



Book Review

Stephanie C Kane (2022) *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press

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This book is particularly timely for me, as it lands on my desk just as my hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba is experiencing its normal, yet unpredictable, spring flooding. It is early April and as in previous years, the ice has finally broken up, and a winter's worth of snowy meltwater has made its way into the streams and rivers of the upper plains of the United States and the southern Canadian prairies, flowing north through Manitoba and eventually to Hudson's Bay and the Arctic Ocean. Along the way, as Stephanie Kane (2022) describes in *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control*, countless lives have been and will be affected by this annual flow in ways that were, are, and will be unexpected and frequently unjust for those living outside areas protected by government operated flood-control infrastructure.

I reside about a hundred meters from the northern bank of the Assiniboine River, about seven kilometers from downtown Winnipeg. On the day *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control* lands in my mailbox, the river is just below its springtime flooding peak. The waters have spilled over the bank, slightly threatening a few pieces of yard furniture and a fire pit in my backyard. Like most Winnipeggers who live along the major rivers that crisscross the city, I watch each April in nervous anticipation of the rising spring waters that I know are coming my way, moving slowly toward the city from the west and south, causing the meandering brown waters of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers to reach up and over their banks.

However, most Winnipeggers are confident that the city is well protected by a series of monumental hydrologic engineering structures that ensure floodwaters are diverted around and away from the city, so that (hopefully) most of the flooding experienced by homeowners like me will threaten only patio furniture and the edges of riverside backyards. Not since a massive flood in 1950 have Winnipeggers been forced from their homes *en masse* due to an environmental disaster. Few Winnipeggers, however, give much thought to the ancient hydrogeological processes, local politics or social costs of this protection for the city. The rivers flowing through and around this mid-sized Canadian prairie city are mostly invisible, just as the ongoing structures of settler colonialism underpinning the city's foundation remain mostly unspoken and unacknowledged. Yet, these colonial structures come into view during flooding events, combining with the unpredictable floodwaters to perpetuate the genocidal violence of settler colonialism in Canada. Worldwide, the effects of environmental disasters disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples (see, e.g., Ahmed et al., 2019); a grim fact that plays out during ongoing efforts to secure Winnipeg from floods.



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Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control is at least partly about this story. Kane offers a creative and sometimes lyrical account of Winnipeg's flood-control culture; however, much of the colonial past and present remains obscured and muddled, like the waters of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, which is also much to the detriment of Indigenous peoples who exist out of sight and out of mind for most settler-descendants living in the city and its rural environs. Kane envisions an ethnography "that pulls the science-based technicalities of flood control and law into an arena of pragmatic imagination in which such questions can be asked and Indigenous theories applied" (p. 19). Yet, the author concedes that it was "happenstance" (p. 122) that brought Indigenous experiences of flooding and flood control into view late in the fieldwork. Despite rightfully locating the devastation of a massive flood in 2011 that displaced Indigenous residents of the Lake St. Martin First Nation for a decade in "a string of catastrophes that start with colonialism" (p. 137) and pointing out that flood control in Winnipeg is "built on the assumption of Indigenous sacrifice" (p. 139), Kane frames this as "a necessary given rather than an intention" (p. 125). Conversely, Métis environmental scientist Max Liboiron (2021: 36) argues that these sorts of environmental disasters are "central to, rather than a by-product of, colonialism." For years, settler colonial states, such as Canada, devalued Indigenous lands, viewing them as disposable "sinks" and "sacrifice zones" for the unwanted outputs of settler colonialism (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022: 23). Questions of intention were irrelevant when land relations were altered so fundamentally as part of a deliberate anti-Indigenous colonial strategy (Liboiron 2021: 40).

Kane is very mindful of the complex colonial relations that undergird this story; however, many details remain largely peripheral to this ethnographic account. Nevertheless, Kane is an engaging storyteller who weaves many disparate themes and ideas together in her account of flood-control culture. The mid-sized prairie city of Winnipeg, Manitoba—Kane's river city—is the nexus of a monumental annual effort to out-plan and out-engineer the forces of mother nature through a network of infrastructural flood defenses and professional hydrologists and flood forecasters. Technical know-how combines with idiosyncratic folkways that are hardly noticeable to most residents. Kane, as an ethnographer, makes the taken for granted explicit, and puzzles over localisms like "Number-Feet-James", which is described as an iconic river measure that is peculiar to Winnipeg (p. 98). Yet the characters at the heart of the story that Kane tells are often not people at all. The rivers themselves, as well as the ancient glacial forces that shaped the land of southern Manitoba into a massive "flood bowl," along with countless tiny diatoms that dwell in these waterways are, in fact, the prominent characters in Kane's imaginative story of flood control in this northern river city.

This is not a conventional ethnography, according to Kane. Instead, its focus is what Kane calls "geo-culture ... the combined logistical domains of professional and everyday life that persistently work to imagine and translate the technical into the territorial and fearful emotions into rational systems of control or influence" (p. 10). "Geo-culture" is an "invented genre of ethnographic exploration" (p. 11), and one which combines many sources of academic, technical, and lay knowledge about flood control, while also engaging "the geological imagination" (p. 11). As such, the book reflects a unique and sometimes challenging effort to bring together disparate ways of imagining and enacting flood control. Historic figures and ancient geomorphological and hydrogeological processes are brought to life, while the author weaves in the experiential wisdom of flood forecasters and laypersons alike. Fictional representations of flooding and flood control, as well as the political theatre of a press conference, provide further data to map the contours of river-city "geo-culture."

While in some ways celebrating the "geo-culture" of Winnipeg's unique flood control, past and present, *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control* also raises concerns about the future, and about those who live beyond the flood-control infrastructure that mostly saves the city from the worst harms of flooding. Middle-class settler cottage communities on the southern shore of Lake Manitoba, settler farmers near Hoop-and-Holler bend, and more distant Indigenous communities to the northeast of Lake Manitoba are treated as "sacrifice zones" for unwanted waters diverted away from the city. The few are sacrificed for the good of the many, it would seem. Yet, Indigenous suffering from flooding has a much more complicated history, woven into settler colonialism in western Canada. Indeed, Western paradigms of environmental justice may not fully account for the harms of induced flooding (Thompson et al. 2013) for Indigenous peoples who have different conceptions of, and relations to, land, water, and the environment (see, e.g., Jarratt-Snyder and Nielsen 2020).

On a personal level, I found the book a challenging but engaging read. I have never read an ethnography that was simultaneously so familiar, yet also quite unfamiliar. Many of the experts interviewed are university colleagues, well-known local experts and politicians, and even old university friends who, like me, studied physical geography at the undergraduate level some decades ago. In many ways, I felt like this was *my* story. Conversely, the many taken for granted assumptions, cultural quirks, and local idiosyncrasies animating flooding and flood protection in the city were eye-opening and, at times, amusing. Yet the dark colonial violence lurking beneath the surface of these waters is the most unsettling, if not fully explored, aspect of this story. It is hardly a fair criticism to say that a book does not "do it all." So perhaps, this book can be best seen as a wake-up call not only to the impending environmental disaster brought about by climate change, but also to the slow moving, environmental violence (Nixon 2011) of settler colonialism that exists in the background of flood-control culture in this and other river cities.

This book provides an apt starting point for those who wish to better understand these pressing issues, and perhaps even move toward the decolonization of flood control itself.

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