

High Country News

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a dark vest, is sitting on a large, dark, flat rock. She is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image. The rock is situated at the edge of a calm river, which reflects the surrounding forest and the woman. The riverbank is covered with tall, dry grass. In the background, there is a dense forest of evergreen trees, with some sunlight filtering through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect on the ground and the woman's clothing.

LAND AS REPARATIONS

Salmon return to
the Klamath River

How gay culture made
blue jeans sexy

A ride-share co-op
arrives in Denver

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HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Four salmon-blocking dams were removed from the Klamath River earlier this year. Photographer Paul Robert Wolf Wilson's father, Klamath and Modoc tribal member Bobby Wilson, points out one of the first c'yaals, or salmon, to return to Modoc Territory following dam removal. "I'm honored to be able to see this and witness this here today," Bobby Wilson said. "And I'm relieved that we'll have all these fish here for our youngsters — my grandkids and their kids after them." **Paul Robert Wolf Wilson / HCN**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$45 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.



Our purpose

I'M LOOKING AT A PHOTO of someone's house going up in flames. It's one of a number of iconic images taken during the Mountain Fire, which broke out in early November and swept through suburban neighborhoods in Ventura County, California. The image is horrific. And it is also metaphorical: As Greta Thunberg says about planet Earth, "Our house is on fire." This really should concern more people. Statistically speaking, we are all at risk. And yet our former president and now president-elect promised fossil fuel industry leaders nearly everything they wished for if they would help him get elected. It's just one of many all-but-guaranteed assaults on the land, on public health and on the most vulnerable in our communities.

Meanwhile, I've been holed up in Joshua Tree, experiencing over and over how heart-breakingly beautiful the land is, how it gives and gives. I've been drinking it in, absorbing it into every cell in my body and trying hard not to think about where natural resource policy will be headed in the hands of the new administration. I've been off the internet, beyond the range of cell towers and Wi-Fi during this time of fear and conjecture over what's coming.

A full moon illuminates the rock-studded desert. It's a scene ruled by contrast, and I hold this image in my mind next to the image of the house on fire, like a battle between dark and light. While there is no doubt that the election results will change much, there is much that will remain unchanged about *High Country News*. We will remain committed to science, to justice for all people and beings. We will remain committed to the belief that public lands should be stewarded for future generations. We will remain committed to exposing and opposing corruption. We will remain committed to civility, dignity, equality and respect.

We will not let assaults on what we value deter us. We will not be intimidated by lies and obfuscation. It's more important than ever for us to be truth-tellers — to be journalists. To make every story matter for our readers and the communities we serve.

There are still a lot of unknowns out there. But here is what I do know: *HCN* will continue defending land, water and wildlife. We will continue to underscore the existential threat of climate change. We will continue to support Indigenous sovereignty in all shapes and forms, and to work toward justice and equity for underserved and marginalized communities. We will continue to cover the changing culture of the West, and to confront elitism and extremism. And we will continue to tell the truth, over and over again, no matter what. Because that is our purpose. It's what we do.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Chona Kasinger / HCN

Meet Seattle's radical gardeners

How Black Star Farmers cultivates community.

By Natalia Mesa



Jessica Hadley

Roads and wildlife don't mix

Recent animal deaths in Yellowstone spark a broader conversation about living with wildlife.

By Kylie Mohr



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ON THE COVER

Jade Stevens rests near Lake Putt on land in California's Tahoe National Forest that is owned and managed by the 40 Acre Conservation League.
Alexis Hunley / HCN

Regrowth begins in northern New Mexico following 2022's Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire.
Sharon Stewart



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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

REPLANTING THE PRAIRIE

If you want to maximize biodiversity — now recognized as intimately connected to climate warming — you need to preserve and increase your native grasslands (“Prairie Revival,” November 2024). That’s where the insects are, and foragers after the insects pass that energy up the long food chain.

Jake Sigg

San Francisco, California

I have been a lover of prairies for years. Is there a nonprofit that could receive donations to buy swaths of land to plant prairie? Or help pay for seed? Or dig up poison hemlock? I am not a big donor, but this seems like a wonderful way to heal after this terrible election. Maybe we could create a National Prairie Organization.

Jane Martin

Whidbey Island, Washington

MORE TRANSLATIONS

I just finished the “Latino Vote 2024” issue (October) and both the Spanish and English versions of “El Voto Indeciso Latino” and “Poder Latino.” While I was stoked to see Spanish content in *HCN*, I couldn’t help but feel disappointed that this issue only offers Spanish-speakers’ translations of articles about phenomena Latinos are experiencing firsthand. Latino communities already know that mainstream

political platforms don’t reflect their needs, and we already know our families and neighbors fall on vastly different points on the political spectrum. It’s helpful to know reworking districts can create better representation for us, as it has in Yakima. But for the most part, these articles — while news to non-Hispanic readers — are not news to us.

Translating only these types of pieces robs Spanish-speakers of the opportunity to learn about critical current issues and further isolates them. To really promote bilingual journalism in the West, *HCN* should translate articles that aren’t explicitly about Latinos, too.

Kira Córdova

Littleton, Colorado

A WESTERN PARADOX

What bitter irony to read in the same *HCN* issue about the privileged miseries of a group of rebellious white ranchers who have successfully cheated the federal government (meaning every American citizen) out of a million dollars in public-lands grazing fees (“The legacy of Bunkerville,” October 2024), juxtaposed with a story about Native Americans having to pay to graze cattle on land we stole from them, not once, but twice (“Trust Issues,” October 2024).

Linda Paul

Boise, Idaho

COSTLY CUTS

Thank you for Nick Bowlin’s recent article (“The Forest Service is cutting its seasonal workforce and public lands will suffer,” Oct. 8, 2024) about the Forest Service’s devastating decision to not hire seasonal employees in 2025 (and likely 2026). I’ve worked on a trail crew on Washington’s Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest for eight years. This was my first year as a permanent seasonal employee. I recognize that my being spared from these disastrous cuts is a fluke of timing more than anything else. There are legions of employees with as much or more experience and skill as me who are not permanent, and whose deep knowledge and contributions to their programs will now be lost. Bowlin captured the scope of this crisis — and it is a crisis — admirably.

While the hiring freeze does not technically apply to fire positions, many non-fire employees obtain firefighting qualifications every year and serve in crucial support roles on fires across the country. The loss of non-fire temporary seasonals will absolutely have an impact on firefighting capacity.

As the field season winds down, the mood on my ranger district, and in districts across the country, is heavy as we try to imagine next year without the incredible colleagues and good friends whose dedication and passion form the backbone of this agency — and whose work makes it possible for millions of Americans to experience our public lands. If anything good is to come from this mess, my hope is that it will finally increase awareness of what for too long has been the largely invisible and thankless essential work of stewarding our national forests. I hope the eventual upshot

of this crisis will be increased pay, benefits and job security and improved working conditions for people like me and my colleagues and the next generation of Forest Service workers.

Claire Thompson

Peshastin, Washington

A DECENT CAMPAIGN

I absolutely loved the editor’s note in the October 2024 issue, “Democracy on high.” It was refreshing and exciting to see someone writing about the need for a planet with clean water and a habitable climate! I heartily subscribe to all of your beliefs and agree with your campaign slogans, especially: *Be kind to one another*. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?

Keep up your good work, especially with issues like October’s election coverage. I salute you.

Steve Forsythe

Tulsa, Oklahoma

COMMON VALUES

B. “Toastie” Oaster raises an important topic concerning the difficulty of communicating to both Native and non-Native audiences (“How do you describe a sacred site without describing it?” October 2024). In an understandable reluctance to describe a sacred site, first foods, ceremonies, etc., so as not to endanger the site itself, we could mistakenly think that we’re left with indescribable land. But what makes the land sacred is the *relationship* that Native people have with it, and what that relationship means to them — family, community, connection to ancestors and all things, well-being, a way of life, etc. Talking about the relationship evokes universal human values — something that both Native and non-Native people can relate to.

Amy Gulick

Clinton, Washington



REPORTAGE

Owned and operated

A driver-led rideshare co-op launches in Denver.

BY WILLIAM M. ADLER | PHOTOS BY ELI IMADALI

ONE AFTERNOON IN JUNE of 2022, Mohammed Ishag, a Sudanese immigrant who drove for Uber and Lyft, was killing time in the Denver International Airport rideshare lot, listening to a pulpy and popular audiobook called *Insta Empire*. Ishag, a

32-year-old native Arabic speaker who had been in the United States for about five years, found the story amusing and an excellent tool for learning English. He was absorbed in the adventures of the protagonist, a young American billionaire, when

a middle-aged Asian woman knocked on the window of his 2011 Toyota Highlander.

She told him that her name was Minsun Ji and that she worked for an organization in Denver called the Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership Center (RMEOC). The group was starting a driver-owned rideshare cooperative as an alternative to Uber and Lyft, which consider drivers independent contractors rather than employees. Drivers receive no benefits or labor protections and yet assume all the risks of driving. A 2022 study conducted by the nonprofit Colorado Jobs with Justice found that Denver Uber drivers make \$8.77 per hour, while Lyft drivers earn \$6.72 per hour — less than

half of the city's then-minimum wage. To scrape by, the study found, some drivers were working as many as 18 hours a day.

As Ji spoke, she handed Ishag a flier. "WHAT IF DRIVERS OWNED THE PLATFORM?" it asked. The flier closed by inviting Uber and Lyft drivers to an introductory meeting of "Drivers Co-op-Colorado."

Isaac Chinyoka waits in traffic as he drives to pick up a rider in Denver, Colorado. Chinyoka, an adjunct professor at two colleges and a scholar at the University of Denver, drives for Uber and Lyft as well as for the rideshare co-op, where he serves as director of operations.

TWO YEARS LATER, on a steamy late August morning in 2024, some 40 rideshare drivers and their supporters stood in the parking lot of a modest two-story office building on South Parker Road in far southeast Denver, celebrating the “soft launch” of The Drivers Co-op Colorado, their new driver-owned company, and their very own rideshare app, which would be going live for the first time.

Ishag, now a member of the company board, addressed his fellow drivers. He called the launch a “monumental moment.”

Getting there had required

relentless organizing and fundraising, as well as reassuring skeptical rideshare drivers, who doubted that a worker-owned co-op could challenge the Uber-Lyft duopoly, which controls virtually all of the U.S. rideshare market. It is also a software-engineering feat: Theirs is the first driver-owned rideshare app in the U.S. to offer both on-demand and pre-scheduled rides. There were also legislative hurdles, such as the law that required “transportation network companies” to pay the Colorado Public Utilities Commission an annual permit

fee of \$111,250. The co-op argued that a local business should not have to pay the same fee as Uber and Lyft, and eventually the Legislature agreed: It repealed that law and passed a new one that required the co-op to pay only \$16,000 annually.

After the rally, a dozen or so drivers gathered in a conference room inside the co-op’s offices. Most were African immigrants, who, like Ishag, came from Sudan or Morocco, Algeria, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, but there were also a couple who had been born in Colorado. They were all there for one of the first mandatory orientation sessions for new driver-members.

Minsun Ji, herself a Korean immigrant, led the orientation along with Ishag and other board members. Ji is a creative and tenacious community-labor educator and organizer in Denver, where, in 2002, she founded *El Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores*, the region’s first immigrant workers’ rights center. After an academic interlude — she earned a Ph.D. in international studies from Denver University and taught at University of Colorado-Denver — she became executive director of RMEOC in 2022 and has since transformed the nonprofit into a nationally recognized incubator of both start-up and conversion co-ops.

On this early afternoon, Ji clicked through a series of PowerPoint slides projected on a screen that covered everything from multi-year financial

projections for the co-op, to the ins and outs of democratic governance, to the \$300 equity share required to become a worker-owner. “This is your company,” co-op board member Ahmed Eloumrani, who immigrated to Colorado from Morocco, told the drivers. “It’s not like Uber, which will shut you off after a customer complaint. Here we encourage you to speak up.”

Speak up they did, mostly to complain about rideshare driving. One driver had his Uber app deactivated for no apparent reason. Another, from Castle Pines in Douglas County, said he recently drove an Uber customer to Denver International Airport for \$180, of which he pocketed only \$30, or less than 17%. Eloumrani pulled out his phone and showed a screenshot of another driver’s \$100 UberX fare, for which the driver received \$25.

The co-op inverts that equation: 80% of every fare goes to the driver, and 20% to the co-op, whose fares are generally 5% to 10% lower than Uber and Lyft’s. Nor does the co-op use dynamic, or surge, pricing; it offers a flat rate. Additionally, any end-of-year profits will be returned to the drivers as patronage shares. As Ishag told his fellow drivers, “As a co-op, we stand on the foundational principle of mutual benefit, where each driver holds a genuine stake in our company and its success.”

Ji said that fully 70% of the co-op’s members are from Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and of those, 45% to 50% are African. She told me there are over 600 Sudanese drivers for Uber in metro Denver alone, and nearly as many from Somalia and Ethiopia. “Driving is one of those jobs that a lot of immigrants can do,” she said. “Especially when they don’t speak good English. Because they don’t need to



Minsun Ji, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership Center, stands for a portrait in The Drivers Co-op Colorado offices in Denver.

communicate directly with customers too much.”

NOT LONG AFTER THE APP went live, I tried it for the first time. I was at Union Station in need of a ride home. Soon after I tapped on the app, my phone buzzed: “Your driver Isaac has arrived.” Isaac Chinyoka was waiting at the curb, wearing a wide, gap-toothed smile and a navy-blue T-shirt. “DRIVERS CO-OP COLORADO,” it read, and below it, “Drivers-Owned Ridesharing.” (The co-op has advertised itself on social media and via its drivers, who hand out business cards that display QR codes that link to the app.)

I asked about Chinyoka’s journey to Denver. He told me he grew up on a farm in rural southeastern Zimbabwe near the Mozambique border, attended college and graduate school, and eventually received a joint Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Cape Town and Yale. Coursework at Yale brought him to the U.S., and academic colleagues from Zambia invited him to Denver, where he’s lived since 2021. At 43, he teaches as an adjunct professor at two colleges, is a scholar at DU, and, until recently, drove for the established rideshare companies as well as the co-op. (He retired from driving to become the co-op’s general manager.)

“When do you sleep?” I asked. Chinyoka smiled but ignored the question. He told me he joined the co-op because it spoke to some of the fundamental questions he has addressed throughout his community-service and academic career.

“I’m interested in workers’ rights and the precarious nature of workers,” he said, “and in finding sustainable ways of supporting the poor and marginalized in communities.”

Chinyoka cited the co-op’s new partnership with Remerg, a nonprofit that connects previously incarcerated people with necessary resources, including transportation. He added that the co-op, many of whose members were once refugees, is in talks with refugee-support groups to provide rides for their clients, as well as for people living with disabilities and schoolchildren living in motels.

ONE MONTH AFTER the so-called soft launch in the parking lot, Chinyoka stood on the granite steps outside the west entrance of the Colorado State Capitol. With microphone in hand, he welcomed a cheering crowd of about 50 fellow driver-owners to the official launch of their co-op. “We are the Drivers Cooperative, Colorado proud,” they chanted.

Some held colorful hand-lettered signs that read “Fair Fares 4 Riders Higher Wages 4 Drivers,” and all wore co-op T-shirts. A few dozen supporters were there, too, some of them regular passengers. There were also some public officials who had come to offer a few words of encouragement and a handful of reporters.

Before introducing the officeholders, Chinyoka acknowledged each member of the co-op’s board. “It’s interesting to note,” he said, “that we’re all drivers; that’s where the driver-owned comes in.” He added: “The co-op empowers the drivers, because they can make decisions about their working conditions.”

That seemed like a fine distillation of the co-op’s simple but radical premise: to put its members where they belonged—in the driver’s seat. ✨

William M. Adler is a freelance writer who lives in Denver.

POEM

Spring of Whirling Omens

By Carolina Hotchandani

One week in May, we wake
each day to sirens.

Branches shaking,
snapped. We aren’t lulled

back to dreams by the wailing,
the rhythmic pelting of hail.

Take shelter, our phones tell us.
We descend to our underground

havens as the heavens seek
an axis around which to wheel.

Clouds the color of slate
steel themselves against

the other, weaponless air.
The wind makes itself a drill bit

spinning over still-green
cornfields, and I wish a religion

would whirl through my brain—
raze my sense that we deserve

the skies turning on us.
Let me find mercy in this scene:

the gods coveting a passageway
from sky to ground—

a funnel-shaped tunnel to pull us
through to another world.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Carolina Hotchandani read her poem at hcn.org/whirling-omens



REPORTAGE

Anatomy of a border town

Why can't Farmington shake its reputation as a 'poster child' for anti-Indigenous violence?

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER

Note: This story includes details about lethal hate crimes.

OIL. THEN SETTLERS. Then violence. Then protests, tensions and more violence, in a cycle of conquest and dispossession. "Those are structural issues that are baked into the psyche of Farmington," said Melanie K. Yazzie (Diné), assistant professor of American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota. Yazzie co-authored *Red Nation Rising: From Bordertown Violence to Native Liberation*, which examines anti-Indigenous violence in towns abutting reservations — places like Gallup, Albuquerque and Farmington, where Natives buy groceries and building supplies, work, go dancing, or just hang out. "Border towns are places that really help us to see how settler order operates," she said.

Farmington, New Mexico, a town of 46,000 about 30 miles from the Shiprock community on the Navajo Nation's eastern border, is an oil and gas town with a

reputation for male settler violence. For decades, non-Indigenous teens and young men in the Navajo Nation's border towns have beaten and harassed Diné people — usually those living on the streets or intoxicated — in a cruel coming-of-age game known as "Indian rolling." Some non-Natives claim that it's a thing of the past, but Native residents say it remains a serious problem.

In 1974, one such "game" unraveled into triple homicide, when three white Farmington teens tortured three Diné men in a canyon outside a wealthy neighborhood. They took Benjamin Benally, John Harvey and David Ignacio into Chokecherry Canyon, up a four-wheel trail behind churches and expensive houses overlooking the city. They put firecrackers in the men's orifices and beat their heads with rocks in what became known as the Chokecherry murders. Afterward, the grieving Diné community protested in Farmington for seven successive Saturdays, with support from leaders of the American

Indian Movement. Eventually, Farmington settlers had enough. The police attacked protesters, teargassing them and arresting 30 people.

Some non-Natives, including the current mayor, say Farmington is not a violent place. But longtime Diné community members and human rights activists say improvements have been modest, and underlying issues remain unaddressed.

FIFTY YEARS AFTER the Chokecherry murders, in September 2024, about 200 people marched through Farmington again. Representatives of the Diné community, the American Indian Movement and non-Native supporters made their way up Broadway and down Main Street, downtown's two arteries, as the pavement radiated desert heat through the soles of their sneakers and moccasins. "Farmington needs to be reminded of its history," said Chili Yazzie (Diné), former Shiprock Chapter leader and longtime community activist. But he said the demonstration's primary goal was to bolster healing, especially for the victims' families.

Chili Yazzie, who is not directly related to Melanie Yazzie, also marched in 2006, after a non-Native Farmington cop killed Clint John, a Diné man, in a Walmart parking lot, shooting him three times in the chest, then once in the head. "As far as we're concerned, the white police officer murdered this young man," Yazzie said. After a reportedly all non-Native jury acquitted the officer, the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission was formed. Yazzie, who was chairman for four years, visited 13 border towns around the reservation. "Farmington is the poster child of racial violence," he told *HCN*. "This is the hotbed."

That same summer, three young white men in a truck picked up a Diné man, William Blackie. They asked him to buy them beer but took him outside of town instead and brutalized him alongside the road, yelling racial slurs before fleeing. Blackie, bleeding from the head, called 911 and begged the cops not to shoot him. He survived.

In July 2014, a few hours south of Farmington, "Indian rolling" in Albuquerque left two dead. "Anti-Indianism in New Mexico has a particular flavor," said Melanie Yazzie. In 1880, an intoxicated Farmington settler shot a Diné man in the street for target practice.

And in 1978, Chili Yazzie picked up a hitchhiker between Shiprock and Farmington, a white boy wearing a Clint Eastwood-style slouchy hat and poncho. When Yazzie pulled over so the hitchhiker could relieve himself, the boy shot him in the right arm, then in the side. He was later sentenced to jail time. Yazzie fled, hitchhiking to the hospital, where his arm was later amputated.

THIS SEPTEMBER'S MARCH was different from the 1974 protests: The city sponsored it, providing bottled water for participants. The police blocked off the streets with patrol cars, but kept their presence discreet. Farmington Mayor Nate Duckett said he gave them no special instructions to do so. The demonstration culminated at the Totah Theater in downtown Farmington — *Tóta'*, the Diné name for the Farmington area, means "in between water" — where community leaders discussed the racial climate, past and present. The mayor declined an invitation to speak. "I had already had prior engagements that weekend and was out of town, so I was not able to attend," Duckett told *HCN* in a phone interview. When asked what those prior engagements were, he said, "I don't think what I do out of town is any of your business, sir." He wouldn't say whether his trip was official or personal: "It was whatever it was. But I already had things that were planned out of town, so I was not able to attend. What were *you* doing this weekend?"

Instead, he sent a statement to be read, in which he stressed how far Farmington had come since the '70s. "As much as we remember that painful past," it read, "we must also recognize the journey this community has made since then. Together, we work to heal, to grow and to overcome."

John Redhouse, a longtime Diné activist who grew up in Farmington and participated in the 1974 marches, spoke after the

mayor's statement. "White people say that there's no more racism, there's no more genocide," Redhouse said. "That's not true. They've never been on the receiving end of racism and hate crimes. We're the only ones that have standing and truth to make that statement."

Melanie Yazzie agreed, calling the statement "total garbage." She said economics and gender are among the factors contributing to anti-Indigenous border-town violence. Farmington is an "epicenter of resource extraction," or, as Duckett put it in an interview with *Native America Calling* earlier this year, a town "built on the backs of oil and gas." Despite the extraction of Native wealth, Native people have historically held mostly low-paying jobs, and, until recently, had little or no presence in city government. Nevertheless, Navajo Nation residents spend 70 cents of each dollar they have in border towns like Farmington, which is also a hub for other Indigenous communities, including the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and the Jicarilla Apache Nation. "There are such high populations of Native people, and we are seen as a threat. And then we are treated as such by police," said Melanie Yazzie. When uniformed officers abuse Natives, she said, vigilantes, militias and gangs of settler teens follow — often as a rite of passage. She said it's no coincidence that Chokecherry Canyon, site of the 1974 killings, is up a trail where male settlers express their masculinity through off-roading.

"If one of the primary expressions of settler masculinity is to uphold settler order, and if settler order is about eliminating Indigenous people so as to claim final jurisdiction to the land," she explained, "then that helps to understand why these things happen."

Most non-Natives aren't committing hate crimes. "Racism is perpetrated by a small pocket of the community," said Chili

"Farmington needs to be reminded of its history."

Diné community members march through Farmington, New Mexico, following the murders of three men in 1974.
Bob Fitch photography archive, Stanford University Libraries

Yazzie, “while the majority of the white community may just be immersed in white privilege, whether they realize it or not.” He noted the good-hearted white residents who are friends, like the First Presbyterian Church leaders who helped organize the September march.

James Klotz, pastor of First Presbyterian, said he’s long been haunted by the question of the church’s stance on racial issues. Klotz helped organize the march after talking with Diné congregational members and the victims’ descendants. In a church newsletter, quoting the Presbyterian Church’s statement of faith,

According to Chili Yazzie, former Shiprock Chapter leader for the Navajo Nation, the march this September was a reminder of Farmington’s history while offering a sense of healing for Diné community members and families of the victims.
Curtis Ray Benally

he wrote, “I was gratified and humbled to see that, as far as First Presbyterian Church goes, we make our stand on the side ‘to hear the voices of peoples long silenced and to work for justice, freedom, and peace.’”

Duckett said racism exists in every community. He believes the solution is for people to treat each other with civility. A 2005 report about Farmington by the New Mexico Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared that “the climate of tolerance and respect between the two cultures is a marked improvement from the conditions the Committee observed 30 years ago in 1974.”

But activists say it isn’t enough: They want a city monument commemorating the Chokecherry murder victims. Duckett told HCN that he’s open to considering a “positive” monument “that focuses on how we work together going forward.” He said he hasn’t seen the proposed plans yet. “There’s too

much divisiveness in the world.”

Melanie Yazzie argues that the problem runs deeper than individual animosity: “It has to do with the very foundation of settler colonialism.”

Racism, Chili Yazzie added, is an offshoot of the global problem of white supremacy, which he never expects to see solved. But things can still improve. “White privilege is very prominent in Farmington,” he said. “For there to be healing, that needs to be addressed.” ☼

If you’re a Native in the West who has experienced racism in a reservation border town, we want to hear from you. Email your story to b.toastie@hcn.org.

B. “Toastie” Oaster (they/them) is an award-winning journalist and staff writer for High Country News who writes from the Pacific Northwest.



REPORTAGE

Get to know the Pacific brant

Technological advances are transforming scientists' knowledge of North America's favorite goose.

BY SARAH TRENT
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ALEX BOERSMA

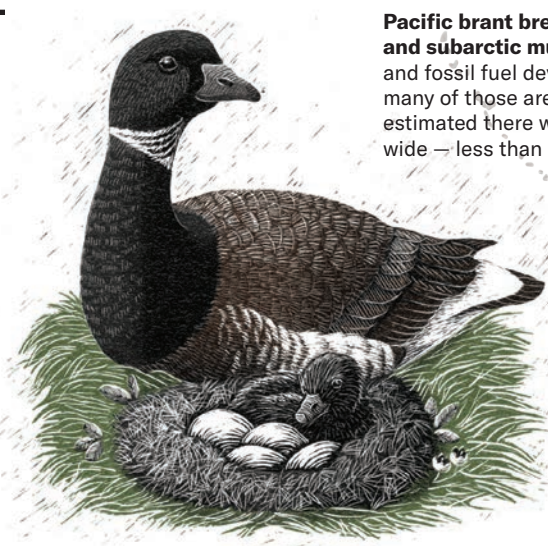
EVERY YEAR AROUND November, flocks of one of North America's tiniest geese leave Alaska's Izembek Lagoon, launching an epic migration up to 3,000 miles long. In flights that can last 60 hours, Pacific brant head for eelgrass tidelands that stretch from British Columbia to Baja.

Many humans along the way consider these distinctive birds — black, with mottled flanks and a necklace of twisting white stripes — North America's "best goose." Uncommon and beautiful, they're beloved by birders. Subsistence and recreational hunters prize them, too: They're particularly delicious.

But much of their habitat is degraded, and their size and habits make them harder to study than other geese. As technology progresses, however — from tinier trackers to more powerful computing tools — researchers are learning more about what this species needs to survive and thrive. 🌱

Sarah Trent is a freelance journalist based in Vancouver, Washington. @sftrent

Alex Boersma is a Canadian scientific illustrator living in Chicago.



Pacific brant breed along coastal Arctic and subarctic mudflats, but climate change and fossil fuel development are shrinking many of those areas. In 2023, U.S. officials estimated there were 108,000 brant West-wide — less than half their historic numbers.

Izembek Lagoon

Brant migrate in swarms, instead of Vs or lines, and behave similarly on land, moving together in tight knots.

- Important breeding colonies
- Fall staging area
- Major wintering areas

Waterfowl population estimates are often based on banding and harvest data, but because nearly every Pacific brant spends autumn at Izembek, they're uniquely possible to count. Since the '70s, scientists have done this from the air, but low flights frequently disturb birds, and manual counts are hard to get right. In 2017, USGS scientists piloted a new, safer and more precise method: They captured images from high-flying aircraft, then trained AI to count birds.

Brant weigh about 3 pounds, making them closer in stature to mallards than Canada geese, which can reach 20 pounds.



Some populations face more threats than others, and genetic research is helping biologists target protections. For example, birds from multiple breeding sites winter in Washington. Most are black brant, many of which breed in Alaska, where a few colonies are actually growing. A rarer group, called gray-bellieds, nests at much higher latitudes in Canada. Recognizing subpopulations has enabled Washington authorities to restrict hunting in years when just one group's numbers are low.

Researchers once tracked brant migrations by telegram, as Arctic scientists notified southerly colleagues when flocks left Izembek. More recent bird-mounted tracking tools were long limited by battery lifespan and weight. And brant present an added challenge: scientists use tracking collars on other geese, but brants wearing them are often socially ostracized. So researchers have developed other methods, such as implanted trackers and devices worn on a backpack-like harness. Some even use tiny solar panels, which allow for lighter, longer-lasting batteries.

These birds depend almost entirely on eelgrass, which development, diminished water quality and rising sea levels has degraded coast-wide.



Brant must eat enough eelgrass each winter to fuel their return flight to the Arctic and provide the stored energy they need to lay eggs.

Is your pension fund liquidating Oregon's forests?

Lax state regulations create a timber bonanza for institutional investors.

BY DANIEL O'NEIL

THIS STEEP SLOPE in Oregon's Coast Range is littered with ruddy dead branches and freshly cut stumps, but at least it offers sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. Until recently, the view was blocked by 65-year-old spruce, hemlock and cedar trees. But last summer, the landowner liquidated them, felling six city blocks of mature forest and its biologically diverse understory. State law requires the land to be replanted, but in order to maximize profits, the owner will likely clear-cut it again in 30 or 40 years — well before a mature forest is re-established.

This parcel isn't owned by an individual or a conventional timber company; a pension fund, the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America, acquired it a decade ago, recognizing the relatively low risks and high returns of investing in timber. Today the land is managed by the pension fund's subsidiary, Nuveen, a timber investment management organization, or TIMO. Altogether, this pension fund owns about 156,000 acres of forest in Oregon's Northern Coast Range. (Nuveen did not respond to requests for comment.)

Oregon is the nation's top producer of softwood lumber and plywood, a fact not lost on institutional investors, such as pension funds, mutual funds and insurance companies. TIMOs and similar entities now manage or own about two-thirds of western Oregon's

private forestland, a total of 2.8 million acres. In the Coast Range, where institutional investors control 80% of private forest land, fresh and recovering clear-cuts define the landscape.

Yesterday's timber companies clear-cut forests, too, but their long-term ownership of the land motivated them to allow longer recovery periods and maintain some accountability to local communities. In contrast, today's institutional investors regard forests merely as assets, cutting and trading them in pursuit of the greatest — and fastest — return. Thanks to Oregon's tax loopholes and lax forestry regulations, its forests are especially vulnerable to this kind of exploitation.

"As they say, stumps don't lie, and neither do aerial photos," said Chuck Willer, executive director of the Coast Range Association, a conservation nonprofit. "You've got this lineup of the stars here: a highly productive area that grows the best timber in the country, owned by a few dominant players, in a state that is deferential to the industry."

IN THE 1990S, CHANGES to the federal tax code offered timber companies an incentive to either sell their land to institutional investors, which would then manage it through a TIMO, or else form a real estate investment trust (REIT) that would own and manage the timberland on behalf of investors. Because neither TIMOs nor REITs pay corporate income tax, a wave of U.S. timber companies took advantage of the opportunity to restructure.

Timber companies in Oregon, which already enjoyed relatively low property taxes, lobbied the state Legislature to dramatically reduce the harvest tax, a state tax on cut logs that helped support timber-rich counties. A *ProPublica* investigation in 2020 estimated that the loss of harvest tax revenue in Oregon has cost local governments \$3 billion over the last three decades, even as it enabled REITs and TIMOs to offer higher dividends to their investors.

Timber investors are also buoyed by Oregon's outdated Forest Practices Act, which was groundbreaking when it passed in 1971 but has since been outpaced by forest protections in Washington and, especially, California. And Oregon state law compensates landowners for certain costs they

may incur from amendments to the Forest Practices Act — a major reason for Oregon's Board of Forestry to avoid making significant changes.

"This is the capital structure we have now, and it goes back to the thing that has haunted forestry in the United States for just about forever — that for all the benefits forests provide, only a few of them are compensated monetarily," said Norm Johnson, emeritus professor at Oregon State University's College of Forestry. "And when we combine that with a state that allows a landowner a lot of freedom, well, this is the outcome."

The result is a forest that is becoming less diverse and less productive. And this worries Johnson: "Those forests are being harvested when they're only half the volume they could hold, so we're losing a lot of the ecological and social benefits, let alone the carbon storage, and that's a real problem," he said. "If we really want those benefits, are we willing to pay for them?"

RELATIVELY FEW REITs and hardly any TIMOs operate in California, where bitter political battles over logging in the 1980s and '90s led to tougher state oversight of timber harvests on private land, deflating the potential profits for investors.

"If you want environmentally sustainable forest management in a way that respects forests as more than just a crop, you can try to mandate those values that are non-timber-related," said Erin Kelly, professor of forest policy and administration at Cal Poly Humboldt. "California has done this through state laws, bringing in other agencies and giving them oversight of private timber operations. When you get somebody from Fish and Wildlife out on that timber harvest, you're looking at the forest differently. It changes how you're going to harvest."

Oregon officials have taken a very different approach to the timber industry. Although its Legislature is controlled by Democrats, Oregon is known for its timber-friendly politics, embodied by *The Oregon Pioneer*, a gilded statue of a logger that stands atop the state Capitol. The industry maintains its power by making generous donations to candidates from both parties.

Oregon's citizens, however, have a strong tradition of effecting change through ballot measures. An initiative proposed for the



2020 ballot sought to substantially expand stream protections on private timberland. When polls indicated that it would pass, then-Gov. Kate Brown, D, persuaded the timber industry — represented mainly by REITs and TIMOs — to work with select conservation leaders on a habitat conservation plan that, when implemented, would significantly expand Oregon’s stream protections. Once the agreement was in place, the proposed initiative lost momentum.

“The TIMOs and REITs are very much in risk management, and they are responsive where it looks like something worse than increased state regulation might happen,” said Johnson. “The industry was very worried about the wording of that citizens’ initiative and what it would really mean, and because there was something risky on the horizon, they wanted to respond.”

Johnson considers the forthcoming habitat conservation plan the first major advance in Oregon’s forestry rules in 30 years. “And

*“For all the benefits
forests provide,
only a few of them
are compensated
monetarily.”*

Clear-cuts like this one near Cannon Beach have become a major feature of Oregon’s Coast Range, and of investors’ portfolios.
Daniel O’Neil

then you look at how it happened — that’s a model for the future, one of the models. We need to recognize that big environmental and social gain and think about how we can push the ball forward.”

While it’s unlikely that Oregon will ever adopt California-style forest regulations, Johnson believes that future ballot measures, or even the threat of them, could achieve meaningful change. Ultimately, it may be up to Oregon’s citizens — and the millions of pension holders and insurance policyholders who unknowingly support the state’s practices — to demand that Oregon start valuing healthy ecosystems over the portfolios of institutional investors. 🌞

Daniel O’Neil is a freelance journalist who reports on forestry and other environmental issues in Oregon and Washington through words and photos. He lives on the north Oregon coast.



REPORTAGE

The return

Salmon are reclaiming the waterways above the recently removed Klamath River dams.

BY JULIET GRABLE | PHOTOS BY
PAUL ROBERT WOLF WILSON



A fall-run chinook salmon uses willows and tree cover for protection as it heads upstream to spawn. This area, like most of the Klamath River Basin, was blocked by dams until earlier this year.

THREE FISH BIOLOGISTS were searching the shallows for shadows.

On a chilly, late-October morning, this team, led by Mark Hereford of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, walked up a tributary of the Klamath River near the Oregon-California border. They were looking for fall chinook salmon that had returned from the ocean to spawn.

The men's boots splashed softly as they worked their way through knee-high water. Frost had turned golden streamside grasses silver, and low clouds shrouded distant conifers, but already the sun felt warm, promising a crisp, sunny day.

In the creek, the dark, undulating forms of chinook were barely distinct from the rocks below, and they tended to hide under logs and hug streambanks. But before long, the biologists spotted one after another.

At one riffle, several fish crowded side by side, facing upstream. One of the biologists stepped forward, startling a small male. With a flash of its mottled silvery-green side, the salmon darted downstream, breathtakingly quick. The biologists all started talking at once:

"There's three right here, plus there's one, two, three, four above that."

"That's a lot of fish!"

"Holy smokes," Hereford called from the creek's south bank, laughing in amazement.

This was no ordinary spawning survey. Earlier this year, at the behest of tribal nations, state and local governments, the power company PacifiCorp and others, the Klamath River Renewal Corp. oversaw the removal of four hydroelectric dams from the mainstem of the Klamath River. The dams, which either lacked or had inadequate fish ladders, blocked salmon from hundreds of miles of upstream habitat, including this creek. Less than a year ago, this spot was submerged beneath a reservoir.

The California Oregon Power Company, which later became PacifiCorp, began building the dams 113 years ago. Salmon runs plummeted. Coho were listed as federally threatened. Scientists had expected salmon to return, but the appearance of so many so soon — several hundred above the dam sites by late October — has filled many people, including seasoned biologists, with wonder and optimism.



The tribes with close relationships to the river — including the Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Shasta and Klamath — were among the strongest advocates for dam removal, along with fishermen and conservationists. Now, many of those advocates are working to restore streams throughout the watershed.

What constitutes a healthy salmon population depends on who you ask, said Barry McCovey (Yurok), senior fisheries biologist for the Yurok Tribe. “For tribal people, success has to do with our ability to be Indigenous people and practice the way of life that we’ve done since the beginning of time. So, are we able to catch enough fish to feed our elders? That’s an important one. Are we able to have enough fish in the river so that we can teach our children to fish?”

It will likely be many years before enough salmon repopulate the Klamath’s upper reaches to support widespread fishing.

Meanwhile, spawning surveys are just one part of a collaborative, basin-wide effort among tribes, agencies and conservation organizations to monitor salmon as they explore newly opened habitat. What scientists and managers learn will also inform restoration work focused on improving conditions for returning fish.

Back at the creek, Hereford spotted something that would’ve been common just over a century ago: the carcass of a female chinook in the grass a short distance from the water. He and his colleagues planned to measure the fish and take tissue samples, but first, they paused to admire her. The fish, about as long as Hereford’s arm, had likely dug her gravel nest, or redd, in the creek nearby and laid her eggs there; salmon die after spawning. Her silvery scales had dulled, and her flesh had begun to slough off. She bore a circular scar where a lamprey had fed,

and something, perhaps a river otter, had bitten a chunk out of one side. The marks were a reminder that these fish bear more than their progeny; they also bring the gift of nutrients to this landscape from the ocean, over 200 miles away.

By midday, the biologists had counted nearly 100 live fish near the mouth of the creek, along with many redds — a glimpse, perhaps, of an even more abundant future yet to come. ☀

Juliet Grable lives in southern Oregon. She writes frequently about climate change, wild-life, and forest and watershed restoration.

Paul Robert Wolf Wilson is a Klamath and Modokni storyteller from the headwaters of the Klamath. He works at the confluence of peoples and place, centering energy, foods and rivers in the West.



*“Are we able to have
enough fish in the river
so that we can teach our
children to fish?”*

Facing: Experts from the Karuk Tribe, CalTrout, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and NOAA Fisheries capture and tag Klamath River salmon to follow their upstream journey.

Left: Salmon swim up a small creek above where a dam once stood.

Below: The return of salmon restores an integral part of river-based communities — both human and ecological. Vegetation restoration has centered native plants and streamside resiliency.



FACTS & FIGURES

A year of wacky weather

Climate change heats things up across the West.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

DATA VISUALIZATION BY JENNIFER DI-MAJO

WATER YEAR 2024, which ended Sept. 30, was especially dry in Roswell, a southern New Mexico town notorious for an alleged UFO crash landing in 1947. The community received just 63% of its normal precipitation, with about half of it falling in a single July storm. The dearth of moisture, combined with unusually hot summer temperatures, sent the region into severe drought.

And then, *après ça, le déluge*: On Oct. 19, a series of storms hammered Roswell with as much as 4 inches of rain in a single hour. By day's end, 5.78 inches had fallen, an all-time record. Water rushed through town, washing away cars and submerging buildings. Two people died and hundreds needed rescuing. In many ways, this was a microcosm of yet another whiplash-inducing Western weather year.

In early October, for example, when Wyoming normally sees its first snow, ranchers were forced to truck thousands of cattle to safety as a fast-moving wildfire raged through the tinder-dry Bighorn, Shoshone and Bridger-Teton national forests. Even as the Southwest's high country was aglow with fall's brilliant yellow aspens, the lowlands sweated through broiling July-style temperatures.

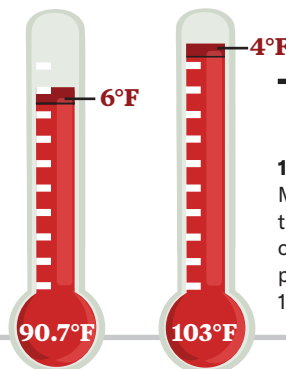
Instead of the scent of piñon wafting from northern New Mexico woodstoves, the air smelled of yet more freshly cut hay as the growing and irrigating season dragged on and on.

Last winter was scarily dry in some areas, while elsewhere enough moisture fell to begin healing the wounds inflicted by 20 years of mega-drought. And nearly every corner of the West experienced a warmer-than-normal summer, with Southern California, Las Vegas and Phoenix suffering through heat waves and triple-digit temperatures well into October.

Weather is not climate, and, taken in isolation, the events of the last 12 months might not be extraordinary. But when considered together, against the backdrop of extreme weather across the globe — which experienced its hottest summer on record for the second consecutive year — 2024 provides yet another signal that human-caused planetary heating has come home to roost.

The climate is likely to grow still warmer, and the weather even wackier. Or, as climate scientists put it in the research journal *BioScience* in October: "We are stepping into a critical and unpredictable new phase of the climate crisis."

90.7°F
Average maximum temperature in Eugene, Oregon, in July 2024, more than **6 degrees higher** than the 1990-2020 normal.



103°F
Maximum temperature in Salem, Oregon, on July 5, breaking the previous record set in 1960 by **4 degrees**.



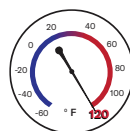
POWER OUTAGE

32,000

Approximate number of people left without power in Northern California in mid-October after high wildfire hazard forced Pacific Gas & Electric to shut down its lines.

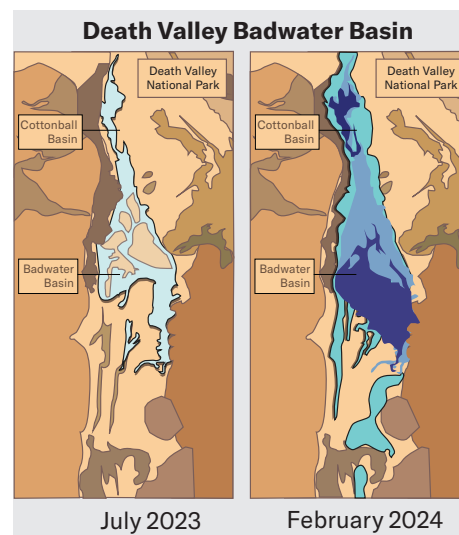
1.6 INCHES

Amount of rain that fell in Death Valley, California, in February 2024, more than **three times the normal** monthly amount. It caused flash flooding and enabled kayakers to frolic in what is usually a dry lakebed.



36 DAYS

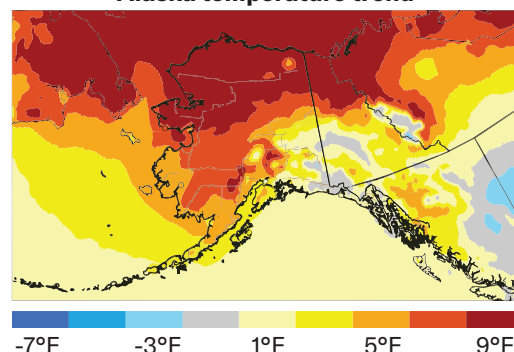
Number of days this year that Death Valley's temperature reached **120 degrees** Fahrenheit or higher.



Alaska temperature trend

+8.3°F

Degrees the average October temperature has increased in the past 50 years (1974-2023).



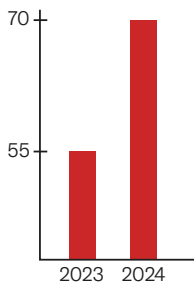
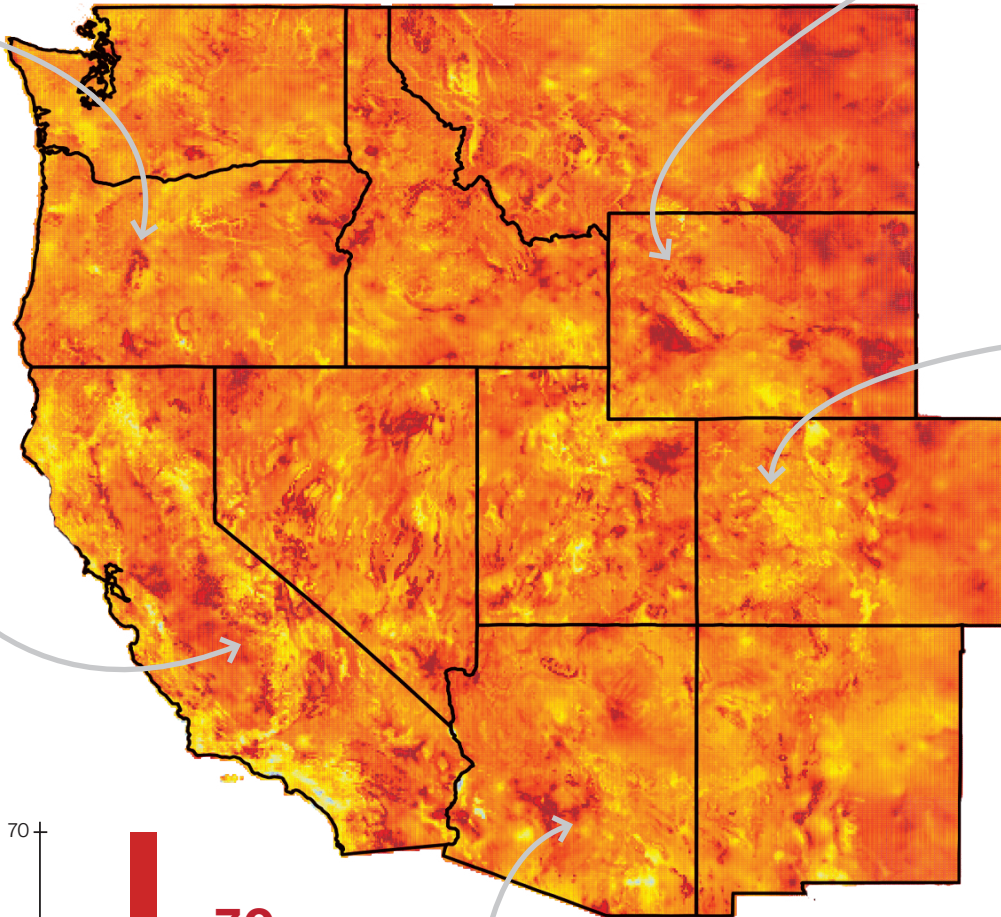
2000

2005

2010

Temperature variance from average

Nov. 7, 2023, to Nov. 6, 2024



70
Number of days this year, as of Oct. 1, when the maximum temperature in Phoenix reached **110 degrees Fahrenheit** or higher. The previous record was 55 days, set in 2023. Phoenix also shattered the previous record for the latest date of 110 degrees or higher, reaching 110 on Oct. 7.



339

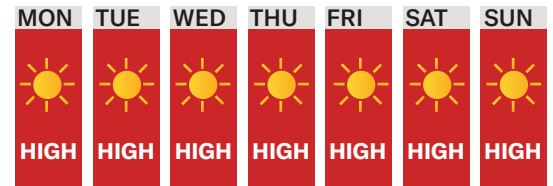
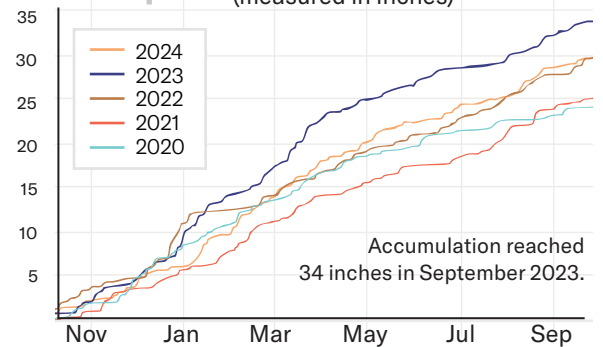
Number of confirmed **heat-related deaths** in Maricopa County, Arizona, this year as of early October. Another 336 fatalities were under investigation.



185,000 ACRES

Combined extent of the Pack Trail and Elk fires in western and northern Wyoming as of Oct. 21, when Pack Trail was 62% contained and Elk only 48%. The blazes broke out in September, blanketing the region with smoke for weeks and forcing ranchers to evacuate along with thousands of cows.

Precipitation accumulation in Upper Colorado River region (measured in inches)



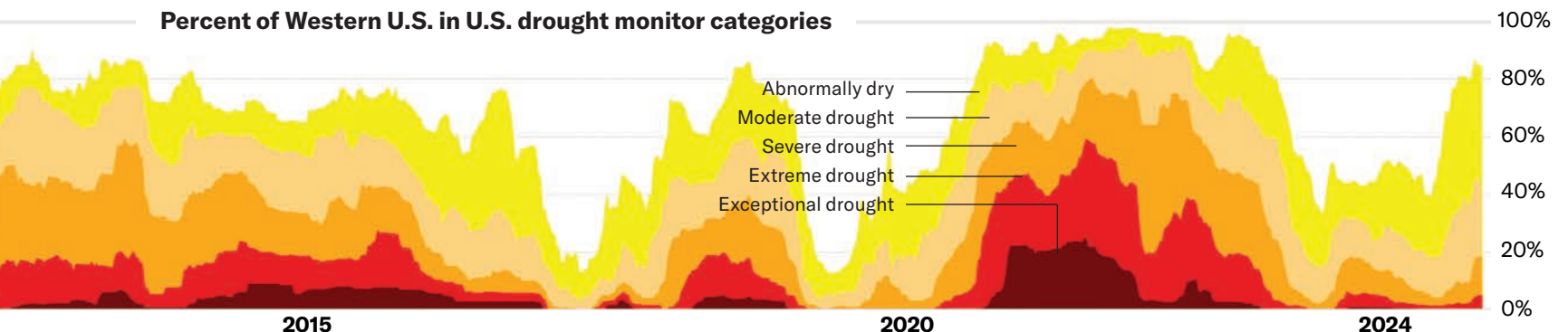
EXTREME HEAT, RECORDS BREAKING

2,218

Number of daily high temperature records tied or broken in the West in a single month, between Sept. 20 and Oct. 20, 2024.

SOURCES: National Weather Service, National Interagency Fire Center, National Centers for Environmental Information, Southern Nevada Health Services, Maricopa County, *BioScience*, Western Regional Climate Center.

Percent of Western U.S. in U.S. drought monitor categories





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High
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"I have liked the way the News has evolved over these many years, becoming even more needed during these crazy times!"

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Jeff Sullivan

DEAR FRIENDS

Finding common ground in divisive times

By the time you read this, a month will have passed since the 2024 election. We all watched as the electoral maps slowly filled up with red across the West, while blue flowed down the coast and pooled in Colorado and New Mexico. Donald Trump was declared the winner of the presidential race; the long-predicted “red wave” had finally arrived.

But Westerners understand that the red-and-blue splotches mask a much more nuanced human reality. Smart, passionate people from a wide range of backgrounds are working tirelessly to create a more sustainable and just future for this part of the country. They’re the kind of people we often feature in the pages of *High Country News*, and they — you — are the ones who read it.

That doesn’t mean that we all agree about the issues. What it does mean is that we’re willing to try to see this place through the eyes of people who aren’t exactly like us. We’re committed to treating our fellow Westerners with grace, understanding that we are all imperfect, anxious and scarred by life’s inevitable insults. We recognize that this thing we call the West is still a work in progress, and that it always will be.

That’s why *High Country News* produces reporting and analysis that not only informs and inspires, but also challenges our assumptions and stereotypes. It’s why we host gatherings around the West that bring together people from all walks of life to wrestle with tough issues and find shared interests and common ground. And it’s why we’re redoubling our efforts to draw more people into the critical conversations about the future.

Because if 54 years of reporting has taught us one thing, it’s that we often have more in common than we think we do. Yes, there is racism. Yes, there is misogyny and hate. Yes, there are truly irreconcilable differences between some of us. But there is also a great deal of decency — a willingness to step up and help when others are in need. And no matter where we sit on

the political spectrum, we share a deep-seated love of this land.

A recent poll conducted by researchers at Colorado College found that 70% of voters in the Mountain West want to protect clean air, water and wildlife habitat and also provide opportunities to visit public lands. And 78% of voters support limiting

development to protect wildlife habitat, and want to see more emphasis on protecting migration routes and creating safe highway crossings.

“There may be a lot that divides voters across the country, but in the West there is nearly universal consensus in favor of conservation,” said associate professor Katrina Miller-Stevens.

As Jennifer Sahn, our editor-in-chief, said in her editor’s note at the front of the magazine, *HCN* will continue to defend the places we all want to conserve, and the communities that rely on them — that’s

you and me and our neighbors and all the wildlife we share the land with.

It won’t be easy. It will take the hard work of journalism, of holding bad actors to account, of limiting billionaires’ ability to meddle in our democratic processes, of coming together and truly seeing one another again.

This, as much as anything, is what motivates our work at *High Country News* right now.

Thank you for supporting this work, and thank you for being a part of this community of thoughtful, determined people. We hope you’re making time to take care of yourselves, connect with loved ones and get out on the land. The work doesn’t end.

With heart, Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

Have thoughts, suggestions or strenuous objections? Send them to dearfriends@hcn.org. We always love to hear from you.



Visitors at sunset viewing the Grand Canyon from Mather Point on the South Rim after a dusting of winter snow. **National Park Service**

UNSTEADY GROUND

California's approach to Black reparations shifts toward land access, ownership and stewardship.

By Adam Mahoney | Photos by Alexis Hunley

LIKE MANY RESIDENTS of Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains, Jacques Powers wears clothes and boots painted with dirt and mud and gets around in a humming monster truck. But no matter where he goes, whether in these mountains or elsewhere in the state, Powers rarely feels like he belongs.

Powers, who calls himself "Mr. Heinz 57," has Black American, Portuguese Hawaiian and Irish heritage, and his wife, Angeletta, is a Black woman. There are about 40,000 people living in the five communities nestled under the area's shadowed peaks. But most of them — around 70% — are white, while fewer than 2% are Black.

And that is something the Powers family is seldom allowed to forget.

Powers, who was born in Hawai'i, volunteered with Brotherhood Crusade, a Black community empowerment organization, in the 1980s, taking Black children from South Central Los Angeles into the San Bernardino Mountains. He was well aware of the structural racism that defines life for many Black children in California's cities. The mountains appeared to offer some sanctuary from those socioeconomic disadvantages, thereby

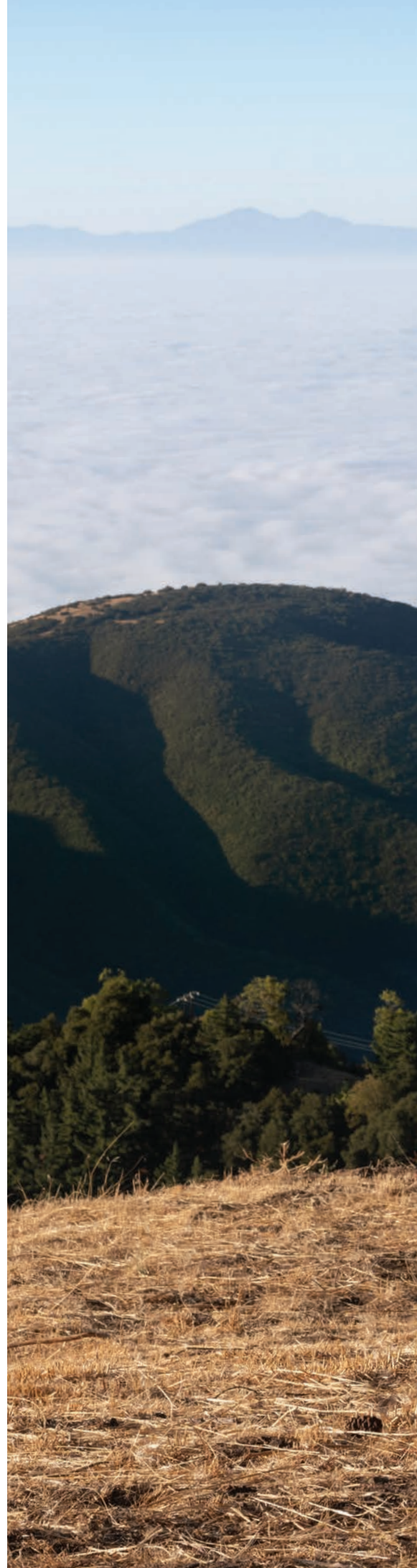
narrowing the racial disparity gap. By age 35, children who grew up in the mountain community of Crestline, for example, could expect to earn more than any of their counterparts across San Bernardino County, regardless of race.

Crestline is the third-largest community in the mountains, and after Jacques and Angeletta Powers got married in 1981, they decided that was where they wanted to raise their children.

They couldn't afford land there, though, so in the late 1980s, they bought a starter home near Lake Arrowhead, in another part of the mountains. They already knew that racism was alive and thriving in the mountains: Residents and county officials had tried to stop the Brotherhood Crusade from establishing a permanent camp, after which the group sued for racial discrimination and was awarded \$1.3 million. In Lake Arrowhead, local business owners occasionally refused to serve the Powerses, and every few weeks, Powers would find the lug nuts on his truck's tires loosened.

In 2019, flyers were left on local doorsteps, urging residents to "Save our land. Join the Klan." That Ku Klux Klan slogan dates back to

Jacques and Angeletta Powers pose on a hill overlooking their inaccessible property in Crestline, California.





the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era, when the federal government promised to give 40 acres of land to formerly enslaved families. (According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, San Bernardino County and neighboring Riverside County are currently home to a higher total number of active hate groups than the entire state of Mississippi.)

When I visited Powers, he arranged to meet me at the base of the mountains. It was for his protection, he said, as well as mine; he wanted to prepare me for possible confrontations with other local landowners.

We talked for hours at George's Burgers, a small, no-frills joint. There, at a graffiti-etched table, Powers broke down 200 years

of his family's history. From a worn briefcase, he pulled an outline of his family tree dating back to enslavement; court documents filed by his great-great-great-uncle in the 1800s, accusing the U.S. government of racism; and his own lawsuit against San Bernardino County.

The Powerses' current struggle dates back to 2004. After decades of saving money from their tree-cutting business, they finally purchased land in Crestline — 2.2 acres that included coveted water rights to the Santa Ana River. They had no idea that, back in 1979, the Valley View Park Mutual Water Company, which helps supply water to some of the mountain properties, had claimed ownership

of the only road to the lot. Various legal documents say the road belonged to the county or the U.S. Forest Service, but in recent decades, neither entity has laid claim to it. The Valley View Park Mutual Water Company did not respond to several requests for comment.

The land's previous owner, a white man, had used the road without any objection from the company. But according to the Powerses, around the time the property changed hands, the company's tactics did, too. After a fire burned through the area in 2003, the water company purchased the lots surrounding the plot the couple would eventually buy. Court documents show that the water company did not build a gate across the road until the Powerses bought the land.

Following a 15-year legal fight that went all the way to the California Supreme Court, the court ruled in favor of the water company, leaving the couple locked out of their property. They now live in Arizona, a common destination for Black families pushed out of California by the high cost of living. In 2006, when the water company offered to purchase their land for about 20% of its appraised value, they became convinced that the company was deliberately squeezing them, hoping to buy the lot and its water rights for pennies on the dollar.

Last year, the Powerses began working with Where Is My Land, a nonprofit group working to restore and expand landownership for Black Californians. The group rose to prominence after it helped the descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce regain ownership of a property in Manhattan Beach, California, that the couple had purchased in 1912 to create a resort for Black people. In 1924, the city condemned the land by eminent domain, claiming it was needed for a public park, but left it undeveloped for decades. After the property was returned to the Bruce family in 2022, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, D, said that Where Is My Land's work should serve as a model statewide.

Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, California lawmakers have debated how to make material amends for the deep-rooted impacts of slavery and anti-Black racism, and many now argue that reparations should be made not in cash but with land. But that effort intersects with present-day racial tensions, the state's housing crisis, and the worsening effects of climate change. Meanwhile, Black



The single road that provides access to Jacques and Angeletta Powers' property.

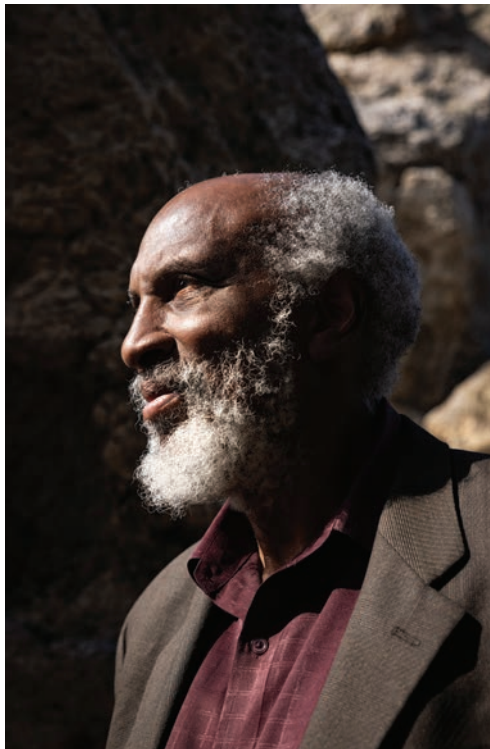
families like Jacques and Angeletta Powers are asking what it means to belong in a place that is built around their exclusion.

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON arguments against reparations in California is that slavery was never explicitly legal in the state. But in the 19th century, at least 26 Black people were enslaved by the first white settlers in the San Bernardino Mountains, and slavery was practiced throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Even after California entered the Union as a “free state” in 1850, officials sought to keep free Black Americans from migrating there.

The likelihood of Black reparations, in California or any other state, remains slim. But this year, California legislators earmarked more than \$12 million for reparations in the state’s budget and introduced 14 reparation-based bills in the Legislature, including one that would have established an agency focused on increasing access to Black land-ownership. The bill unanimously passed the state Senate, though state senators abruptly pulled it before it reached Newsom’s desk. (State Sen. Steven Bradford, the chair of the Black Caucus, said it would be re-introduced next year, a non-election year with fewer hostile political ramifications. But opposition from a Trump administration and Newsom’s presidential aspirations might make final approval just as difficult.)

These steps represent only a fraction of the 115 legislative recommendations made by a state task force of civil rights leaders, legal experts and legislators, but they have helped move the issue from the fringes to the political mainstream. This year, a survey of 1,200 Black Californians by the California Black Power Network found that 90% believe some form of reparations should be enacted, while 85% would be more likely to vote for a politician who shared their position on the issue.

Some of the state’s most prominent Black politicians, including Bradford and Assemblywoman Lori Wilson, have argued that reparations should be made not with cash but by increasing Black landownership opportunities and restoring property rights to dispossessed Black families. They believe this would be the quickest and most efficient way to resolve the state’s racial disparities, which have left Black residents with shorter and poorer lives than any other racial group. “Reparations was never about a check,”



Professor John A. Powell, director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley.

Bradford said in 2023. In a state where property values are more than twice the national average, he added, “It’s about land.” Given that California homes have gained an average of \$50,000 in equity every year for the past decade, increasing Black access to property could accelerate wealth accumulation and lower the racial wealth gap at least as efficiently as cash payments.

However, an even broader and deeper history of exploitation is embedded in the state’s landownership patterns. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Native peoples were dispossessed, enslaved and slaughtered, first by Spanish missionaries and then by white settlers. Unfettered logging, mining and dam building by settlers and, later, powerful state and corporate interests have damaged ecosystems, leading to costly disasters as climate change increases the frequency and intensity of wildfires, droughts and floods.

According to a study by researchers at Texas A&M University, overdevelopment has made California more vulnerable to environmental threats than any other state in the nation. Residents of color are particularly at

risk: California’s Black and Latino communities are five times as likely to be impacted by floods, a hazard that’s compounded by the fact that they are also five times more likely to live within half a mile of a toxic site.

At the same time, Californians are suffering from an acute housing shortage; according to one estimate, the state needs to build 3.5 million new housing units by 2025 to meet current demand and keep up with population growth.

The scarcity of land and property has driven up rents and housing costs for residents of all races, forcing tens of thousands to flee the state. Many of those who remain have moved further right on the political spectrum; last year, the number of registered Republican voters increased in every single state and federal legislative district, while the number of Democratic voters fell by tens of thousands statewide.

Policy measures may address the worst effects of these intertwined crises, but experts contend that a fundamental shift in public attitudes toward land must accompany any lasting solutions to climate change and the state’s racial disparities. The notion that land is a commodity to be owned and exploited, they say, must give way to the idea that it is something to be worked with.

The director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, John A. Powell (who prefers not to capitalize his name), said that at the most fundamental level, reparations aren’t about cash or land. Reparations are about a sense of belonging — something that the Powerses and tens of thousands of other Black Californians have long yearned for. “Reparations is about repair and creating a world where everybody, including Black people, fully belong,” Powell said. It is a world “where everyone has rights. A world where we respect the environment. And a world where the idea of dominating other groups or the land itself isn’t the dominant belief.”

Across the state, Black, Latino and Indigenous activists are advocating for collective forms of reparations, such as land co-ops, where land is communally owned and members share decision-making and benefits. But as Powers sees it, this approach asks Black families to sacrifice their long-awaited chance to build personal financial and generational wealth. After watching generations of white families reap the benefits of land



Jade Stevens, co-founder and board president of the 40 Acre Conservation League, California's first Black-led land conservancy.

exploitation, that prospect is hard to swallow. Powers recognizes that the effects of white supremacy are felt throughout society, not only at the level of the nuclear family. But at the end of the day, he said, “I still want and deserve mine.”

FROM HER OFFICE in Los Angeles, Jade Stevens, 34, shared her family’s story with me. Between the early 1900s and mid-1970s, in what is now called the Great Migration, roughly 6 million Black people left the South, initially to escape racist violence and the lack of opportunity created by the region’s Jim Crow laws. As the economic boom fueled by World War II waned, tens of thousands of Black people, mainly from Louisiana and

Texas, moved to California in search of jobs. Stevens’ family was among them.

Stevens’ relatives still own land in Louisiana, but she’s acutely aware that many Black families lost their land during the Great Migration. Researchers conservatively estimate that between 1920 and 1997, Black landowners lost \$326 billion in land and associated wealth due to discriminatory U.S. Department of Agriculture lending policies and forced land sales. But the losses run much deeper than money and acreage.

“It’s contributed to this idea of not feeling welcome, not feeling like we’re safe” in either urban or rural places, Stevens explained. It’s also disrupted how Black folks relate to each other and to the land: Two and three

generations after the Great Migration, rates of Black landownership are still lower than they were before the upheaval. Today, Black families’ homeownership rate is 30% less than that of white families. And since roughly 70% of Black people live in communities deprived of nature, they’re less likely to engage in nature-based activities.

“We no longer have appreciation for truly living with the land” through hiking or farming, or for the skills that come with it, said Stevens, including the ability to protect one another and the land itself from extreme weather. “And that’s primarily because many of us have had to move closer to the city, move across the country, for employment reasons, for safety reasons.”



Stevens, who has worked in communications for several politicians, including former state Assemblyman Sebastian Ridley-Thomas, likes to imagine what life would be like for her and her younger cousins if her family had never migrated, if they'd be "more connected" to the things that matter.

In 2021, she and three other California businesspeople — Blake Milton, Cameron Stewart and Reuben Stewart — founded the 40 Acre Conservation League, California's first Black-led land conservancy. The group's name derives from that Reconstruction-era government promise, never fulfilled, to grant "40 acres and a mule" to emancipated families.

This year, with \$9 million in funding from the state and private conservation groups, the group is embarking on a project unlike any other undertaken by a Black-led organization in the state: It will steward hundreds of acres of undeveloped land. As part of California's ambitious "30 x 30" goal of conserving 30% of the state's lands and coastal waters by 2030, the group was granted ownership and management rights to a 650-acre property surrounded by Tahoe National Forest in Northern California's Placer County.

It's a daunting task, especially given that the area has one of the nation's highest risks of injury and death due to floods and wildfires. In 2021 and 2022, two fires in the Tahoe Basin hospitalized dozens of people and destroyed more than 1,000 structures, causing an estimated \$1.3 billion in damage. The property itself was clear-cut for decades. Yet vibrant emerald-green meadows still thrive below towering ponderosa pines, firs and oaks, and the terrain provides refuge for rare species like the foothill yellow-legged frog and the southern long-toed salamander. With the help of state funding, the group plans to restore habitat, build hiking trails and create a nature center for environmental education.

Along the way, the 40 Acre Conservation League hopes to teach Black folks the skills they need to combat the effects of climate change, such as creating defensible spaces against wildfires, harvesting rainwater, and replanting native vegetation to restore soil health and prevent erosion.

Stevens believes this effort will serve the land in profound ways. "If we are able to bring more Black people into this space of stewardship to understand what it means to conserve the land, how to mitigate risks from climate

threats, protect plant life and the animals, the whole world is gonna care a little bit more," she said.

Assemblywoman Lori Wilson, who was instrumental in securing state support for the 40 Acre Conservation League, said she was slow to make the connection between reparations and access to undeveloped land and outdoor recreation. A stint on Northern California's air pollution regulation board changed that: She saw firsthand how dramatically air and water quality affected life outcomes. "We were a state that intentionally ensured that Black folks in particular could not own land and, when they finally did, it

"We can think about land ownership in different ways. It doesn't have to be the original idea of providing individual plots of land, but there does have to be some kind of life-changing effect for individuals."

was in areas with life-threatening environmental issues," she explained.

While the league's work is routinely cited by those crafting the state's reparations plan, Wilson said, it might not be widely accepted as a form of reparations. "I don't think our community's saying, 'OK, yeah, we got that, and this is reparations,'" she said.

Stevens isn't sure her group's work qualifies as reparations, either. It offers benefits to Black communities, but those benefits don't satisfy the traditional definition of wealth. "It is true that we can think about landownership in different ways," she said. "It doesn't have to be the original idea of providing individual plots of land, but there does have to be some kind of life-changing

effect for individuals." And, in America, she acknowledged, life-changing typically means money-making.

LANDOWNERSHIP as a form of Black reparations is complicated by the fact that neither California nor the nation has offered proper reparations for the genocide of Indigenous people. Some representatives of Native tribes that have ancestral ties to the 40 Acre Conservation League's property have taken exception to the group's claims of ownership and stewardship, Stevens said, despite multiple meetings to discuss the issue.

One tribe that calls the Tahoe Basin home is the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan. The Nisenan, like all of California's Native peoples, were decimated by settlers' campaigns of violence and cultural eradication. For decades after California achieved statehood in 1850, state-sponsored militias conducted deadly raids on Indigenous communities. Disease and starvation compounded the losses, and by the end of the 20th century, the state's Indigenous population had plummeted from an estimated 150,000 to just 16,000.

"We're still in the truth-telling phase of accepting the wanton murder and wiping out of California Native people," said Shelly Covert, spokesperson for the Nisenan and the executive director of the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project. "Just like people in the Black community, we've been ignored and looked over, and gaslighted for generations, and offered nothing. So when you see the Black community, with a strong voice, getting land, it still stings, even if it is deserved." The federal rights of Covert's tribe were terminated in 1964, and even today it is not recognized by the government.

At the same time, she said, the LandBack movement and other campaigns for Native rights have benefited from the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and she would like to see supporters of LandBack and reparations coordinate their efforts more closely. After years of crowdfunding, the Nisenan purchased 232 acres of their ancestral land in September for \$2.5 million. The land, which is about 40 miles from the conservation league's property and was once owned by a Quaker school, will be developed for housing for elders and facilities to cultivate ancestral crops and traditional medicine.

Reparations and LandBack activists in

Northern California are finding common ground within the growing movement for “climate reparations.” The term, coined in 2009 by Black energy expert Maxine Burkett, refers to the disproportionate effects of climate change on communities already burdened by generations of colonialism and anti-Black racism. It acknowledges what Stanford University scholar Margaret Ramírez calls the “complex entanglements” of Indigenous, Black and Latino communities.

One group working for climate reparations is the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, a collective landownership group led by Indigenous women in the San Francisco Bay Area. The venture is funded primarily through the trust’s Shuumi Land Tax program, a voluntary “tax” paid by hundreds of people living on traditional Native land in the Bay Area as a way to acknowledge the genocide and dispossession that preceded them. The group has also called on Californians to support land return by establishing easements on their properties or including land transfers in their wills.

Over the last few years, the trust has acquired more than 50 acres of land in areas that are primarily home to low-income Black and Latino families. On Sogorea Te’ land, Black, Indigenous and other communities of color work together to learn farming skills, traditional prescribed burning techniques and basket weaving. Volunteers cultivate native species, clear debris and clean up water sources — forms of stewardship that offer collective benefits, making them more compatible with the goals of LandBack.

Sogorea Te’ and other groups such as the California Environmental Justice Alliance recently persuaded California legislators to invest \$270 million in “community resilience centers,” places like libraries, churches and recreational facilities that not only offer shelter during extreme weather but also provide a place for Californians of all backgrounds to learn preparedness skills and share their feelings about climate change.

“These kinds of thriving hubs are really key in ensuring that Black folks, and all folks, can thrive and be out of the exposure of climate and environmental risks,” said Nile Malloy, climate justice director at the California Environmental Justice Alliance. “Everything we’re doing here is meant to repair harm, but also to build an economy to prepare

people for this next generation where we want to see Black folks thriving.

“Land is a big part of that, but with land comes a lot of power,” Malloy added. “With power comes responsibility — responsibility to conserve and maintain areas to build resilience for everyone.”

Such efforts can offer substantial benefits, but since they go to communities rather than individuals and families, they are often difficult to measure in acres or dollars. As a form of reparations, they ask Black Californians to trust that state institutions and the state’s non-Black residents will finally do right by them.

AFTER OUR TALK at George’s Burgers, I followed Powers’ truck into the mountains. My Honda Accord struggled to keep up on the winding road, which skirted the edge of a steep cliff. The higher we climbed, the crisper and cleaner the air became, and the larger the plots of land.

We stopped on a small rise a couple of hundred yards from the plot the Powers family owns but is legally barred from entering. We looked down at a browning, unkempt area where dry downed branches were scattered on the forest floor like matches in a giant matchbox.

Powers, who was nicknamed the “Flying Hawaiian” by his colleagues in the tree-cutting business, gained a reputation in the mountains for the skills he’d learned as a boy: Instead of climbing up and down the trees he trimmed, he swung himself between them. For almost three decades, he made a living by thinning trees near the land he’d eventually purchase, helping hundreds of homeowners protect their homes from wildfire.

At times, he said, he has felt at home in this forest. In the early morning, during the brief period after the fog evaporates but before LA’s smog overtakes the sky, it’s possible to see the Pacific Ocean from here. Not far belowground lies the Santa Ana River aquifer — a life-saving boon to the drought-stricken, wildfire-prone region. Despite the fires, despite the years of legal battles and threats of violence, he still sees this mountainside as a refuge from the gentrification and pollution that define life for people of color in the valley below.

About a century before Powers was born, his great-great-great-uncle, George Vashon, was denied entry to the Pennsylvania Bar

because Black people weren’t considered citizens. As an 8-year-old on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, Powers watched his family lose their home to eminent domain. That experience, he said, broke his father, a former musician who played with the likes of Louis Armstrong. “There’s really nothing that he could have handed down to us because he was always shortchanged, all across the board,” Powers said.

Now Powers himself is fighting that harsh reality. His family’s situation isn’t uncommon, said Dreisen Heath, a researcher and activist who has worked with Where Is My Land: “Private companies have long taken advantage of individual landowners for their own capitalistic gains.” The group is working with four other families who are battling private interests, including timber companies and retail chains, to regain land or ensure access to it.

After the group helped the Bruce family’s situation gain national attention, Powers was hopeful. But in the 20 months since Where Is





Nisenan ancestral land in the hills of Nevada City, California, is part of the 232 acres recently purchased and rematriated by the California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project and the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe.

My Land began its publicity campaign on his behalf, just 360 people have signed a petition in support. “So far, nobody’s help has really gone that far,” he said.

Despite their troubles, the Powerses still occupy a relatively privileged position in California. Since the couple bought the land in 2003, home values in the area have risen by 230%. Their possession of such an asset is even more remarkable considering that since the turn of the 20th century, Black Americans have lost 80% of the land they once owned; in California, Black landownership is roughly half that of white people. In San Bernardino County, where Black folks make up just 9% of the population, they account for 18% of those living without shelter on the streets. Some Black Californians worry that land reparations could worsen these inequities, widening the gap between rich and poor within the Black community. More privileged Black Americans may have better access to the documents needed to prove that they are

descendants of slavery, and they’re likely to have a greater ability to navigate government bureaucracy and secure reparations than lower-income or less-educated Californians.

By purchasing land in a state where land is so hard to buy, Powers hoped to gain the privilege that his family had been denied. He wanted to pass it on to his three children, following a tradition that has driven American landownership for generations. But that tradition, which benefits nuclear families at the expense of communities, has also led to the loss of skills and cultural traditions that, as the climate changes, may once again be needed for survival. “If our goal is to never be together, never to live all together, that means we don’t have true land practices,” said Covert of the Nisenan Tribe. “We have no responsibility to the land or each other. That’s where culture was always born, and that’s where culture and our future are going to be preserved.”

The state’s current focus on individual Black landownership misses this, observed

powell of the Othering & Belonging Institute. He would like to widen the conversation. “Addressing the crisis of Black life doesn’t mean ignoring Native Americans, Latinos, people with disabilities, poor whites,” he said. “Everyone’s story has to count so that everyone belongs. The conversations about reparations, whether cash or land, are framed as a binary.”

Policymakers often resort to binaries, seeking clarity of intent and simplicity of implementation. But histories and experiences, whether individual or communal, cannot be reduced to binaries. Powers feels most at home far from the halls of government, swinging between trees to protect the Earth and his neighbors; in the mountains, he has experienced his strongest sense of belonging. Stevens, however, felt most supported while sitting in the state Capitol in Sacramento, hearing the “yes” votes as the Legislature approved funding for the 40 Acre Conservation League’s land purchase. She hopes that her work will make more people like her feel at home in their state.

Regardless of the form reparations take or how they are distributed, they are intended to create a society where *everyone* belongs. By beginning to repair the past, said powell, Californians can also prepare for their collective climate future. “In the face of these threats, it’s not enough to protect and valorize one historically harmed group,” he said. “It’s important that we actually see that everyone has to belong unconditionally to meet this moment.” 🌱

This story was produced in partnership with Capital B News.

Adam Mahoney, the environmental reporter at Capital B News, is from Wilmington, California, where he grew up. He first wrote for HCN in 2020 about the oil refineries in his hometown. @AdamLMahoney.

Alexis Hunley is a photographer whose art centers on the intersectional experiences of marginalized communities. She is particularly inspired by the cultural and sociopolitical nuance of Black American life.



Remnants of the forest after the 2022 Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire in northern New Mexico.
Sharon Stewart



BURNED

*Devastation is hard to face, but
turning away is harder.*

By Emily Withnall

*The land is
a part of us, and
our memories
cannot be
untangled from
the places that
make us
who we are.*

IN A SANTA FE WALMART, through aisles flooded by fluorescent light, I hunt down 5-gallon plastic jugs, finally finding them, illogically, halfway across the store from the water-filling station. I shove my shopping cart with the sticky wheel alongside the filling station, where water trickles from a jammed spigot so slowly it takes 30 minutes to fill eight jugs. Chilled and agitated by the store's icy air conditioning, I wonder if there might be a better way.

When the Rio Gallinas flooded this June, a deluge of ash and chemicals used in fire retardants ran down Hermit's Peak into the Rio Gallinas watershed, causing high turbidity in the drinking water in Las Vegas, New Mexico. I grew up in Las Vegas, my kids were born there, and my dad and my 21-year-old, Alex, currently live there. After the flooding, the city's water treatment plant couldn't keep up with demand. Undrinkable water has been common since the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire swept through Las Vegas in 2022. After the flood, the city distributed water at the Mike Marr Gymnasium at Robertson High School, first in big jugs, and then later in large cases of 8-ounce plastic bottles. Neither my dad nor Alex can drive. My dad is blind, and Alex just hasn't learned yet. The town is small, but carrying a large amount of water on foot is challenging. So, one weekend in early July, I drive across Santa Fe to load up on water for them both. It costs \$70 for the jugs and water and takes me three hours to deliver enough

to last them a couple of weeks.

Despite having a temporary water treatment system in place, Las Vegas has been cited 27 times for polluted drinking water by the New Mexico Environment Department since the fire. A memorandum of agreement approved in August by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Claims Office, and the city of Las Vegas estimates that a permanent water treatment system will be complete in six years. Meanwhile, water delivery feels like the least I can do. I wasn't in Las Vegas during the fire; I'm not dealing with the health consequences of smoke inhalation; and I'm not among those still fighting with FEMA two years later to rebuild their homes and livelihoods. Las Vegas, and the rural communities around it, are in a predominantly Hispano region, with high poverty rates and deep cultural connections to the land. The fire — the largest in New Mexico's history — burned 341,725 acres, and it's been a significant blow to the remote agricultural communities affected by it and an already precarious way of life. Still, the sense of trauma and grief is shared by all who call San Miguel and Mora counties home. The land is a part of us, and our memories cannot be untangled from the places that make us who we are.

NEARING LAS VEGAS with my jugs of water, I gaze at the imposing rocky profile of Hermit's Peak in the distance. The mountain is named for the Italian monk Giovanni Maria de

Agostini, who lived in a cave near the top of the peak for three years in the 1860s. Though it seems impossible, legend has it that El Solitario, as he became known, walked more than 50 miles from the cave to Las Vegas and back for Mass each Sunday.

Rising above 10,000 feet, Hermit's Peak is part of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the southern sub-range of the Rockies. I was 11 and my sister, Katie, was 9 when we first hiked up it. My mom drove us up the hairpin turns from where Las Vegas sits in the foothills, up and up and up past smashed guardrails and dense trees, until we emerged into the tiny villages that dotted the high mountain meadows. Finally, we reached the tiny campground in El Porvenir, uncurled ourselves from the car and began our trek. The hike was gentle at first, but when we reached the switchbacks, it became so rocky and steep that Katie sat down and refused to take another step. I glowered at her as she accepted our parents' \$5 bribe to keep going.

In seventh grade, I backpacked up the peak with classmates and our science teacher. As a P.E.-hating bookworm, I relished my athletic classmates' complaints and their amazement at my hiking ability. We slept under the stars on the far side of the peak, waking to cows grazing around us before we began the endless stream crossings down the Beaver Creek Trail. Another time, at age 16, I cajoled my friend Rowyn into hiking up with me. She wanted to turn back many times, but at

every switchback turn, I promised it wasn't much farther. I'd also hiked it with my ex-husband when Alex was a baby. In my memory, Alex cooed when we reached the well near the top, where El Solitario drew water when he lived on the mountain. I hiked the peak again, post-divorce, with a friend and colleague to whom I had confided that I was queer. After passing the hermit's well, we walked through the aspens on mercifully gentler terrain, finally arriving at the top of the peak, where we looked out over the rocky outcropping to the undulating dense blanket of evergreens and the Great Plains rippling out to the horizon.

WHEN THE HERMIT'S PEAK and Calf Canyon Fires started as two distinct fires — and before they merged into one — I was the interim director of university relations at New Mexico Highlands University, my alma mater, and was charged with communications for the school's Incident Command team. For months, the incident commander called me at all hours. There were relentless Zoom meetings, complicated evacuation planning and press releases I rigorously drafted. The essential messages in the press releases were “don't panic,” “only go when we say go” and “when we say go, do NOT stay behind.” We offered information about what to do if you needed help evacuating, numbers to call for help hauling livestock, details about places to find a warm meal and shelter, links to resources and counseling, and reminders

that FEMA officials would be here eventually to help. The calls never stopped, the information changed hourly, and the helicopters were grounded because the wind, like everything else, was unprecedented. The fire, aided by the wind, raced north, and ash blanketed houses. I was working from home in Santa Fe, choking back tears each night as I learned how much farther the fire had spread, how much had been lost, how much of my home was gone.

At 6 p.m. every night of the 148-day fire, I opened the Santa Fe National Forest Facebook page to watch the updates. It had become a digital communal space, where the people affected by the fire gathered. We talked in the comment section, asking questions, expressing thanks for the updates, and demanding answers from the Forest Service, which had started both fires to begin with. Incident meteorologist Bladen Breitreiter was often a part of these updates. Cool and tattooed, they stood in front of a giant fire map that grew daily. On one memorable evening, Breitreiter shared what they called “atmospheric nacho theory” — a lighthearted way to explain the air currents and the effect they had on the fire. Air currents and jet streams became layers of salsa and sour cream. Instead of fire, we momentarily saw food. Breitreiter's ability to reach us through our fear and tension earned them a growing fan club as we waited for the wind to stop and for the hotshots to have a fighting chance at containing the fire.



A YEAR AFTER THE FIRES stopped burning, in October 2023, I saw a call for volunteers to help the Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance plant trees in the burn scar in Rociada, so I asked Alex to join me and signed us both up.

Just off state route 518 in Sapello, we passed Cyn and Amanda's house; seeing how close the fire had come to their

A metal candle holder that belonged to the writer's friend Makani, one of the few objects that survived when the fire destroyed their home.

MNak Photography

*Who are we,
I wondered,
to pretend we
can ever repair
the harm
we've caused?*

cabin was unsettling. As I drove farther, black trees carpeted entire mountainsides. I remembered all the times I had driven to Rociada previously — when my family visited friends, when my ex-husband had a job watering the Pendaries golf course, when my then-girlfriend and I backpacked into the Pecos Wilderness from the Rociada #250 trailhead. The trail was incinerated by the fire. I thought, too, of Makani, Jane and Randy, whose house was among the first to burn. My mom, a midwife, had delivered Makani, and I later babysat her. Our families ate meals together in that house. Makani posted photos on Facebook soon after the house burned while the fire raged northward. In the wreckage of her childhood home, she documented what remained: a doll's head, a beer stein depicting hot air balloons, a metal candle holder featuring three wiry figures, dancing.

When we arrived at the spot where the road ends abruptly in giant potholes that give way to wilderness, we parked alongside the other vehicles. Alex and I each received tree-planting bags with two deep pockets like panniers that hung to the backs of our knees. We quickly filled the bags with saplings of western white pine, Douglas fir, ponderosa and mountain mahogany. The crew had been on the mountainside all morning and had already planted hundreds of trees. Alex and I each took 50 — 25 on each side. I was surprised by how heavy the water-logged saplings were. I grabbed a bright orange steel planting bar and, with the

awkward heft of the bags and the bar, waddled as quickly as I could across the stream and up the mountain.

We put the triangular tips of our planting bars into the ground. The earth was packed so hard that digging deep enough took muscle I wasn't sure I had. With repeated taps, I slowly got my blade into the ground. When I achieved the right depth, I removed the bar and carefully inserted the sapling, trying not to crush its delicate roots. I closed the hole around the plant and tamped the earth around its base. Then I moved 20 feet to begin the process again.

When it took me an hour to plant just eight trees, I realized that taking 50 had been overly ambitious. I looked east across the mountainside, where charcoaled trees seemed to stretch out forever. Across the stream to the north, another mountainside appeared as an endless ripple of black trees. Even if I could plant faster, and even with 100 people out here planting every day, the task felt insurmountable. Who are we, I wondered, to pretend we can ever repair the harm we've caused?

In this case, the fires were caused by prescribed burns and spread quickly in what New Mexicans know is the windiest season. In fact, the dreaded words "historic" and "unprecedented" were used to describe the wind in the spring of 2022 — which is to say, the Forest Service fucked up very specifically. Setting the stage were decades of settler-colonizer fire suppression practices, along with the rapid

warming of the planet, creating a tinderbox of trees and undergrowth dead or brittle from disease, bark beetles, not enough water and too much heat.

The saplings were delicate and bright. They offered a sense of possibility — of curbing erosion, repopulating an ecosystem and protecting a watershed. But they were so few, given the nearly 62 million trees the fire burned. It was a number too big





Spring runoff in Rio la Casa Creek after the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire. **Sharon Stewart**

for me to grasp. I felt small on the mountainside, and less useful than the invasive mullein flaunting its fuzzy leaves all around me. The mullein was at least helping to curb erosion, even as it competed with native plants. As we walked back to our cars, I asked the crew leader, who was also the group's executive director, how many of the 26 saplings I'd managed to plant might make it. She said partner organizations

do some monitoring of the seedlings but that the Hermit's Peak Watershed Alliance lacked the resources to track survival rate. She and her colleagues simply do the work and hope it sticks.

It hurts to know that Alex and my 18-year-old, Talia, will never get to see the rippling green tapestry spreading out from the base of Hermit's Peak. They may never know a time when clean drinking water is not scarce or

in jeopardy. I will the saplings we planted to take root, to grow against the odds, to deliver our lifeblood to us across this land that sustains us and that we, in turn, must help sustain. ☼

Emily Withnall lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She is working on a book about hydraulic fracturing and domestic violence.

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REVIEW

For the win

The Indigenous film *Rez Ball* shows the challenges and triumphs of small-town Native life.

BY JASON ASENAP

IT'S A WONDER THAT it's taken this long for an Indigenous basketball movie to come to fruition, aside from the obvious funding issues, because the idea was ripe for the picking. Basketball is as deeply ingrained in Indigenous culture as football is to the South. Those familiar with Indigeneity will understand the meaning of *Rez Ball* and its close affiliation with Indigenous cultures in the United States. When I was a younger man, playing basketball for my high school team in a Comanche community in Walters, Oklahoma, our coach scoffed at the way Comanche

hoopers played. He dismissed the way we played as "Indian Ball." To him, it was a disparaging term for a disorganized, faster-paced style of basketball that lacked discipline, while I simply consider it a more fun way to play the game.

Smaller communities take immense pride in their local sports teams, and this is especially true on the rez. These teams, for better or worse, represent their communities. I always look to the 1986 film *Hoosiers* as the template for the exemplary small-town basketball movie. It successfully mines all the important sports tropes: small-town pride, an unorthodox,

underdog team of misfits, a troubled coach overcoming enormous obstacles to achieve a goal, and ancillary characters and situations that contribute to telling the story of how a team comes to access its own special power to become champions, using a power that the players had within them the whole time. *Rez Ball* is that kind of story.

Two of our finest Indigenous filmmakers have teamed up with Netflix to create a basketball story that shows the pride of Indigenous teams in our own small communities. Sydney Freeland (Navajo) and Sterlin Harjo (Seminole) tell the story of a Navajo Nation high school basketball team, the Chuska Warriors, and its arduous journey to make it to the New Mexico state championship. Jessica Matten (Red River Cree Metis) plays Heather Hobbs, a coach struggling to stay focused on her team while maintaining a long-distance relationship with her partner even as both the team and the relationship are unraveling. Kauchani Bratt (Quechua/Coahuiltecan Nation) plays Jimmy Holiday, a rising star

who has to quickly step into the role of team captain after tragedy befalls the team. He lacks a good support system; his mother, Gloria, played by Julia Jones, was a baller in her youth who fizzled out in college. Her dreams were left unfulfilled, and she refuses to attend her son's games and struggles with alcoholism. There is a lot of tragedy in *Rez Ball*, just as there is in real-life Indigenous communities. The movie delves into alcoholism and suicide and the deaths caused by both. Given these subjects, *Rez Ball* may not sound like a family-friendly movie, but it is. It carefully navigates these and other challenging issues that Indian Country deals with today, and, in the end, it is an inspirational story. Perhaps this is the hallmark of Indigenous filmmakers: They can tread this terrain and still create stories that see the community succeed. They refuse to simply wallow in trauma porn.

It can be challenging to create realistic-looking basketball sequences. The actors may not know the mechanics of shooting, dribbling and passing correctly,

skills that take years to perfect. But somehow *Rez Ball*'s creative team has managed to find actors who can actually play, or else found decent players and trained them to act. Whatever the case, they are believable on the hardwood. The basketball scenes in the small-town gyms look real; the players move gracefully, thanks to the slick editing of Jessica Baclesse. The scenes slow down, then speed up to show us the skill of the players, accompanied by a modern hip-hop soundtrack — provided by Indigenous musicians Halluci Nation and Travis Thompson — that contributes to the youthful tone of the movie. When the players aren't yelling at each other, fighting through their own obstacles on the journey to building team chemistry, they look like they are having a blast on the court.

Sports movies traditionally have one memorable scene involving an unorthodox teachable moment, a way to train a person to do something they don't yet understand. In *The Karate Kid*, for example, when Mr. Miyagi teaches Daniel LaRusso to "paint the fence," he is actually teaching him karate moves that will serve him well down the line. There is a great scene in *Rez Ball* that echoes this. Coach Hobbs decides to take her team on a surprise trip to her grandmother's homestead, where she puts them to work herding sheep. It's a team-building exercise meant to help her players find the chemistry they need; as a coach and former player herself, Hobbs understands that chemistry cannot be forced, only discovered. It's a highly enjoyable scene that references Diné culture and language as the team members are forced to use teamwork, creativity and ingenuity to fulfill their mission. Together they learn the skills that a successful team basketball requires. The

boys begin to integrate their culture into their basketball lives and realize they have way more in common than they realized. They learn that if they want to win, they will have to work together as one.

Since it's an Indigenous movie, there are, inevitably, comedic moments. Navajo comedian Ernie Tsosie provides some of them in his role as assistant coach Benny Begay. His one-liners are sharp; the largely Navajo audience I watched the film with at a special Netflix advanced screening in Albuquerque laughed enthusiastically at his jokes, many of which were in Diné. His character is not introduced until near the beginning of the second act, however, and I felt he was underused. I wished that we saw more of him, because the character is charming and brings an added element of Diné humor. More successful is the use of Cody Lightning (Cree)

and Dallas Goldtooth (Dakota/Diné), who play local radio sports announcers for radio station KTNN, a real-life all-Navajo radio station. Their comedic sports commentary helps move the film along as they narrate what is happening on the court. On the opposite end of the comedic spectrum, Jimmy Holiday's mother comes across as relentlessly gloomy upon introduction and remains a bit of a buzzkill throughout. By the end of the film, we realize why Gloria is this way and why she doesn't support her son's dreams, but by then her character has become almost too unlikely to be redeemed.

I wouldn't put *Rez Ball* in the same category as *Hoosiers*. It wouldn't be fair, and it probably doesn't aspire to be put there; *Rez Ball* doesn't have access to Gene Hackman in his prime, or to Dennis Hopper. What it is, though,

is a breakthrough in the genre: an Indigenous family-friendly basketball picture, written and directed by Indigenous people. This is no easy feat. Plus, *Rez Ball* aspires to a different goal than *Hoosiers*, telling the story of a contemporary Indigenous basketball team from a contemporary Indigenous perspective. It has a more modern, flashier and altogether much larger underdog tale to tell, not simply the story of a small-town team taking on big-city rivals. It's a tale of Indigenous people overcoming our trauma, our lack of support systems, our doubts and fears, and deciding to take a chance on achieving excellence — choosing to believe that Indians ultimately *can* win in the end. 🌟

Jason Asenap is a Comanche and Muscogee writer and director based in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Rez Ball is a breakthrough in the genre: an Indigenous family-friendly basketball picture, written and directed by Indigenous people.

Kauchani Bratt as Jimmy Holiday, captain of a Navajo Nation high school basketball team, in the new movie *Rez Ball*. **Netflix**



The passion of the Mormon feminist

For 50 years, the magazine *Exponent II* has been making the LDS Church squirm, and it has no plans to stop.

BY LEAH SOTTILE

KATIE LUDLOW RICH AND HEATHER Sundahl had prizes to give away. “Which founding mother from *Exponent II* was banned from speaking at Brigham Young University?” Rich quizzed a small, mostly female audience gathered inside a conference room at the University of Utah.

Hands flew up.

“Laurel Thatcher Ulrich!” one woman shouted, naming the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian who famously observed that “well-behaved women seldom make history.”

“Yes,” Rich smiled, awarding her a tall prayer candle emblazoned with an illustration of a Mormon feminist. “1993. The shadowy ban,” she said, pointing to an important moment in Ulrich’s history.

Rich and Sundahl were speaking about the 50-year history of *Exponent II*, a Mormon feminist magazine, at the annual Sunstone Symposium, a conference dedicated to progressive Mormon scholarship. (*Full disclosure: The author received an honorarium for giving the keynote lecture at the conference.*) In this room, everyone seemed familiar with the magazine, rattling off the names of former editors as if they were rock stars.

Over the past five decades, *Exponent II* has carved out a community where people can explore the ways in which Mormonism and feminism collide, and the friction created by those dueling identities. Throughout that time, the Mormon Church has repeatedly ostracized its feminist members, including some who have written for *Exponent II*.

Recently, Rich and Sundahl, longtime contributors to the magazine and its blog, published a comprehensive history of the publication, *Fifty Years of Exponent II*, which features an afterword by Ulrich. They lay out

the breadth of perspectives offered by the magazine over the decades as its writers grapple with what it means to be both a Mormon and a feminist: “Dual identities,” they write, are also “dueling identities.”

The magazine offers a more accurate portrait of Mormon life than is commonly portrayed in popular media, according to Rachel Rueckert, the magazine’s editor, and it represents a culture that is much more complicated and interesting than people outside the faith realize. “My friends are everywhere on the Mormon spectrum,” she says. “I know a lot of Mormon atheists. I know a lot of queer Mormon folk. Where are their stories represented?”

THE MAGAZINE WAS FOUNDED in Boston by women who belonged to the LDS Church at the height of the women’s liberation movement. The first issue was published in 1974. The new quarterly took inspiration for its name from *The Woman’s Exponent*, a suffragist newspaper created by Mormon women in the late 1800s.

The intent was for *Exponent II* to feature recipes, homemaking advice and women’s views, all delivered in a style that read, as its first editor put it, like “a long letter from a dear friend.” It would be mailed to Mormon meeting houses nationwide. The magazine gave women a voice, though still a very conservative one: “Their brand of feminism,” Rich and Sundahl write, “was consistent with the church’s aims.”

Exponent II’s first editors were optimistic that the wider church would embrace it “with open arms,” Sundahl said. The first issue was pointed: inside were discussions of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and women’s education alongside recipes for cranberry

mousse and wheat bread.

The church leadership was nonetheless displeased and reacted as if a good Mormon wife had burned her bra in front of the church’s then-president and prophet, Spencer Kimball himself. The problem was, in part, that *Exponent II*’s first editor was married to a man who held a position of power in Boston’s LDS community. Church authorities flew from Salt Lake City to Boston to caution the magazine’s staff against future publishing plans. One said it “smacked of an underground newspaper” and warned the editor that people might think it was a church-sanctioned publication, given the editor’s husband’s position. In 1975, she stepped down. But the publication kept going.

Given the church’s strong views on gender, the reaction was not surprising. The highest seats of power and the priesthood are reserved for men. The word “patriarchy” is used frequently in the faith: Counsel and guidance bestowed by priesthood holders are literally called patriarchal blessings. “In Mormonism, there’s quite a lot of attention to gender roles,” said Caroline Kline, assistant director of Global Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University and a co-founder of *Exponent II*’s blog. “If you’re a liberal feminist, as am I, you’re probably going to struggle with the fact that women do not have the priesthood and therefore are not included in the ecclesiastical structure in the same way men can.”

She Subscribed to a Bird-Brained Manner of Thinking, a digital photo collage that won best in show and *Exponent II*’s feature artist award at the 2019 Certain Women Invitational, an exhibition showcasing Mormon women’s artwork.

Corinne Geertsens



Additionally, the church has, throughout its history, suggested that women should prioritize motherhood over other pursuits. “Beguiling voices in the world,” wrote LDS President Ezra Taft Benson in 1981, “maintain that some women are better suited for careers than for marriage and motherhood. These individuals spread their discontent by the propaganda that there are more exciting and self-fulfilling roles for women than homemaking.”

One modern church manual is slightly less explicit: Women “have, by divine nature, the greater gift and responsibility for home and children and nurturing there and in other settings.”

As *Exponent II* became a leader in Mormon feminist thought, it posed an existential threat to a church where men are viewed as the heads of the household and holders of the priesthood. “What *Exponent* does is it teaches women to listen to their internal authority,” Sundahl told *High Country News*. “It teaches women that you have the power in you.”

And that is radical.

THROUGHOUT THE MAGAZINE’S lifespan, the LDS church has shown increasing hostility toward Mormon feminism. In 1979, academic Sonia Johnson — who once called the LDS Church “the last unmitigated Western patriarchy” — was excommunicated after founding a feminist group called Mormons for ERA.

In 1993, the board of Brigham Young University rejected a recommendation that Laurel Thatcher Ulrich — the faith’s only female Pulitzer Prize-winner and one of the founders of *Exponent II* — speak at BYU’s annual Women’s Conference. It offered no explanation for its decision. That same year, three feminist thinkers — part of a group of Mormon academics branded the “September Six” — were excommunicated. More recently, in 2014, the church excommunicated Kate Kelly, the Mormon feminist who founded Ordain Women, an organization calling for women to gain the priesthood. (HCN requested comment from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints about *Exponent II* and its stance on feminism but did not receive a response.)

Despite these clashes, *Exponent II* continues to unflinchingly dive headlong into hot-button topics including abortion

access, marriage equality, sexual abuse and the priesthood. The magazine comes out quarterly in print, and the blog publishes new essays several times per week. In a 2007 post titled “Radical Mormon Feminist Manifesto,” Jana Remy, the blog’s co-founder, pushed back on the idea that the church could define people’s identity or decide whether they had a place in the faith. “We will no longer passively submit to secondary status,” she wrote. “We reject church teachings about the eternal nature of traditional gender roles and will not sustain official proclamations from the church leaders that reify such notions of women and men conforming to specific narrow roles such as submissive wives, full-

“It teaches women to listen to their internal authority. It teaches women that you have the power in you.”

time mothers, bread-winning fathers.”

The manifesto advocated for equal partnerships, co-parenting, support for single parents, for women and people of color to be leaders in the faith, and for the inclusion of LGBTQ members in temple ordinances. “We affirm that as the LDS Church moves into the 21st century,” Remy wrote, “it can no longer ignore and reproduce the multiple oppressions of sexism, racism, and ableism that are endemic to its patriarchy hierarchy.”

Kline called Remy’s piece “prophetic.”

“She laid out where Mormonism should go in terms of issues of equality and gender and race,” Kline said. “This is exactly where Mormon feminism went. She was just a decade or two in front of everyone else.”

As the years passed, the magazine became a place for the wider community to

gather and process the increasingly restrictive policies handed down by the church. For example, in 2015, the church prohibited the children of same-sex couples from receiving church blessings, including baptism, until they turned 18 and decried same-sex unions.

In response, *Exponent II* “chose a side,” wrote Pandora Brewer in the magazine’s Spring 2016 issue, which was devoted to perspectives from those most affected by the policy. “We believe that this is a troubling, divisive policy.” (The church revised it in 2019.) And in August 2024, when the church banned trans people from being baptized and working with children, and required them to be supervised in restrooms at events, people again turned to *Exponent II* to process it. “The indignation at the cruelty of these policy changes towards transgender people burns within my bosom like the raging fire prepared to receive the hewn trees with rotten fruit spoken of in the scriptures,” one blogger wrote.

Rich said the magazine’s readers don’t see Mormon feminism as just one thing; within the community, there is plenty of struggle and debate about what that identity looks like. The point, she said, is that people get to define it for themselves.

Rich is no longer an active member of the church; the 2015 policies were one reason she pulled away. *Exponent II* helped in her faith transition. “To hear or to encounter writings by these really smart women who were processing and talking about these things that I also found upsetting was both validating and scary,” she said.

Sundahl remains an active member of the faith, though her four adult children have all left the church. She said that being part of *Exponent II* has been a refuge — proof that it’s possible to stay in the church and be a feminist.

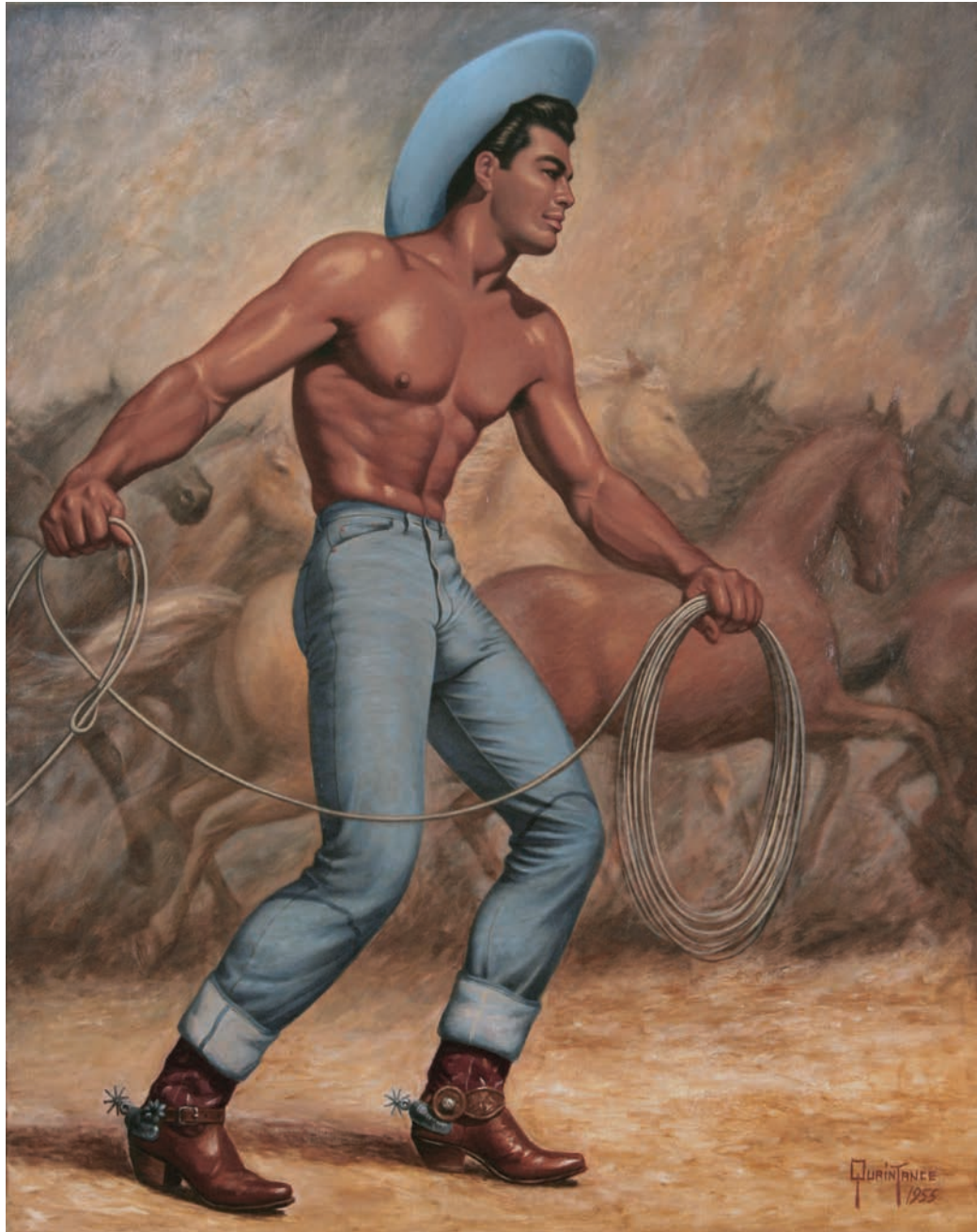
In 2008, Sundahl authored a piece for the blog called “Baby Killer,” telling the story of a miscarriage she experienced at 17 weeks. Her doctor sent her to a Utah abortion clinic for a late-term dilation and evacuation procedure that is done to remove remaining fetal tissue.

“As this Mormon mother of three, I went to an abortion clinic,” she said. “You have these ideas of who you are, and you’re like, good Mormon girls don’t go to abortion clinics.”

Sundahl wrote of the horror she felt walking past a protester to get into the clinic. “An older man, perhaps in his sixties, stood in front of me with a sign. He looked like a

CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.



Denim daydream

The idea of blue jeans being sexy arose in part from gay cowboy erotica.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

I'VE OFTEN THOUGHT OF jeans as “sky pants,” trousers woven from cotton clouds. Jeans are the wild blue yonder above the canyons, plains and crumbling escarpments of the West. Pants to die in, as Andy Warhol once proclaimed.

But also pants to live in: When I visited Los Angeles for the first time, I went to The Eagle, a gay bar tucked into a curve of Santa Monica Boulevard. It was cowboy night, and denim was all but required. At my hostel, I struggled to decide between two pairs of jeans. One was a pair of boot-cut Levi's I'd worn into the ground, working as a ranch hand in Colorado's Wet Valley. The other pair was more risqué — skin-tight jeans from a brand called RUFSKIN, which I'd bought earlier that day in West Hollywood. I could barely fit my calves through them, but after wrangling them on, I headed out the door.

At The Eagle, I paid a small cash cover and got a stamp on my hand. Techno music bumped and vintage cowboy-themed flicks played on the TV sets in my peripheral vision. Most of the bar patrons wore white tees with their denim, highlighting their beards or scruff. One bartender was shirtless and commando in gravity-defying low-rise jeans, like a mid-aughts pop star except for way hairier, 30 years older and wearing a small museum's worth of body art. Others wore full Canadian tuxedos, while a muscular couple rocked cut-off *jorts* with matching '80s mustaches.

Jeans have long been synonymous with an effortless cool, from gay biker clubs to queer icons like Marlon Brando and James Dean. The queer community has particularly embraced them, especially as an erotic staple in leather subculture. Of course, it wasn't always that way; for many years, blue jeans — like my boot-cut Levi's — were just work pants. I had no idea that an artist who once lived around the block from The Eagle helped give them their now distinctive cultural connotation.

George Quaintance was a hairdresser and vaudeville dancer originally from Virginia who began painting professionally in the 1940s. He moved to Los Angeles in 1947 and became known for his gay “beefcake” oil paintings, many of which depicted Southwestern ranch hands and Adonis-like cowboys. He created cover art for male magazines like *Physique Pictorial* and

Demi-Gods, which got away with publishing photos and illustrations of men in G-strings by billing themselves as “health and fitness” publications.

The scene at The Eagle was straight out of a Quaintance painting, especially 1954's *Saturday Night*, in which four men lean over a bar in what can only be described as an ode to indigo bulge and butt. “He put Levi's on the map as a garment that was sexy as well as serviceable,” Ken Furtado and John Waybright wrote in their biography, *Quaintance: The Short Life of an American Art Pioneer*. It's impossible to know for sure, but some writers and historians, especially in queer culture, credit Quaintance with being the first to fetishize jeans.

When he moved to Phoenix, Arizona, in the 1950s, the painter entered his “golden era,” creating work that celebrated the fantasy of his new desert home. Writer Reed Massengill wrote that this home, which he called Rancho Siesta, was a place of “male camaraderie, tight Levi's, and models who lived just a horseback ride away” — in other words, a full-on technicolor denim daydream. In *Sunset* (1953), a man in a cowboy hat, jeans and assless chaps (another highly fetishized piece of gay leather culture) watches a man slipping out of his jeans as two men shower in the background beside a saguaro. Denim also appears in *Red Dust* (1955), which portrays the artist's lover, Edwardo, shirtless with a lasso in front of a stampede of horses. And in *Lake Apache* (1954), two cowboys prepare to skinny-dip in a canyon, their jeans draped over a saddle.

Over time, Quaintance's paintings gathered such a large, dedicated fan base that he formed Quaintance Studios, a mail-order business that sent out a catalog of prints, postcards and sculptures of his art. At its peak, he garnered around 10,000 subscribers, an analog business reminiscent of today's OnlyFans, where sex workers and celebrities distribute adult content online directly to paying subscribers.

But while the artist insisted that his Rancho Siesta was located in “Paradise Valley” amid sprawling, creosote-dotted acres, it was always a fantasy: The real Rancho Siesta was Quaintance's suburban home in east Phoenix — a place that didn't even have a pool for skinny dipping. For a painting like *Rainbow Falls*, for example, Quaintance draped white sheets down a staircase and leaving

his models to pretend they were bathing in Havasupai Falls. Even the jeans he painted were a fantasy, so impossibly tight that the jacked cowboys who wore them looked as if they'd been sprayed with indigo body paint. And yet they somehow appeared comfortable wearing them as they trekked across the desert and wrestled on slickrock.

Quaintance carefully constructed his own myth, often painting idealized self-portraits and even “airbrushed” photos of himself with paint. He truly lived the fantasy. And while he dressed his lovers, models and daydreams in Levi's, he never wore them himself. “George dressed well; he always wore tailored Western clothing, but never jeans,” one of his exes told Quaintance's biographers.

In the repressive era Quaintance lived through, his beefcake paintings gave queer men access to a heavily romanticized cowboy utopia. His models gave the fantasy legs and let viewers' imaginations run wild. More than 70 years after his death, his legacy lives on in leather bars like The Eagle, gay rodeos and adult street fairs. As for my RUFSKINs, they're now retired; I've opted instead for the practicality of straight-legs and boot cuts. I drift through the city and desert in my own cloud pants, dyed cerulean like Quaintance's fantastical desert skies. ✨

Miles W. Griffiths is a writer and journalist based in Southern California.

Jeans have long been synonymous with an effortless cool, from gay biker clubs to queer icons like Marlon Brando and James Dean.

Red Dust, which portrays the artist's lover, Edwardo. George Quaintance / Courtesy of GayArtCollection.com

WASHINGTON

The masked marauders are out in force! Batten down the hatches: An unidentified woman living in Poulsbo, Washington, had to call 911 after an army of around 100 raccoons surrounded her home. According to KOMO News, deputies came to her rescue after she was forced to flee by car to escape the peskily persistent varmints, which were pestering her night and day, demanding food. Perhaps it's merely a coincidence that she's been feeding local raccoons for 35 years, though according to her, they've only recently become a problem. "Somehow the word got out in raccoon land, and they all showed up to her house expecting a meal," said Kevin McCarty, a spokesman for the Kitsap County Sheriff's Office, nbcnews.com reported. Fortunately, there have been no recent reports of rabies in the Kitsap County raccoon community, and no one's been bitten or injured, except for a neighbor's dog, who got into a scuffle with one and was taken to a vet. Raccoon infestation is an expensive problem; a trapping company told the woman that it would cost an estimated \$500 per raccoon, meaning upward of \$50,000 for the whole bunch. The best way to avoid infestations? Remember that it just takes one misplaced "s" to turn a "pet" into a "pest." SO DON'T FEED THEM. And hire a proofreader.

OREGON

Speaking of wily rascals, someone, or a group of someones, in Bend, Oregon, have been putting googly eyes on public sculptures, *The Rogue Valley Times* reported. Googly eyes — the stick-on plastic novelty items used for DIY crafts — have appeared on several of Bend's roundabout sculptures. "Art bombing," as this has been dubbed, might seem like a harmless and funny prank, but Romy Mortensen,

president of the Art in Public Places board, said "isn't worth the laughs," mainly because the adhesives used to stick on the googly eyes might damage the art. Jacob Larsen, the city's communications manager, agrees, adding that removing things like googly eyes and repairing the damage misallocates valuable city resources. "City staff who respond to make repairs to roundabout art are taken away from performing core duties for the community, such as street sweeping, snow plowing and pothole repairs," Mortensen said that some sculptures were so damaged that

Art in Public Places had to bring in a conservator to address the issue. At least they knew who to call; the same conservator had previously restored a roundabout sculpture that was damaged by pineapple juice. "We can tolerate the occasional sweater or holiday attire (to dress up a statue), but when we're getting into acidic fruits and vegetables, (googly-eye) adhesive or even just outright graffiti, that's a whole other level we haven't seen before," Mortensen said. We can only hope some genius discovers a gentler and less destructive way to enhance public art with giant



Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

googly eyes, because frankly, we could all use a good laugh.

COLORADO

It's not every day that exotic marsupials from the Land Down Under are glimpsed galumphing around the streets of Durango, Colorado. Which is why the call police dispatchers received was so memorable. "Hi. So, I know this is going to sound completely insane. I was just downtown, and I was walking home from work. There is, like, a baby kangaroo with a diaper on, wandering around Main Street." KRDO aired the Durango police cam footage, which showed a little marsupial hopping down the middle of a dark and quiet street, and yes, it was wearing a diaper. And yes, it was as adorable as it sounds. The juvenile red kangaroo fled its owner's home after an alarm went off, durangoherald.com reported. Officers can be seen on the police video joking and giggling while in "hop pursuit" of the little joey. The kangaroo's owner eventually arrived on the scene and safely recovered the errant pet, because, in case you're wondering, yes, red kangaroos are legal to keep as pets in Colorado, according to Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

WASHINGTON

People who think of their cherished pets as family can now snuggle in peace with them for all eternity, thanks to a unique cemetery in eastern Washington, krem.com reports. Timber Run Reserve, the new cemetery, will cremate you and your beloved pet and lay you to rest together — assuming you're both dead, of course — either in a memorial niche wall or in the ground underneath a nicely engraved stone. It's a lovely idea, whether your fur baby is a German shepherd or a kangaroo. No word about raccoons, though. ☼

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#IAM THE WEST

MIEL FRANCO PÉREZ (THEY/THEM/ELLE)
DJ and founder of ¡DYKED! (sapphic, queer
pop-up dance, music and art events)
Salt Lake City, Utah

The first event was at Mobile Moon (a queer and femme-led gardening co-op) on a Sunday. It started at 2 p.m. and ended at 10 p.m., so it was very accessible; people could show up without any pressure to stay up all night, and they could look around in the daylight and see each other and meet each other. Seeing the entire dance floor filled with queer, sapphic, trans joy was such a powerful experience: We're all here together, and we've always wanted to be here together. We've always craved this connection. Just because spaces for us don't exist doesn't mean we don't deserve them. I feel like it is crucial, especially in a place like Utah, to allow people with experiences like mine to have a space where we can safely exist and express ourselves without being pushed around or judged or ashamed or fetishized — without really worrying about men questioning us or groping us or looking down on us.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.

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