



# H-Environment

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## H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

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**Richard S. Newman, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2016). ISBN: 9780195374834**

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**Introduction by Michael Egan, McMaster University**

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**A**t the risk of upsetting and alienating much of my readership, let me start like this: Even though many of the events surrounding the crisis and evacuations at Love Canal seem like they happened only yesterday, they are now closer to the end of World War II than they are to the present. I know. It hurts me, too. But it does suggest that Love Canal sits squarely in a past with which historians might now feel comfortable enough to interrogate. In August 1978, Love Canal entered the mainstream public discourse. On 1 August *The New York Times* reported:

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.--Twenty five years after the Hooker Chemical Company stopped using the Love Canal here as an industrial dump, 82 different compounds, 11 of them suspected carcinogens, have been percolating upward through the soil, their drum containers rotting and leaching their contents into the backyards and basements of 100 homes and a public school built on the banks of the canal.

A week later President Jimmy Carter declared a federal state of emergency and provided funds to evacuate families living immediately adjacent to the old canal site. That sparked a reaction from many neighbours left behind. In October 1980, Carter declared a second state of emergency, which facilitated the evacuation of more Love Canal residents, and assisted with future health care.

Love Canal casts a long shadow. It is synecdoche for every subsequent toxic contamination crisis, and marks an important turning point in environmental history. It spurred Superfund legislation, and transformed the manner in which the state responds to pollution disasters. Love Canal also serves as the entry into a particularly fraught kind of toxic history, where public health, environmental harm, law, policy, and emotions intersect. The idea that chemicals can leach out of the ground, into basements, schools, and playgrounds is the stuff of horror movies. But there's a danger in the assumption that Love Canal is representative of all contamination narratives. That undermines the nuance and complexities underpinning toxic history case studies, not least the story of Love Canal itself. As evidenced by the robust discussion in the reviews and response below, Love Canal demands careful interrogation of race, class, and gender. We need to study toxic history carefully in order to better understand and to provide meaning that can only enhance our environmental histories. My current work has me examining chemophobia in the American 1980s. Love Canal dominates much of the chemical fears during that decade. It is invoked regularly. As a result, I read Richard S. Newman's recent book, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present*, with considerable attention, and welcomed the opportunity to guest-edit a roundtable on the book.

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The value of the *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* comes from the diversity of opinions and perspectives that reviewers express in these fora, and from the opportunity provided the author to reply. These interactions are consistently some of the most engaging online interactions in our field. Newman's book invites discussion on toxic history and the histories of toxicity that we would do well to consider more thoroughly. Because of her work on the relationships between energy production, toxicity, and environmental justice, **Stephanie Malin** made an ideal reviewer. Her book, *The Price of Nuclear Power: Uranium Communities and Environmental Justice* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), stressed the importance of local voices, which resonated with Newman's own approach. I was also grateful for a sociologist's take on toxicity, and thought her background might enrich the historical analysis in the other two reviews. Just as I was discussing the prospect of this roundtable with Christopher Jones, I was reading and reviewing **Michelle Mart's** *Pesticides, A Love Story: America's Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals* (University Press of Kansas, 2015). The book made passing reference to Love Canal, but I was especially interested in asking Mart to discuss Newman's book in the broader context of toxic history. Finally, **Scout Blum's** *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (University Press of Kansas, 2008) made her an obvious colleague to approach regarding reviewing Newman's book. Combined with Newman's response, the following conversation offers an exciting of *Love Canal* and Love Canal.

In closing, I should like to thank Christopher Jones for the opportunity to curate this roundtable. It goes almost without saying that I am especially grateful to the roundtable contributors for their efforts in submitting their reviews, and to Rich Newman for his congeniality and willingness to participate. As ever, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is an open-access forum and is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate and join the discussion.

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**Comments by Stephanie Malin, Colorado State University**

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In his recent book, Richard Newman offers a sweeping examination of Love Canal's socio-environmental history. Rather than focusing solely on the contemporary historical era – dominated by the community's notorious chemical contamination and residents' eventual relocation – Newman utilizes a broader perspective. He shows his readers the myriad ways in which “from this single area...one can see centuries of environmental struggle and change in North America” (8). Yet, the ambitious historical scope of Newman's book is a double-edged sword. From my sociological perspective, this expansive arc represents the book's most significant strength and its most sorely missed opportunity.

In Part I, Newman takes his readers from pre-industrial conflicts over land use among Native Americans and European colonizers, through the dreams of early industrialists obsessed with harnessing the hydroelectric power of Niagara Falls, and into the era of corporate chemical magnates whose enterprises eventually dominated and polluted the region. In particular, he introduces readers to the seemingly visionary ambitions of Elon Huntington Hooker, who founded the eponymous Hooker Chemical company. This corporation would, of course, dump thousands of tons of chemical soup in the canal that Lois Gibbs and her neighbors would live above decades later. Despite this tainted legacy, Newman adeptly establishes that Hooker thought of himself as “an industrial progressive who harnessed technology to solve the nation's intensifying environmental problems” (61). Rich historical, archival data enliven this section of Newman's book, and highlight the deep ironies – especially examples of the world-conquering and hubris-laden art commissioned by Hooker to commemorate his view that humanity could overcome constraints of the natural world. Newman's compelling narrative voice brings to life the era in which the Niagara Falls region became a booming hub for chemical and industrial production.

In Parts 2 and 3, Newman introduces readers to the contemporary history of this industrial boom: the chemical contamination experiences of Love Canal residents, their eventual relocation and work to pass the Superfund Act, and even the land's remediation and recent resettlement as Black Creek Village. Readers meet the first Love Canal community and its working-class residents, see their gradual realization of the extensive toxic risks under and in their own homes, and then explore various ways in which residents dealt with the trauma and uncertainty of toxic chemical exposure. Unfortunately, however, Newman offers a rich portrait of only a *segment* of Love Canal activists. He glosses over important tensions among various activist organizations, tensions that smacked of environmental racism and classism. Newman also tends to portray Lois Gibbs as representative of all residents' and activists' experiences, avoiding the interesting and under-explored nooks and crannies of Love Canal activism and experience – including the perspectives of people who never left the neighborhood.

While the Superfund Act resulted from national awareness of Love Canal, and though Newman focuses on the success that legislation represents, we conclude with a troubling denouement. Love Canal is now Black Village Creek, filling up with a new round of working-class residents enticed by homes priced 10 – 20% below market value. Though former residents including Gibbs fought the relocation, they lost this battle. Developers won. The results have been tragic; as Newman recounts, health problems and toxic exposures have reemerged in this ‘remediated’ community, despite the extensive, state-of-the-art environmental engineering schemes used to filter leachate and otherwise remediate the site.

Newman’s *Love Canal* succeeds in highlighting for readers an exceptionally timely notion: *before the institutionalization of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Superfund Program, the American landscape was riddled with unregulated, unmonitored, and often unknown chemical and industrial dumps from America’s dizzying participation in the Industrial Revolution.* Communities like Love Canal that dealt with these historical mistakes, Newman shows, contended with rampant pollution, contested and rare health outcomes, and instances of deep disempowerment. Newman showcases for his readers the immense risks and voluminous unintended consequences that emerge when environmental regulations are absent and when the precautionary principle is eschewed in favor of industrial economic development, in one era after another. His historical details, and his careful examination of the numerous barriers faced by Love Canal activists, display that regulatory programs that protect public and environmental health are relatively new, have been hard won, and are constantly vulnerable to eradication. Indeed, these are the very programs that have most swiftly come under attack under the Trump Administration – which makes Newman’s message so relevant and timely.

These lessons are well taken, but the reader must largely connect these dots him- or herself. Regrettably, Newman does not match his book’s ambitious historical scope with an equally rigorous examination of larger political economies that helped structure the Love Canal story. This is especially dissatisfying as Newman describes the recent developments in Black Creek Village, but then does not fully articulate and emphasize the deeper structural significance of ‘history repeating itself’ in an era of environmental deregulation and pro-free market norms in U.S. society.

While an historian should not be expected to ‘do sociology’, the book’s contribution and its observations about Love Canal’s historical significance are unnecessarily limited as a result of these missed analytical opportunities. Most importantly, Newman does not adequately connect his observations with the extensive, often community-based bodies of research that examine environmental justice (EJ), environmental health, and social movements related to contamination of all kinds. Love Canal helped initiate EJ research and praxis (along with sit-ins and protests surrounding a hazardous landfill in Warren County, North Carolina); Newman even fleetingly engages with some related concepts, such as popular epidemiology and path dependence. But then he stops short of letting those canons enrich the

analytical work he can accomplish. The book suffers as a result because these perspectives would have allowed him to more fully contextualize the significance of Love Canal activism and its relationship to the development of EJ as a nationwide movement. With multiple loose threads left untied, Newman does not fully articulate the historical influences of key drivers behind the industrial contamination in Love Canal, namely: capitalist markets, dominant industrial corporations, and eventual neoliberal policies favoring environmental and other forms of deregulation. These forces combined over time to severely limit environmental protections in the U.S., in turn affecting communities like Love Canal.

As such, while Newman makes a compelling case for the important historical role of the Superfund Act and the vital role Love Canal activists played in its legislative success, Newman's book falls short in assessing the ways in which broader neoliberal ideologies about environmental regulation helped push back against Love Canal activism, even as it began. This was even more significant as the Love Canal area was remediated, resettled and reinvented and as new homes were marketed as inexpensive and safe in the re-named Black Creek Village. While Newman discusses the new settlement in the Epilogue, he does not use his data to illuminate a *key thread* linking together the historical eras he has reviewed in earlier chapters: Each era's growing concern with industrial, market-based economic development. These pre-occupations and policies only intensified in the neoliberalized years of Love Canal's re-branding and re-settlement, but these larger patterns are not adequately articulated or analyzed by Newman.

Thus, Newman does not conclude with a strong sense of the how these patterns put American communities at risk in a political-economic context where environmental regulations are demonized by U.S. politicians and, now, millions of Americans. Indeed, we do not get a strong sense of how historically at risk regulatory programs like the Superfund actually *are*. We get little sense of how *difficult* it is to engage in sustained EJ activism. We have only abstract notions of how *many* communities contend with environmental disasters; how many of them face structural barriers so significant that they never reach their goals, never know the relocation experienced by Lois Gibbs and other Love Canal residents. We do not fully explore, either, the deep symbolism of Love Canal's re-settlement, which illuminates brilliantly just how contentious and fleeting environmental and public health protections can be in a market-dominated era where an inexpensive home or well-paying job can entice people with little economic wealth to take environmental risks and create 'sites of acceptance' regarding industrialization's EJ costs.

As a result, Newman doesn't contend deeply enough with the existential threat neoliberalism poses for realizing and sustaining EJ, given that related policies tend to undermine environmental regulations, privatize natural resources, and reduce social safety nets such as healthcare. Neoliberal ideologies have posed serious threats to legislation like the Superfund Act and even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and relayed policy directives have essentially co-evolved with EJ activism since the 1980s. Newman, however, avoids this delicate territory and

instead concludes that “Love Canal stands for environmental redemption” (266). He thus misses a vital opportunity to link his sweeping historical observations to contemporary structural barriers to EJ activism.

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**Comments by Michelle Mart, Penn State Berks**

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**R**ichard Newman takes up an historical challenge both compelling and frustrating: to tell the story and larger environmental meaning of the eponymous neighborhood in upstate New York with the tragically ironic name. The task is compelling in that the land abutting one of the celebrated spots of natural beauty in the northeast came to symbolize industrialization's destruction of the environment. Yet, it is frustrating to wade into the contested historiography of this turning point of modern environmentalism.

From a personal perspective, I found myself drawn to Newman's story as it relates to questions I raise in my own work. Although I am not a scholar of Love Canal and its related legal, political, and environmental implications, I share with Newman an intense fascination with the power of evolving cultural narratives, and the extent to which such narratives can either reveal or obscure greater understanding of our impact on the natural world.

Newman's tale of Love Canal, "A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present," describes how different people viewed or used this particular place in upstate New York over time, assigning to it particular concrete and symbolic meanings. It was, for example, a place to commune with or tame the wilderness. It also provided the raw materials for industrial might. Alternately, it illustrated the ascendancy of the modern chemical world or supplied the backdrop for mid-twentieth century suburbanization and domesticity. In its best-known role in modern historiography, the Love Canal of Newman's story is at the epicenter of modern environmental activism and regulatory reform. And, since every good narrative must have a compelling ending, Newman asks, what is the conclusion of this shifting narrative of an infamous place, what is its legacy? The question is, of course, far from simple, but I found myself—reluctantly—coming up with a slightly different answer than did Newman.

Legacies only make sense in the context of the whole story. The broad chronological sweep of Newman's narrative captures the reader's attention, arguing the importance of seeing particular events in their context and complexity. Newman divides his book into three parts and, thus, three eras: colonial times up through the 1950s; the late 1970s into the early 1980s; and the 1980s to the present. In addition to the chronological delineation, Newman frames his book with a thematic one. Part I recounts the optimism of two and a half centuries when it seemed that the possibilities of development were unlimited. Newman summarizes the predominant view from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century on when

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 usable, and even disposable, commodity. (18)

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Moving rapidly through the colonial period and giving examples of the clashing visions of European-American explorers and settlers, and those of Native Americans, Newman then discusses the late nineteenth century ambitions of William Love, for whom the neighborhood would eventually get its name. In Love's scheme of a "Model City" in the Niagara environs, we see industrial and technical marvels that would create an ideal domesticated space. Although Love's vision never materialized, its utopian spirit would reappear in the twentieth century plans of Elon Huntington Hooker who placed his hopes in a different technology and built a wildly successful chemical company whose "products helped win wars, explore space, and fuel American consumerism." (54) Interestingly, in Newman's portrait, we meet an idealistic man who fully embraced his role as a progressive businessman, interested in industrial success *and* safeguarding the environment. Hooker's ambitions are embodied in his slogan "Chemagination" and illustrated in the fanciful 1950s advertisements for the miracle of modern chemistry.

The link between industrial success and the affluent lifestyle it enabled came together in suburban neighborhoods around the Hooker factories, including the Love Canal development beginning in the 1950s, "a suburban oasis within city limits." (102) Newman reminds us—at this critical juncture—that Love Canal as a landscape was malleable, shaped by the expectations and developments which people brought there, and was seen as a place to be exploited: "As a landscape, it was banal, not beautiful. It could be used, and even abused, without much worry, as long as nearby Niagara Falls flowed freely." (95)

The two and a half centuries surveyed in Part I raise many fascinating perspectives on social attitudes and economic ambitions, of the disregard for environmental impact coupled with a belief in progressive stewardship, and of high industrialization on a local scale. Yet, despite the sweep of these issues, the first third of the book almost, inevitably, becomes a prelude to—and is overwhelmed by—the second two thirds due to the powerful hold that "Love Canal" has on our imaginations. To some extent, the rise of grassroots activism, the birth of environmental justice, and the codification of regulatory reform have been reified in Love Canal as a concept, and it is hard to escape its gravitational pull. Thus, despite Newman's intention, the Love Canal of Parts II and III seems to be a very different place than the one we learn about in Part I. Newman observes that this narrative shift is obvious in the post 1970s period:

Love Canal transcended itself. No long just a toxic place, or even a powerful symbol, Love Canal became a metaphor for new modes of environmental thinking and new ways of environmental organizing. (175)

With its own internal narrative, the hundred pages of Part II discuss the high point of the political crisis over Love Canal, and the clash between residents of the area and state and federal government officials. In this section, Newman details the education of ordinary residents into activists, and in his detailed descriptions of

unfolding events stokes outrage in readers who can empathize with the powerlessness many residents felt. Newman also spends time laying out the tension between different organizations of residents, seemingly with different interests, those of homeowners and renters.

One of the strongest disagreements between residents of Love Canal and government officials was the circumstances under which people would be relocated, and who would pay. This disagreement laid bare the reluctance of government to foot the bill, as Newman described the position of state officials who continually asserted that they “need better proof before moving anyone out of Love Canal.” (112) For those people living atop—or nearly so—a confirmed toxic dump, it is hard not to find a more logical reason to support the precautionary principle in the face of such callous illogic.

In Part III, Newman argues that there are two important endings to the evolving cultural and political narrative(s) of Love Canal. One ending is the lasting legacy of environmental activism that lived on in people like Lois Gibbs who founded in 1981 the Citizen’s Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes from her new home in Virginia. Gibbs’ on-going activism was certainly important and impactful, but there are few other examples, and it seems that Newman’s reading of those examples are rosier than is mine. For example, Anne Hillis relocated to Florida where the legacy of Love Canal “stayed with Hillis” as demonstrated in her decision not to use chemicals in her garden and to “tal(k) to her neighbors about the potential hazards of chemicals and hazardous waste.” (212) I wish there was more to celebrate than Hillis’s gardening practices and her conversations with neighbors.

The second ending that Newman discusses reflects a more pessimistic appraisal of the legacy of the environmental disaster. In 1990, the Love Canal Area Revitalization Association—having received the green light of safety from a committee of state and federal officials—began selling newly built homes to re-populate the “cleaned” subdivision. The homes brought history “full circle,” recalling the idealistic plans of William Love to create “A Model Community” in the Niagara Falls neighborhood a hundred years before. (246-7) With careful attention to creating an appealing narrative suitable to the vision, the developers erased the name Love Canal with its alarming associations and dubbed the new neighborhood as the bucolic-sounding “Black Creek Village.” Gibbs and other activists launched protests to block the redevelopment plan, but they failed. Meanwhile, developers even found a way to repurpose Love Canal’s tragic past in their advertisements for new homes by pointing out that no other industrial region in upstate New York had continuing, thorough environmental monitoring to warn of any dangers that might arise. The narrative of environmental contamination and activism had given way to “the EPA’s triumphant narrative of Love Canal remediation.” (253)

So, how do we assess this contradictory legacy of Love Canal? As Newman fairly demonstrates, history is rarely consistent and—usually—contradictory. But the moral I take from the story is rather bleak. Whereas this might have been an

opportunity for a whole new approach to how we live in and treat the environment, Love Canal instead left us with a law to facilitate the cleanup of toxic sites – but more than one thousand sites sit on the list for future action – and a small minority of newly engaged and enraged activists. The Love Canal crisis also left us with a newly developed suburb with toxic levels of an acceptable risk and the broad assumption that the issue had been resolved.

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**Comments by Elizabeth D. Blum, Troy University**

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**W**e face challenging times for environmentalism. In just the first few weeks of the new Trump Administration, the president nominated a man who has been actively hostile to the EPA to be its head; removed climate change information from the White House website; authorized the completion of the Dakota Access pipeline and swept aside orders for an EIS on the area; overturned rulings protecting waterways from coal mining debris; and froze federal science grants. Aides have intimated that the destruction of the entire EPA itself may be forthcoming as well. States and other government agencies, emboldened by Trump's attack on science, have followed suit. The House of Representatives has put forward measures to sell off public lands (later withdrawn) and pushed for fewer protections on parks. Michigan announced plans to drill at one of its state parks.

As an environmental historian, I've been particularly concerned about all these issues, anxiously following the news, Twitter, and Facebook feeds to stay up to date, and attending protests in an effort to have my voice heard. In addition, my research has taken on new significance to me. It feels more important, as if I can contribute by increasing knowledge and understanding about environmental beliefs and attitudes. Yet, certainly, I understand that I must present my work as objectively as I can, showing environmental activism with all its subtleties and complexities. Otherwise, how can we learn how we got here? I hope this discussion of Richard Newman's book, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford, 2016) helps engage these important issues in a difficult time for environmentalism. As a related issue, I'm also very interested in how Newman sees his book within the established historiography. Did he intend to forge new paths – a course I see charted in its discussion of activists and gender in particular?

Published prior to the Trump electoral college victory, Newman's *Love Canal* clearly sees the events at Love Canal and especially the activists through rose-colored glasses. The book brought many of the issues surrounding environmental advocacy and the historian's craft into sharp relief for me. Let me say, first, that I have also written a book on Love Canal, entitled *Love Canal Revisited* (Kansas, 2008). As I noted in a forthcoming review in *Reviews in American History*, the beginnings of Newman's book and my own are quite similar. Using "path dependent" theory, Newman describes a "very long history of environmental protest along the Niagara Frontier" and notes that "generations of industrial dreamers laid down a history of land use that led almost inexorably to the establishment of toxic burial grounds [at Love Canal] in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (9). Although I have severe problems with the belief that anything in history is inevitable, my book, eight years before Newman, walks through the 300 years prior to Love Canal and found that the area "has long been a site of environmental use (and overuse) ... a place where human being exploit others [as well as a place of] ... the empowerment of marginalized populations" (3).

Beyond that, my work and Newman's diverge. Where I document conflict between groups, Newman's book presents a much more unified, enlightened group of activists. Newman's activists press for environmental change imbedded with critiques of capitalism and industrialization, racial injustice, and its global implications. This view distorts the complexity of historical events within the environmental movement. Part of the problem arises from Newman's loose use of terminology. He often uses "resident" and "activist" interchangeably, even when neither is correct. Note the following quotes dealing with people at Love Canal and the meaning of their activism (*italics are mine*). According to Newman, after "initially seeking evacuation, *area activists* soon found themselves engaged in a much bigger battle over the meaning of both a toxic past and the future of American environmentalism" (4). Then, "increasingly conscious of the historical forces that shaped their struggle, *Love Canal residents* began asking tough questions about their environment and its place in a world nearly overrun by industrial waste" (10). Later, a "flier noted that *Love Canal residents* desired something called environmental 'justice'" (119). And, "*Love Canal activists* were soon talking openly about environmental ethics, national hazardous waste policies, and environmental stewardship... [they argued that] environmental health was very nearly an American right" (123-4).

Language is important in this case. Obviously, not all the residents of the Love Canal area morphed into activists. Some residents openly or quietly stood against the work to remove residents from Love Canal. In addition, not all activists lived in the neighborhood. Love Canal saw an influx of non-residents as activists, notably with the Ecumenical Task Force. "Activists," as well, hardly presented monolithic views or purpose of enlightened 21<sup>st</sup> century environmentalists. The Ecumenical Task Force falls closest to Newman's description of the "activists/residents": they certainly connected the hazardous waste problems with other social justice issues as well as nationwide environmental problems. Yet they bickered with the LCHA frequently over goals, language, tactics, and methods. Divisions ran rampant through the LCHA as well: prominent leader Lois Gibbs's actions caused several groups to break away in protest. And what is an "activist"? Newman often makes it sound like the entire neighborhood actively protested, when only a few dozen led and organized. Now, certainly, more came to the occasional town hall or marched in parades, but are these the "activists" Newman discusses? Did all of them come to these same enlightened conclusions? The historical record reflects that many of residents held very socially exclusionary and even racist views. Only one resident, Lois Gibbs, continued to be active in the national environmental movement after Love Canal (Luella Kenny continued to assist the local area through the health fund). Although Gibbs has had a tremendous impact on grassroots organizing, it would be inaccurate to ascribe her views and level of commitment to the neighborhood as a whole. Most of the thousands of residents worked toward their own removal, left, and went on with their lives as much as they could.

*Love Canal's* views of the activists generally and from a gendered perspective present issues regarding connections to the established historiography. Newman

ahistorically sees these “activists” as creating “a new identity [that]... reframed the very nature of American environmentalism” (124). Prior to the late 1970s, Newman states, environmentalism focused “only on saving nature, or pristine landscapes, out there in the great non-human beyond” (11). That changed with Love Canal, “for the people in this infamous neighborhood were among the first to argue that their streets, sewers, homes, and yards comprised a threatened, and threatening, landscape” (11). Obviously, to construct this argument, Newman discards and ignores significant contributions by numerous historians detailing activism of both white and black women in urban reform beginning in the Progressive Era as well as mid-century anti-nuclear protest.

His gendered analysis of the activists, in particular, lacks a connection with previous scholarship. In one chapter, he notes that environmental activism broke with “ingrained notions of appropriate public behavior and political comportment” for neighborhood men (129). “Many Love Canal men,” Newman asserts, “had to reimagine themselves as both activists and dissidents ... [I]t may not have been the most comfortable identity to assume—skip work for a protest meeting?—but it was a necessary one” (129). In fact, union activity yielded familiarity with protest for white working class male residents of the neighborhood. Many of the prominent Love Canal women remembered their fathers and husbands joining union protests and pickets during their time at work to protest for safer conditions. The picket of the remedial construction site, one of the LCHA’s earliest protests, grew partially out of men’s familiarity with this tactic. In addition, the unions often supported the LCHA and other activists, since their goals of worker health and safety coincided. Other male activists (particularly with the Ecumenical Task Force) had deep experience with social justice issues prior to getting involved at Love Canal. They had participated in anti-war, anti-nuclear, and student protests and hardly had to “reimagine” themselves to be activists.

Similar problems arise from his discussion of the women at Love Canal. Newman notes that women at Love Canal “ironically” (133) used maternalism to promote their ideas, yet to Newman, “these maternalist conceptions of activism proved to be only a stepping stone... [later,] women embraced social movement politics with a vengeance. It is hard not to see the influence of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* percolating through Love Canal women’s evolving notions of protest. (Lois Gibbs’ autobiography begins allusively with a chapter entitled ‘The Problem at Love Canal,’ perhaps a nod to Friedan’s iconic chapter ... ‘The Problem That Has No Name’)” (133). Going along with this tenuous proto-feminist hero theme, Newman also quotes journalist David Shribman without comment or critique as saying “Love Canal women refused to give in to the stress, anxiety, and outright disappointment that often accompany activist struggles” (133).

The women active at Love Canal consciously chose, used, and manipulated maternalistic rhetoric to their advantage, but they also believed it. To call this choice of language “ironic” ignores the significant historiography of women’s activism and maternalism, as well as the words and ideas of the women themselves. Rather than

see themselves as feminists (although we might), many Love Canal women saw their activism as anti-feminist. They used their language to promote the role and value of a mother and wife to feminists who, in their view, denigrated these roles. New Right anti-feminism rather than Betty Friedan connected many female residents to their activism. Is Newman implying here either a “hierarchy” of rhetoric (feminism being more “advanced” than maternalism; or environmental justice over NIMBY) or that women who use and develop maternalist arguments as rhetoric in environmental struggles are less worthy of our attention?

History has dealt with the concept of imposing standards of heroism on past actors before, notably with slavery. In 2001, for example, Michael Johnson authored a dramatic reinterpretation of Denmark Vesey. Known by most historians as the leader of one of the largest slave rebellions in American history, Johnson instead presented him as simply one of many slaves possibly framed by whites to spread fear of violence. This new interpretation won over some pretty distinguished historians, forcing them to rethink how historians presented slavery. Winthrop Jordan noted that scholars should “stop requiring slaves to have behaved in ways that we now think would be heroic.” Philip Morgan succinctly noted that historians want to “highlight ‘freedom fighters,’ as if entitlement to human dignity depended on a readiness to engage in violent struggle. The assumption is that only through a willingness to sacrifice life could slaves prove their worthiness for emancipation” (Jon Wiener, *Historians In Trouble*, 130-31). Environmental historians should demand the same from our scholarship.

Overall, Newman’s history of Love Canal adds some important components to the story of Love Canal, including a history of Hooker Chemical prior to Love Canal. His presentation of the Love Canal crisis, however, is far less useful. Seen through rose-colored glasses and intent on proving the activists as positive heroes, the book seems to come theoretically from an earlier era of promoting consensus and minimizing conflict. His desire to transform the Love Canal story into a triumphant narrative of unified activists marching toward enlightenment about national environmental injustice cannot be supported by the evidence. It may be tempting in this age to glorify those who stand on the front lines of environmental activism, but historians should present their narratives in all their complexity or little will be learned from it.

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**Response by Richard S. Newman, Rochester Institute of Technology**

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I want to thank Michael Egan and H-Environment for the opportunity to participate in this online forum. I also want to thank each of the reviewers for their thoughtful—sometimes tough—responses to my book. They challenged me to think about Love Canal legacies in different ways, including the fraught meaning of environmental justice struggles then and now. When Michael first contacted me last Fall about this review, none of us could have known just how drastically (and fast) the environmental landscape would change. Still, those very changes have (to my eyes) reinforced the enduring importance of Love Canal activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let me begin with our charged environmental moment and the path back to Love Canal. Though Elizabeth Blum launches her critique with a nod to contemporary events, Michelle Mart and Stephanie Malin also meditate on the meaning of the present by wondering what Love Canal's legacy can be when partial neighborhood resettlement occurred there. Is this evidence of Neoliberal supremacy—or worse, the inability of Love Canal activists to change environmental discourses? Indeed, in the Trump era, with EPA facing a 31% budget cut—including the potential elimination of the Office of Environmental Justice—we all might wonder if Love Canal activism has any resonance at all?

These are important concerns but I would argue that the Love Canal story is still vital. For one thing, support for programs like Superfund—which came into being because of Love Canal protest—remains strong. In a true measure of irony, new EPA administrator Scott Pruitt has called Superfund part of the agency's "core mission," even as he slashes budgets and personnel. Yet with roughly a quarter of Americans living within a few miles of a Superfund site—conveniently mapped by National Geographic [here](#)—even Pruitt realizes that the program is essential.<sup>1</sup>

Policy is one important legacy of Love Canal protest, aggressive grassroots activism another. The Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ), an activist clearinghouse formed in Love Canal's wake, has been mobilizing for decades and is now poised to push back against the new normal. "Donald Trump's deep cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency terrify me," CHEJ founder Lois Gibbs wrote on the group's blog recently. "They will gut the agency, removing protections for American families and our children. As I travel from one polluted community to the next, women weep as they hold their children, and explain how chemicals in their air, water or land have made their families sick. Local leaders describe how their city or town won't help them, because it's a company town, and no one will hold the polluter responsible. They go on to say their state agency isn't much better. Their

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<sup>1</sup> See Pruitt's perspective on Superfund in the Tulsa World at: [http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/local/epa-chief-scott-pruitt-says-he-s-determined-to-prioritize/article\\_d6ebfe0c-df08-573f-b9e2-a62b642484c1.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/local/epa-chief-scott-pruitt-says-he-s-determined-to-prioritize/article_d6ebfe0c-df08-573f-b9e2-a62b642484c1.html).



only recourse is the federal EPA.”<sup>2</sup> As the former leader of the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA), Gibbs is not afraid to fight against the destruction of things she and others mobilized to create forty years ago.

To return to the main point, Love Canal remains relevant both because it inspired durable environmental programs (like Superfund and community right-to-know laws) and offered a potent example of grassroots organizing that others have followed through the years. To excavate an older sociological concept, Love Canal activists were a “countervailing” power that helped reframe national environmental laws and consciousness.<sup>3</sup> That we can draw on such a tradition in 2017 speaks to the historical importance of Love Canal not only as symbol but movement.

In making this case, Blum criticizes me for, among other things, writing history with rose tinted glasses. Though I disagree with much of what she says, she makes several good points, both here and in her own excellent study of Love Canal. Indeed, in highlighting the significance of Love Canal protestors—renters, homeowners, religious activists, and others—I do not want to lose sight of the internal debates and concerns (including those of race) that haunted the movement. More on this below. Nevertheless, if we don’t acknowledge the broad impact of Love Canal activism, then we cannot understand how things many Americans value today came into being in the first place.

As a scholar of American reform struggles—from abolition to Civil Rights to environmentalism—my goal is not to take sides but explain how various protest movements altered our understanding of rights and moral responsibility. How, where and why did history pivot so that previously unknown issues became mainstream concerns? How did we get to a place where, among other things, there is a national program for remediating hazardous waste and a national conversation about grassroots environmental activism? In my reading, Love Canal protest (warts and all) mattered because it was truly a change-making movement of ordinary people struggling to expand our notion of environmental rights and justice.

Interestingly, I originally intended to craft an environmental genealogy of the present at Love Canal, which (when I started in 1999) meant bringing the activist legacy back in soon after partial neighborhood resettlement had occurred. (I still vividly recall driving by empty homes that had yet to be bulldozed in one part of the subdivision). Though many former residents had recently marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Love Canal in 1998, activists struggled anew to get into the history books. Allen Mazur’s study, *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal* (1998), pushed activism to the margins by arguing that the entire saga was

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<sup>2</sup> See Gibbs’ comment at the CHEJ Blog at: <http://chej.org/2017/03/20/trumps-epa-cuts-no-one-will-protect-us/>

<sup>3</sup> Though it is an older term associated with several disciplines, sociologist Adeline Levine used “countervailing” force to characterize Love Canal activism in her path-breaking book, *Love Canal: Science, Politics, People* (Lexington Books, 1982). It remains an apt description.

overblown and media driven. A few years later, when the Bush administration delisted Love Canal from Superfund (2004) and members of the state redevelopment agency placed an historic marker near the old dump without any mention of area activists, it seemed that Love Canal protest might disappear into the past. Yet my interviews and conversations with politicians, reporters, lawyers, and environmental activists continually came back to the saliency of Love Canal activism.

In my rendering, the story would culminate in the broad achievements of Love Canal activism so that new generations of students, scholars and the public might better understand this iconic moment in environmental history. Per Blum's concerns, I did not want to write a book that made rather narrow historiographical claims; rather, I wanted to craft a story that retold the Love Canal saga in bold and broad strokes.

In this manner, the environmental pre-history of the Love Canal crisis proved to be a critical part of the story and I'm glad that both Mart and Malin's reviews appreciate that elongated perspective. Indeed, the impact of Love Canal activism is thrown into bold relief when we look at the ascension of Hooker Chemical locally and nationally. Hooker played a key role in the Chemical Century by producing an array of important products at plants stretching from the Great Lakes to the West Coast. Like other companies, it also spun a seductive narrative about chemical gold that became nearly as powerful as Niagara Falls itself. This narrative elided chemical waste. While the ads displayed a chemical world with no underside, the reality dictated the development of massive disposal regimes everywhere the company operated: in Niagara Falls (both at Love Canal and the much bigger toxic dump at Hyde Park); in Montague, Michigan; and in the Tacoma Tidelands. Significantly, each of these areas became a Superfund site, proving yet again that Love Canal protest had wide reaching effects on the American landscape.

Of course, the irony is that Love Canal's pre-history also illustrates just what companies like Hooker knew about environmental threats at the dawn of the Chemical Century. As early as the 1910s and '20s, Hooker's internal reports discussed potential chemical risks to its workers. Occasionally, Hooker made such risks public. In World War I, Hooker's founder (the redoubtable Elon Huntington Hooker) argued that his company's expertise in chlorine production illuminated the perils faced by American soldiers on the European chemical front. And yet, by midcentury, those risks had been completely buried by Hooker's PR campaigns. Thus, what we know of as the modern "risk society" took shape not simply in metropolitan science and industrial centers but in the American heartland too, where companies like Hooker Chemical pictured environmental risks associated with chemical production as minor and inconsequential when compared to the riches produced by heavy industry.<sup>4</sup> Even chemical company executives admitted

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<sup>4</sup> I'm indebted to Angela Creager's review of my book on H-Environment for encouraging me to link Love Canal to Ulrich Beck's concept of the "risk society." Her review is at: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/19397/reviews/169962/creager-newman-love-canal-toxic-history-colonial-times-present>.

that disposal and remediation operations were not major concerns in the 1950s, '60s or even '70s.

In the wake of Love Canal protest, however, environmentalism became a new watchword at many chemical companies. [Here](#), for example, is Occidental Petroleum's webpage on environmental stewardship, which discusses remediation, regulation and community relations. ("Occy-Chem" bought Hooker Chemical in 1968 and with it the Love Canal problem.) Of course, this very example returns us to Malin and Mart's concerns about the broader arc of the Love Canal story. Isn't corporate environmentalism further proof of Neoliberalism's corrosive impact on true environmental reform? Perhaps. But the concept of corporate environmental responsibility now gives citizens a baseline for dealing with toxic trouble. In Tacoma, Washington, one state environmental official recently commented that Occidental has become a more conscientious partner in area remediation efforts than it ever was before.<sup>5</sup> In a roundabout way, Love Canal helped produce that shift too.

This side of the Love Canal story is critical in an era of hydrofracking and expanded energy pipeline development. Disconcertingly, new generations of [activists have discovered](#) that a company's hydrocracking mixes may be exempt from right to know laws (on the grounds that their proprietary chemicals are a trade secret). Updating Love Canal activism to confront this problem remains an important part of grassroots environmentalism.

Which brings me, finally, to environmental justice (EJ) at and beyond Love Canal. In one way or another, each reviewer touches on this subject. Did I offer a compelling theory of environmental justice at Love Canal? Did I spend too little time on environmental justice concerns proper? Did I situate Love Canal in the relevant EJ historiography? I take these questions seriously. Together, they point to a common question facing all those who study Love Canal: Just what is its place in EJ history?

As readers of this forum know well, EJ scholarship has evolved significantly in the last decade and it is fair to say that there is still a robust debate about just what constitutes environmental justice, both as a movement and as a mode of analysis.<sup>6</sup> Where do class, race, and/or ethnicity fit on the scales of environmental justice? Are EJ's aims primarily distributive, procedural, or corrective?

As I tried to show, Love Canal was one key point on an evolving EJ grid in the 1970s and '80s. To borrow a Civil Rights term, Love Canal might be considered an early "movement center" for its mobilization of groups and unleashing of ideas whose impact was felt well beyond Niagara Falls, thus helping others to visualize the potential meaning of Environmental Justice. While few residents (renters or homeowners) discussed broad environmental concerns in the summer of 1978,

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<sup>5</sup> See this news report on the Superfund clean up at Tacoma's port:  
<http://www.thenewtribune.com/news/business/article96909337.html>.

within a relatively short time various groups of activists pushed for environmental rights (the right to clear air, water and landscapes) and laws (like Superfund). Within a year, many Love Canal residents had joined (or supported) one of several protest groups and engaged in marches, consciousness raising activities, and even acts of civil disobedience. One of the more poignant examples comes from Anne Hillis, a homeowner and activist who joined other protestors on a cold December day to block workers from entering the chemical remediation zone (where they installed a trench system to collect and filter waste). You're at risk too, she told workers, before being arrested. When they testified before Congress, activists—mostly women—urged federal politicians to think not only about their Love Canal neighborhood but all the “Love Canals” in America.

Of course, Love Canal was far from the only movement center by the early 1980s. Yet it is fair to say that different sets of Love Canal activists raised essential EJ concerns by then, including those relating to distributive justice (which focuses on the uneven distribution of toxic waste across the land), procedural justice (the idea that people had environmental rights to clean neighborhoods, schools and homes), and corrective justice (the idea that the federal government had a moral and political duty to establish a national program to deal with toxic troubles). Moreover, Love Canal's relationship to environmental justice struggles evolved. During the 1980s and 1990s, several Love Canal activists—Lois Gibbs, Luella Kenny, Pat Brown, Sister Margeen Hoffman—became lecturers and correspondents, sharing their experiences with EJ advocates across the country. Readers of this forum can take one measure of the expanding reach of Love Canal protest by looking through the entire online run of “Everyone's Backyard,” the CHEJ's environmental newsletter.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, racial discord still stands out at Love Canal. Because renters were largely African-American, and homeowners largely white, fierce debates arose over just what justice would look like at Love Canal. Would one group get tested, treated and evacuated while another group languished? While I examined these fissures, my book focused on the overarching meaning of class (both renters and homeowners could be defined as members of the working class) and gender (protest leaders among homeowners, renters, and even religious reformers were often women). Still, it is useful to ask a direct question: did Love Canal spawn environmental racism?

On this matter, I would say no, in part because cause and effect are not the same thing. While it remained a clear part of neighborhood politics race was not the key environmental factor in the siting of the toxic dump in the 1940s (the dump's suburban/rural location was), nor did it over-determine toxic peril (many homeowners had backyards abutting the dump proper). Moreover, civil rights concerns were part of a larger history of racism in Niagara Falls and Buffalo. In this way, race shadowed Love Canal activism just as assuredly as it haunted American

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<sup>7</sup> See the online edition of “Everyone's Backyard” at Tufts University:  
[http://dl.tufts.edu/catalog?f\[collection\\_id\\_sim\]\[\]=tufts:UA069.001.DO.MS001](http://dl.tufts.edu/catalog?f[collection_id_sim][]=tufts:UA069.001.DO.MS001)

environmentalism. Blum's book still offers the best treatment of race at Love Canal and her warning against seeing Love Canal protest through a lily-white lens is on the mark and well-taken. As I tried to show, not all residents were activists, not all activists were white homeowners, and the activist roots of Love Canal protest were varied (including people with union backgrounds, civil rights concerns, religious beliefs, and anti-war experience).

And yet the other side of the story is that some renters and homeowners did find ways to work together so that the broader protest movement remained effective. Lois Gibbs, perhaps the lead activist in the area, incorporated renters' concerns into her agenda meetings with federal officials and she went on to work with a wide array of grassroots activists across the country. Members of the Ecumenical Task Force also worked with renters. And renters joined marches, demonstrations, and other events, making sure that their voices were heard. In the end, renters as well as homeowners were included in state/federal evacuation programs and almost the entire area was evacuated by the early 1980s. As scholar Amy Hay puts it, despite differences, "the residents won the battle of Love Canal."<sup>8</sup>

For me, there are several lessons here. One is that environmental justice itself must be viewed through a multi-causal lens. At Love Canal, both race and class shaped area responses to toxic threats and these responses themselves were mediated through historical, cultural and social perspectives that transcended environmental concerns. Yet all groups found a way to focus on common toxic threats. Diane Sicotte finds something similar in her recent study of metro Philadelphia, where race, ethnicity and class are all potent markers of environmental inequality. As she notes, this cross-cutting perspective of environmental peril compels communities to talk through lines of division and find common solutions to toxic threats.<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that race may remain an anchor of environmental justice struggles. Still, as Dorceta Taylor's terrific book, *Toxic Communities*, reminds us, even here EJ scholars need to offer more complex understandings of the way that race relates to, and plays off, ethnicity, class and location (rural versus urban areas).<sup>10</sup>

Another lesson: the trials and tribulations associated with Love Canal activism are far from unique. In fact, they are characteristic of most protest struggles, where core supporters have clashed over tactics, strategies, leadership and personnel. The question remains, does division negate all other aspects of Love Canal protest? Was everyone who signed an antislavery petition in the 1830s (often women and children) an abolitionist? For slaveholders, that was less important than the fact that a massive petition arrived in Congress seeking slavery's end in the District of Columbia. In the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating

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<sup>8</sup>See Amy Hay's excellent essay on Love Canal activism, "Everyone's Backyard," at the Gilder Lehrman Institute's website: <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/seventies/essays/everyone%E2%80%99s-backyard-love-canal-chemical-disaster>.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Sicotte, *From Workshop to Waste Magnet: Environmental Inequality in the Philadelphia Region* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities* (NYU Press, 2014), introduction.

Committee was famously divided between hardliners and floaters and each group had a different understanding of how the organization should be run. (On a more troubling note, SNCC had a major problem addressing the concerns of movement women.) But SNCC found ways to overcome divisions and plan brilliant voter registration drives in the Deep South. Even on the leadership front one can find historic parallels: while some Love Canalers did not like Lois Gibbs' leadership, it is well to remember that SNCC activists blasted none other than Martin Luther King (whom they derisively referred to as "de Lawd" for his seemingly imperious behavior on grass roots campaigns).

The point: division is a perennial issue in protest struggles because the stakes and pressure are usually so high. What may matter more, however, is the way that protest groups surmount division to create lasting change. That certainly happened at Love Canal.

Does this make activists heroes? In closing, I would be remiss if I did not address this concern and challenge Blum's views of a seemingly separate matter: slave rebel Denmark Vesey's attempted uprising and its relationship to historical heroes. To support her critique of my book, Blum incorporates debates about Vesey's rebellion, including Michael Johnson's claim that Vesey was no rebel and thus an example of a mischaracterized historical hero. Despite her insistence, there is no consensus among historians on Johnson's thesis—and in fact many distinguished scholars dissent from Johnson's view. Doug Egerton and Robert Paquette have just published a 900-page book of documents that contradicts Johnson's thesis and portrays Vesey as a heroic rebel indeed.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond that, several scholars—particularly African Americans—have wondered about Johnson's claims that historians have created a false hero in Vesey. Arguing that Johnson's view itself is ahistorical and a willful misreading of the black revolutionary tradition, they have wondered aloud about the way that race has informed his own perspective. As scholar Bernard Powers puts it, Egerton and Paquette's book shows convincingly "not only how Vesey's actions contributed to America's Civil War but also why he continues to influence us, particularly in the South." As Celester Marie Bernier's *Character of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination* adds, a heroic tradition of black protest steeled generations of Civil Rights activists across the Atlantic world and informed generations of civil rights reform.<sup>12</sup>

Back to Love Canal and environmental activism: For Blum to simply wave off historical change makers as false heroes misses the point. Protest movements depend on people who take risks to change the status quo—what Bill McKibben,

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<sup>11</sup> See Douglas Egerton and Robert Paquette, eds., *The Denmark Vesey Affair: A Documentary History*: <http://upf.com/book.asp?id=EGERT001>

<sup>12</sup> See Bernier, *Characters of Blood*, at: [https://books.google.com/books/about/Characters\\_of\\_Blood.html?id=3oYRJ6VQVLMC](https://books.google.com/books/about/Characters_of_Blood.html?id=3oYRJ6VQVLMC)

founder of 350.org, calls “a leap of faith... that seems ludicrous.”<sup>13</sup> We’ve seen this at Flint, at Standing Rock, and at Love Canal, where groups of ordinary people took a leap of faith to try to change things. Whether successful or not, their exertions deserve a place in the history books too—not as superficial heroes but as people who tried to create a different and hopefully better world for us all.

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<sup>13</sup>See McKibben’s *Oil and Honey: The Education of Unlikely Activist* (2013), 12.

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### About the Contributors

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**Elizabeth (Scout) Blum** is a professor of history at Troy University in Alabama. Her first book, *Love Canal Revisited*, focused on the gender, race, and class implications of that environmental struggle. She is currently working on a book about messages presented to children about nature in popular culture sources.

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**Michelle Mart** is Associate Professor of History at Penn State Berks. Her research focuses on recent American culture, the environment, and foreign policy. *Pesticides, A Love Story* examined the cultural history of pesticide use in the United States from World War II to the present. Mart is currently working on a book-length study of the intersection of food, politics, and culture.

**Richard Newman** is a Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology and the former director of the Library Company of Philadelphia. He is the author and/or co-editor of several books, including *The Palgrave Environmental Reader* (with Daniel Payne) and *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. *Love Canal: A Toxic History From Colonial Times to the Present* won the 2015-16 Malott Prize for Recording Community Activism given by the Langum Charitable Trust.

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