what both Gibbs and developers understood Love Canal to be: "more than just a place ... it was a paradigm of future dealings with hazardous waste" (p. 224). Thus, Love Canal remains a place of contested meaning. In chapter 9, Newman suggests that the renamed Black Creek Village represents a success story to officials and developers, while activists continue to resist the idea that Love Canal could ever fully be cleaned up.

Newman's *Love Canal* could have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the role chemicals played in his environmental history. As the work of Nancy Langston, Linda Nash, and Dan Fagin have shown, important conclusions can be reached by analyzing the interactions between chemicals, bodies, and landscapes, especially on sites of chemical contamination.[2] The chemicals are the least dynamic part of *Love Canal* and the book skips over some tough questions. What kinds of chemicals were dumped at Love's Canal? How do human bodies react to those chemicals when introduced to them, either in in large or small quantities? How did the understanding of these chemicals change because of the activism surrounding Love Canal? Answers to these questions would have given Newman more evidence with which to describe the divide between scientists, officials, and citizen activists in their struggles to define the meaning of Love Canal.

Despite this omission, *Love Canal* is an excellent book. Overall, it pushes readers to see environmental justice stories as part of the larger narrative of American history. The book has genuine appeal for academic and non-academic audiences alike, who will delight in Newman's lively narrative style, thorough descriptions of places and people, as well as his thoughtful analysis.

Notes

[1]. Mark Fiege, *Nature's Republic: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Neil M. Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[2] Dan Fagin, *Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013); Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES* (New Haven, CT: Yale

University Press, 2010); Linda Nash, ***Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).