

Electronic Green Journal
Volume 1, Issue 44
Special Issue: In honor of Ryder W. Miller

**Review: I'm Afraid of That Water: A Collaborative Ethnography of a West Virginia
Water Crisis**

Edited by L.E. Lassiter, B.A. Hoey, and E. Campbell

Reviewed by Jennifer Embree
Binghamton, NY, USA

Lassiter, Luke Eric, Hoey, Brian A., & Campbell, Elizabeth (Eds.). *I'm Afraid of that Water: A Collaborative Ethnography of a West Virginia Water Crisis*. Morgantown, WV, USA: West Virginia University Press, 2020. 240pp. ISBN: 978-1-949-19937-6, paperback, US \$29.99.

In their ambitious new book entitled *I'm Afraid of That Water: A Collaborative Ethnography of a West Virginia Water Crisis*, editors Luke Eric Lassiter, Brian A. Hoey, and Elizabeth Campbell expertly weave together a diverse collection of research, stories, interviews, and oral histories of West Virginians' experiences during and after the 2014 water crisis that affected over 300,000 people and nine counties near Charleston, West Virginia. With over fifty different contributors, the book's uniquely collaborative documentation of this industrial disaster brings together diverse perspectives across seemingly disparate populations, such as academics and community activists, young working professionals and retirees, and city dwellers and rural residents, to deliver a highly collective and deeply personal account of this devastating crisis.

Utilizing a research process known as "collaborative ethnography" to begin collecting accounts of the West Virginia water crisis, the editors and authors of *I'm Afraid of That Water* endeavored to ensure that open communication and collaboration between the writers, interviewers, interviewees, and any additional participants in the project was integrated into every part of their research, writing, and editing. Their purpose for using this approach was largely to "engage locally invested consultants in a method of co-interpretation" (p. 77). Additionally, they hoped that through their collaborative

ethnography, they could collaborate with multiple stakeholders and assess the impact that this water crisis had at varying levels within the community.

The book is organized into three parts, each with an underlying theme that connects back to the collaborative ethnography framework. Part I provides an introduction to several key concepts relevant to the overall scope of the volume, including chapters that provide detailed information on the 2014 water crisis, the field of disaster research, and the collaborative ethnography process. It also includes a particularly moving chapter, written by West Virginian local Trish Hatfield, which compiles several oral interviews recounting reactions to the initial start and immediate aftermath of the water crisis, when nine counties of residents first learned that their water supply had been contaminated by MCHM, a chemical used to clean crushed coal. Part II explores the idea of place and belonging, and particularly delves into the complexities of place that surround living in highly polluted areas like Charleston, West Virginia, which is often referred to as a “chemical valley.” Part III focuses on community action and activism, including multiple chapters that discuss individual projects and responses that resulted from the water crisis.

The writers and editors of this volume are quite successful at creating a collaborative ethnography that is both engaging and heartfelt. The results of their unique research method are a thoughtfully-curated collection of refreshingly transparent, multi-layered, and complex stories that convey a variety of viewpoints, reactions, and emotions that can range from overwhelming frustration to burgeoning optimism. Throughout the book, there are multiple instances where the authors will explicitly discuss the actual collaborative processes of giving interviews, working with participants to edit material, and having group discussions about their overall feelings on how the project was developing. These instances make the book feel both authentic and approachable to a more general public in ways that several academic publications try and fail to accomplish.

However, while the personal accounts of individuals that were included in the book were representative of diverse populations in some instances (rural vs. city, academic vs. lay, young vs. old, etc.), one area that could have been greatly expanded upon is the inclusion of accounts of people of color and the economically disadvantaged during and after the water crisis. Throughout the book, the importance of issues related to inequality and race in disaster response and recovery are tangentially referred to with some frequency; however, they never seem to be truly addressed directly or represent a major focus in any particular chapter or interview, with perhaps the exception of Chapter 9, when author Gabe Schwartzmann briefly discusses the creation of his digital oral history project that expressly addresses issues of inequality.

Overall, the editors, writers, and contributors of *I'm Afraid of That Water* were successful in compiling a unique and highly compelling collection of essays that showcase a variety of perspectives and responses to the 2014 West Virginia water crisis. The care, compassion, and meticulous research that went into the creation of this work shines through on every page. This book is a recommended read for West Virginians of all backgrounds, as well as others that live in similar locales that are particularly vulnerable to disasters, man-made or natural, disaster researchers and scholars, and ethnographers.

Jennifer Embree < jembree@binghamton.edu >, Subject Librarian, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY 13902 USA

Electronic Green Journal, Special Issue 44, ISSN: 1076-7975