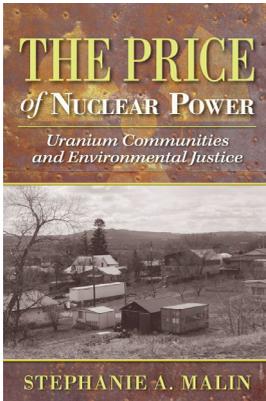


# The Price of Nuclear Power

*Stephanie Malin  
interviewed by  
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*Dr Malin is Professor of Environmental Sociology at Colorado State University. The Price of Nuclear Power: Uranium Communities and Environmental Justice is published by Rutgers University Press. She co-founded and helps lead CSU's Center for Environmental Justice. Superfund sites are polluted locations in the US requiring long-term response to mitigate environmental contamination, using federal resources.*

*Stephanie Malin is a sociologist of environment, globalization, and development, focusing on community-level outcomes of natural resource development. Her main interests include environmental justice, environmental health, social mobilization, poverty, and political economy of energy development. Stephanie examines how these variables intersect in rural communities across the American West and Northeast. We caught up to discuss her work on uranium communities and her thoughts about environmental justice and environmentalism in the Anthropocene.*

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## **What first inspired you to work on uranium issues, during your scholarship?**

I became aware of uranium issues late in college, when I first discovered environmental sociology as part of my coursework in Sociology and Anthropology. I was working on a final project for a capstone course at Truman State, and I learned that the Superfund tax on corporations had been allowed to expire a few years prior. I began exploring the impacts to the Superfund and to communities that hosted these risky sites. Shortly after, when I moved to Utah for graduate school at Utah State, I focused on the Superfund sites in that state, which then led me to the communities that had been contaminated by uranium mills, mines, and production. My thesis research focused on Monticello, Utah, which was a community that has hosted a uranium mill until 1960, and which was still reeling from

environmental contamination of their community – even after two Superfund sites had been designated there and remediated. My first fieldwork trip took me to that town, and since that time I’ve been deeply invested in that community and in others that had similar histories. In fact, I am still dear friends with some of the people I first interviewed then, including Fritz and Barbara Pipkin.

### **What is it like to spend time with people who have been affected by uranium mining?**

Heart-wrenching, humbling, and inspiring. Heart-wrenching because the depth of the injustice can be so frustrating and so immense at times. People I’ve worked with often live in rural places that dealt with persistent poverty, and yet they helped produce uranium for the Manhattan Project, then for the Cold War, and also for power production. At the time, they had no idea of the risks they were taking on and the ways these would change their lives and their towns. In spaces like the Diné (Navajo) lands and other Tribal communities, people often had even less recourse and more risk – and these are often the spaces where, today, people have more limited access to clean water and electricity while living amid abandoned mines and ongoing contamination. The injustice of it all can be infuriating, though these communities often have the most resilient attitudes in response.

They helped build the US into the political and economic powerhouse it was following World War Two – for better or worse. But now that community members experience cancer clusters, birth defects and stillbirths, many kinds of lung diseases, and the legacies of ongoing contamination – many feel discarded, ignored, and devalued by the US government and by the private companies that also capitalized on uranium production. Monticello residents like Barbara and Fritz Pipkin, for example, have been working for decades to get basic services like cancer screening and treatment facilities and federal funding for this in their community – and their fight continues decades later. Tribal communities such as the Laguna Pueblo have worked for decades to clean up the largest open-pit uranium mine in the world. And though they’ve been incredibly and impressively enterprising in response, the risks just keep on hitting their community. These are just two examples in a sea of them.

So the environmental injustices, the health inequities of it all can just be a little overwhelming, even for someone like me, who doesn’t live in these communities. But this is also precisely why I feel humbled and inspired

spending time with and learning from people who live in uranium communities. Many of them have become long-term acquaintances and friends. I've been humbled to see how they continue to fight for recognition and justice, even in the face of rampant structural inequities and, at times, their own daily struggles with health problems. It's been deeply moving to me how their actions are motivated by deep concern for and love of their neighbours, their communities, and the land on which they live. It's truly humbling to watch the humour, the grace, and the perspective they bring to their struggles. It has inspired me to remain hopeful, even when encountering structural barriers and inequities that seem almost too much to overcome. I'm reminded again and again of how to be resilient, how to focus on the small wins, and how to always have humour intact.

**Did you face any challenges while working on your first book *The Price of Nuclear Power*?**

I feel very lucky to have the platform and the privilege to have written this book – and to tell the stories of these uranium communities. I was fortunate enough to have the space to work on the book during my postdoctoral fellowship at Brown University, thanks to Dr. Phil Brown, and I had immense support from my publisher, Rutgers University Press. My one challenge, really more of a regret, was that I wasn't able to work as closely then as I do now with some of the Tribal and Native communities most affected by uranium production. This was mostly because I was drawing on the research and fieldwork I conducted as a graduate student, which hadn't allowed me the time needed to build meaningful relationships with Diné (Navajo) communities or other impacted Native communities and people. So instead of coming in and extracting knowledge, I had to hold off and work with these communities later in my career, when I had the time and resources to make reciprocity part of the equation. I'm thrilled to be working with some of these communities now, and I do cover their experiences in *The Price of Nuclear Power*, but it was more delayed than I would have preferred.

In the book, I also discuss 'sites of acceptance' that emerge in communities like Nucla and Naturita, Colorado, where a critical mass of people support the renewal of uranium production or other activities that are environmentally risky and often costly to people in terms of their health and wellbeing over the longer term. These spaces can be quite politically conservative, and so I dealt with a good amount of animosity

while conducting fieldwork there, from a small sliver of the people I encountered. Even here, the vast majority of people I met were kind, generous with their time, and had well-formed ideas about why they supported the industry. But you can't please everyone or align with everyone's political views, and it gave me a bit of a preview of the current deep divides in our country. As a sociologist, then, I chose to view that all as an educational experience and even have a sense of humour about it.

### ***Do you have any fieldwork stories?***

Most of my fieldwork has been a gift of lifelong learning. I've been able to visit these remote, beautiful spaces in the red rocks and desert of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. I've been able to meet a whole assortment of people who have taught me a good deal. My graduate work in Utah, and in these communities, compelled me to live in the American West and to work on fighting for environmental justice here.

But the fieldwork has also introduced me to experiences of acute risk and loss. As an example, when I conducted fieldwork in Uravan, Colorado, the women who founded the Rimrocker Historical Society were kind enough to take me on a private tour of the former town. Uravan had been a uranium community, in fact it was a company town that produced uranium and vanadium. The town was eventually identified as a Superfund site in the early 2000s and was so contaminated that it was evacuated and then razed to the ground, with all the town's structures burned and buried in a repository where the town used to be. Accompanying some of the women on this tour – women who'd grown up in Uravan and gone to school there, used the swimming pool there as little kids, and who now looked out on an empty landscape – that was heartbreaking. To see the loss of community and the ways that people had been used so instrumentally to aid in such a long-term, ultimately somewhat pointless Cold War effort.

I've also had some confrontational experiences with people who prefer to take aggressive anti-science and anti-intellectual positions regarding research and any criticism of industries like uranium production. As a graduate student, I had editorials written about me and my research in papers in communities that deeply supported renewed uranium production. The editorials were full of half-truths, personal attacks, and other rather shocking accusations about university research. But, as I mentioned earlier, this taught me to deal with divisiveness, taught me how to get out of the headspace where I had to be liked by everyone, and really prepared me to have a thicker skin and see early on how to deal with, understand, and hopefully help heal some of today's deepest societal divides.

**You work more broadly across environmental justice in the Anthropocene — how do you think things are changing?**

As with many other people working on social justice issues, I see a mixture of great opportunity and hope – and scary regression and anti-truth pushing back on those collective efforts. We live in a remarkable, vital time where we have so much responsibility to undo centuries of injustice. We live at a time when the stakes are so high – and when neoliberal attitudes that encourage us to essentially worship economic markets, distrust public institutions, and champion deregulation have been so internalized by many people benefiting from the status quo – so many people actively fight against their best interests. They also dismiss collective action as the antithesis of being American. Sometimes, honestly, it's just mystifying to me. But my first book explores why this happens, and my forthcoming book with Meghan Kallman does as well, even more in depth – so I won't belabour the point.

I feel it's my responsibility as a sociologist, and as a member of various communities, to push back on those sentiments. To help us see a different path where we can build more sustainable, reciprocal, and joyful communities and societies. I've just finished reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and a few years ago I first read Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone's book *Active Hope*. Each day, both of these books remind me of my responsibilities – the ones that come with the privilege of being a university professor and a white woman. And they remind me to remain actively hopeful, joyful, and resolute even when it seems like the world may be far beyond repair. Climate crisis, nuclear contamination, constant assaults on black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) – all of these ongoing affronts to justice can make it difficult to remain hopeful. But fighting for environmental justice and change in that direction is all I can do – again, it's my responsibility. As Kimmerer says so eloquently in her book, 'the natural world relies on us to do good things ... You have to contribute to the wellbeing of the world ... whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world'. Even when it seems daunting, even when it seems perhaps 'cheesy' for a social scientist to move in that direction, I feel it's my role and my responsibility. Really, I have no other choice. To paraphrase Kristin Shrader-Frechette, right now there is too much at stake to be neutral – and good scientists can be objective without being neutral.

**I hear you've been working on a new book - how does it develop our understanding of environmental justice?**

Well, my co-author Meghan Kallman and I have just completed the first draft. I was amazed we kept going during COVID-19, but we did it. It's under contract with Rutgers University Press, and we're hopeful it will be out in late 2021.

The whole approach of the book is to show how we can use environmental sociology to build something better. So few people even know what environmental sociology is, and yet the discipline has been addressing some of the biggest existential questions of our time for decades. We have been conducting rigorous, policy-relevant research around environmental injustices, public and environmental health, racial and class-based inequities and their roots in colonialism and rampant globalization, and the gradual privatization and commodification of public spaces and nature. But so few people know about it or can access our findings. We have some solutions to many of the problems that seem most intractable – but we have to be braver about claiming and asserting them, and in ways that are useful and accessible to people.

But, really, more than us having all the answers, this book is about the communities and places we highlight where people are already doing this. We especially draw on case studies and examples of communities where visionary people are building better communities. We're just lucky to have the platform to tell their stories.

So in this book, we unpack and democratise that knowledge, or at least we hope to. The first half explains and then deconstructs the neoliberal philosophies and policies I described a bit above, the ones that encourage people to value the wellbeing and de-regulation of market systems over the wellbeing of people and the integrity of our planet, the only home we have. The second half of the book then shows how we can build something better – a world not based on consumerism, or environmental degradation, or lonely individualism. But a world built on reclaiming public spaces and rebuilding more distributive and regenerative systems and relations. We utilize the case studies I mentioned, based on interviews with communities and visionary leaders doing just this, to illustrate what this looks like and how we can all help move in that direction. I'm very excited for it to come out, and for the book to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.