



Rejoinder to a Book Review

Kohm S (2023) Review of *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control*, by Stephanie C Kane. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 12(3): 127-129. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.3043>

Author Reply to Review

Stephanie C Kane

Professor Emerit, International Studies, Indiana University, United States

Throughout my career as an ethnographer, I have made a commitment to experiment, to engage in reflexivity, and to make myself vulnerable to criticism so that readers can understand the realities and contingencies of fieldwork-based knowledge production. It is telling, then, that the reviewer of my recent monograph, *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control* (2022), used the same rhetorical tactic as the one negative pre-publication reviewer of the manuscript submitted to McGill-Queen's Press. The negative reviewer of the pre-publication manuscript—someone steeped in positivistic knowledge of hydrology and Indigenous politics but understanding little to nothing of (reflexive) ethnography—wielded the written description of my most vulnerable moment in order to insist that I substantially change the focus of my introduction and language to address the concerns of Indigenous people in order for the press to publish my book.

Originally, I had good logistical, conceptual, and political reasons to sidestep the fraught terrain of Indigenous politics in my study of flood control. First, the purpose of the project was to cast engineering knowledge as *cultural knowledge* and to develop a space-based—not ethnic-based—concept of groups harmed by infrastructure as a potential political identity. Second, I would have had to go through a long and complicated process of permission to work directly with Indigenous people. Third, I did, in fact, follow whatever leads to flooding victims I had—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—but frankly they were mostly dead ends. I focused my attention on experts in engineering, law and, to a lesser extent, the media.

When I first submitted my manuscript to McGill-Queens University Press, I received an almost immediate and enthusiastic response, and a contract followed in a matter of days. But this was during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it took months for the press to secure reviewers. By that time, the Canadian government was literally digging up Indigenous bodies in schoolyards. As I understood from long discussions with my acquisition editor, the press was quite simply paranoid and uncertain about publishing anything that did not pass muster with the Indigenous reviewers they relied upon to prevent backlash to any of their manuscripts, including mine. I came to understand that there was only one way forward. So, I spent another six months or so reading all I could in the literature of mostly Canadian Indigenous scholars in relation to water and a pluralistic vision of law. I then undertook the process of rewriting my manuscript.

As it turned out, the framework of analysis undergirding my book was solid, but as a result of this deeper exploration of the literature, I added new sections to the introduction and changed the language to highlight the importance of critical Indigenous perspectives. For example, most importantly, I changed the term, “infrastructural minorities,” to “infrastructural outsiders” to

include and not mislabel Indigenous communities whose plural legal systems were contradictory with the concept of “minorities.”

The revised manuscript passed muster and I believe the book is better for it. The twists and turns of getting the work published continued. After acceptance by all the press’s committees, they turned around and insisted that—because they could not, after all, obtain the Canadian grant funds they had hoped for because the manuscript was not “Canadian enough”—I would have to find about \$5,000 to support publication, which, to my relief, my department and school provided. After publication, the press did minimal marketing. This book review is important because, a year and a half after publication, it is still the only scholarly review of record.

With this background, I turn to three points in particular in the review published in the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*:

Review text in question (p. 128 of the review—problem areas in bold listed below):

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).

Points at Issue (in order of appearance):

1. “happenstance” (p. 122)

The reviewer exploits the honest vulnerability I present in the spirit of reflexive writing to use as his point of departure for a negative distortion of my work. In a putative contrast with the quotations on pages 137 and 139, he elides all the research and writing I did to address the history of Indigenous dispossession in the arena of flood control. The excerpts below serve as evidence to the contrary:

1. Ch 1.

Section III, “The Wall through Time in a ‘Potential Anthropocene’: Making Cuts, Embodying Logic,” which starts with the quotation from Dian Million (2009: 5) in “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History” and includes a critique of settler history (pp. 23-27).

Section V. “The Winnipeg Model of Flood Control: Ready for Export? An Ethnographic Double-Take” (pp. 34-39,) which highlights the problem of a modern flood control system literally built upon a 19th century settler colonial design now operating in the context of climate change extremes.

2. Ch 5.

Part IIB. “Flood Control Chaos in Lake St. Martin”—the core of which is a poetic-analytic text based on the documentary film *Flooding Hope*, by Dr. Myrle Ballard, a natural resource scientist of this community. (pp. 122-125)

Part V. “Infrastructural Edge = Internal Frontier: An Urban Ghetto in the Wildlands” develops a space-based theory of how law and engineering created and perpetuates flood disasters in Indigenous territories, disguising their complicity by attributing destruction to natural aquatic forces. (pp. 138-141)

3. Appendix I. “Archive and Anthropocene Dialogue”

This is a fact-based presentation of Manitoban river engineering that highlights Indigenous history alongside the law and engineering maneuvers that constitutes flood history and urban development.

2. “Kane frames this as ‘a necessary given rather than an intention’” (p. 125)

This is a simple error of attribution. Claiming that I “framed” it is misleading. In this part of the book, I am undertaking an analysis of the methods deployed by engineers and lawmakers. This is the context of his misrepresentation (pp. 124-5).

“...Following Da Cunha in the above quote, these and later maps encode and enact the reconfiguration of settled nature, of rivers as entities separate from land; seemingly by default, they unequally apportion the pure havoc of this rearranged nature to Indigenous outsiders. In other words, colonial settler habitus blends passively into contemporary infrastructural decision-making as a necessary given rather than an intention.”

3. “Conversely, Métis environmental scientist Max Liboiron (2021: 36) argues...”

A more careful reader would have noticed that, throughout the book, I do draw on and credit Liboiron’s influence in my text! Examples include p. 225, n. 10; p. 232, n. 56; p. 242, n. 12; p. 260, n. 29; p. 278, n. 34.

While I appreciate the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*’s willingness to have my book reviewed, I hope that the above clarifications demonstrate that the ethnography, itself, is consistent with the values of the Journal—something that appears not to be the case from the initial review.

Reviewer’s Reply to Author’s Reply to Review

Steven Kohm
The University of Winnipeg, Canada

Thank you for the opportunity to offer a rebuttal to Stephanie C. Kane’s reply to my review (Kohm 2023) of her book, *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control* (Kane 2022). I would like to make two key points.

First, I am in no way—nor have I ever been—connected to McGill-Queen’s University Press. Thus, when I wrote my review, I had no idea that I might be employing the same “rhetorical tactic” of one of the pre-publication reviewers, nor did I have any role in the examination of the initial manuscript, the recommendations for revisions, or the press’s request that the author secure financial assistance to support publication. The author appears aggrieved by various aspects of the publication process, as well as the press’s marketing efforts, but it is not my place to defend the McGill-Queen’s University Press, and the author’s comments are immaterial to the substance of my review.

Second, I stand by the main thrusts of my initial review, and I urge the author to be mindful and tactful in considering Indigenous peoples and the long, fraught colonial history in Canada that includes cultural genocide and ecological violence. While there are many positive dimensions to *Just One Rain Away: The Ethnography of River-City Flood Control*, the book is neglectful of some important cultural and historical facts that seem to me to be essential in a thorough ethnography of flood control in Manitoba, Canada. Centering Indigenous voices and histories is not a matter of bowing to “backlash” or political correctness; it is simply acknowledging an underexplored yet central dimension of flood control culture in this place.

References

- Kane SC (2022) *Just one rain away: The ethnography of river-city flood control*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.
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