
**Reviewed by** Drew Folk (Independent Scholar)

**Published on** H-Environment (December, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

The Upper Great Plains has long been a distinctive land ripe with subtle and straightforward contradictions. It is a place overtly conservative, yet home to radical political movements, a seemingly inhospitable, largely arid subregion nonetheless home to fertile soil and unique, bountiful grasslands. The individuals who live here are themselves unique conundrums, people who base many of their decisions on personal pragmatism as much as probity, the two not always being mutually exclusive. These factors are no more apparent than in twenty-first century northeastern Nebraska, the setting for Derek Moscato’s illuminating and controversial study, *Dirt Persuasion: Civic Environmental Populism and the Heartland’s Pipeline Fight*, an examination of local grassroots efforts to prevent the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline by a Canadian company, TransCanada; the narrative methods for implementing this challenge; and the ongoing socio-environmental legacy of this controversial project and those opposed to it.

Utilizing US Census Bureau and US Energy Information Administration information, personal interviews, and numerous secondary sources discussing populism, environmentalism/climate challenges, public relations, communications, and narrative framing, Moscato argues that between 2011 and 2021, the proposed Keystone XL pipeline route across eastern Nebraska was defeated by the grassroots efforts of the progressive political activist group, Bold Nebraska, due to their excellent grasp of local ideology and motivations simultaneously coupled with a masterful use of narrative framing in online and mainstream media sources. The establishment of a broad coalition of local support from traditionally disparate groups, ranging from indigenous groups to agriculturalists and private landowners, was essential to this success, as individuals who shared personal environmental or economic grievances caused by the establishment of the proposed pipeline were effectively held together with this common narrative focus over numerous years, a period in which public support for Bold Nebraska’s efforts increased na-
tionwide. Moscato deftly breaks down the successes and methods of Bold Nebraska, as well as describes its coalition members, across seven chapters focusing on the origins of TransCanada’s Keystone XL pipeline, the formation of Bold Nebraska and its early agenda regarding national health care, the influence of its founder and current Democratic Nebraska chairperson, Jane Kleeb, local Nebraskans’ environmental concerns based in materiality, the populist nature of the Bold Nebraska movement, Bold Nebraska’s successful use of metaphorical and context framing to gain public support, the personal experiences of rural Nebraskans with TransCanada and how this led them to be vocal opponents of the pipeline, and Bold Nebraska’s encouragement of civic participation as key to successful activism. Different types of framing ranging from collective action to strategic are also discussed and placed in context with Bold Nebraska’s successful public relations and narrative framing acumen. The astroturf, canned efforts of TransCanada stood no chance against this well-prepared political foe, especially when they were repeatedly framed as outsiders fighting against local interests.

Moscato succinctly outlines Kleeb’s efforts at coalition building through the utilization of populist rhetoric, rhetoric that appealed to local northeastern Nebraska farmers and ranchers and the small Native American population on a personal level, as in their eyes they were fighting for their way of life. He gains much of this information through his main, strongest primary source, personal interviews, and when coupled with secondary sources deftly detailing the different types of narrative framing, he adequately argues that the strengths of Bold Nebraska, and by extension Kleeb, in blocking the interests of outside “elites” bent on harming Nebraska’s fragile agricultural lands and usurping local ownership rights, was a strong public relations campaign which complemented, if not drove, grassroots organizing, a tool national, “elite” environmental groups had little past success at implementing in rural locations. In short, Bold Nebraska built connections that were pertinent to that specific period in time, acknowledging local individuals where they were at, physically as well as in their belief systems, a tactic Moscato describes as “hyperlocalization” (pp. 176, 180). Rural people felt seen and energized by these connections, a factor that was essential to keeping the anti-Keystone XL pipeline group motivated and focused. Moscato highlights how this worked by emphasizing the personal experiences of Nebraska individuals participating in the anti-pipeline movement who lived in northeast Nebraska counties affected by the proposed route, including farmers Art and Helen Tanderup and rancher Randy Thompson; how they felt bullied or ignored by the Canadian company as it made plans for their land; and how, in turn, Bold Nebraska appealed to their emotional connection to their land, in so doing making them de facto environmentalists, a title none of them would have welcomed just years prior to the surveying of the Keystone XL pipeline. These personal interviews clearly demonstrate that, at least for these individuals specifically, their grievances motivated their local grassroots activism. Dirt Persuasion will be the principal work scholars rely on in subsequent years regarding Nebraska landholder motivations as the historiography on the subject continues to develop.

Despite Moscato’s strengths in discussing Bold Nebraska’s organizational and media skills, as well as his clear outline of rural antagonisms and motivations against the Keystone XL pipeline, Dirt Persuasion does have significant shortcomings and weaknesses that render the work somewhat incomplete and problematic. Moscato utilizes limited primary resources beyond personal interviews with rural Nebraskans and Bold Nebraska members, instead choosing to utilize a significant number of secondary sources to support his study, sources which were not adequately footnoted, the book having no notes whatsoever. Researching additional primary sources, such as land deeds, pipeline permit records, and corporate memos on
the proposed pipeline route (if available), would have provided greater context to the book’s overall narrative, especially Moscato’s discussion of the emotions surrounding landownership and property rights. A further issue is Moscato’s repeated use of the examples of the Tanderups and Thompson as seeming avatars for the rest of the agriculturalists on the pipeline route. There are no interviews of farmers along the Keystone XL pipeline route in southern Nebraska who supported Bold Nebraska’s efforts, nor of agriculturalists who supported the pipeline, thus rendering a comprehensive look at rural perspectives on the topic incomplete. While Moscato admits that his work does not examine the TransCanada perspective, it would have nonetheless been better to have included some interviews with their corporation members, so that a better balanced accounting of what transpired during this period is provided to the reader.

*Dirt Persuasion* is additionally concerning as it provides a borderline hagiographic accounting of Jane Kleeb’s leadership skills and the methods she utilized to gain support for Bold Nebraska’s agenda from ranchers and farmers, once again providing a one-sided narrative that fails to account for the whole breadth and scope of historical ramifications and issues caused by Kleeb’s leadership and focus on “hyperlocalization.” Moscato discusses the importance of Bold Nebraska and Kleeb’s use of populist rhetoric, but fails to critique the merits of their methodology, framing its use as some kind of altruistic, civic engaging tool, while downplaying the fact that Kleeb utilized traditional conservative, nativist populist dog whistles in pushing her agenda (e.g., locals vs. outsiders, locals vs. foreign interests/usurpers, locals vs. government elites at all levels, etc.), further contending that this methodology was solely aimed at TransCanada and not individual Canadians (a significant number of whom are undoubtedly employed by TransCanada). Kleeb utilized negative methods to stoke Nebraskans’ fears about their property rights in order to transform them into inadvertent environmentalists, an impermanent transition that did not turn Nebraskans into national environmental activists and only succeeded on a micro level because it was based in local pragmatism and self-interest. Kleeb and the Nebraska Democratic Party had no success in shifting this coalition to support other progressive political issues (health care, LGBTQ rights, women’s health care rights, etc.), largely because doing so did not appeal to the personal values of the conservative voting base of the 3rd Congressional District of Nebraska, including the northeastern part of the state. Moscato does not point out these shortcomings in Bold Nebraska’s long-term strategy in great detail, nor does he address rural Nebraska’s long history of loyalty to Republican politicians and the party’s national platform (including the current authoritarian one), as well as rural bigoted attitudes toward those who were/are not like them (i.e., white, straight, cisgender conservatives), instead speculating that Nebraskans may have voted for Trump as some kind of protest vote against partisan politics (ignoring the fact that Trump was highly vitriolic and partisan), not really believing that he would enact the negative policies he campaigned on. Whereas Nebraskans statewide periodically elected Democratic governors and senators in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the third district remains heavily Republican, a factor which Moscato leaves out.[1] He instead glosses over inconvenient historical, political truths by blaming Democrats for not doing a better job of reaching out to rural Nebraskans in the 2016 election, a voting bloc that rejected them long before this moment, having never voted for a Democrat for Congress since the district’s current make-up was established in 1963. [2] A more thorough account would have criticized Kleeb for pandering to rural voters’ base instincts and how this may have backfired, instead providing Trump thousands of aggrieved voters already primed to vote against liberals and target “outside elites,” a term which is as individually vague and malleable as it is politically nonde-
cript. Trump appealed to rural Nebraskan grievances, but how justified are their grievances and how based in reality, not bigotry, are they? Kleeb and Bold Nebraska may have been justified in fighting the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, but were their methods devoid of local political consequences? While not the prime impetus of his study, by failing to address Nebraskan political realities in *Dirt Persuasion*, Moscato has left many unanswered questions, queries that require answers in order to place the decade-long fight over the Keystone XL pipeline, and its accompanying media narrative, in better regional/national political and historical context.

The book’s numerous issues aside, *Dirt Persuasion: Civic Environmental Populism and the Heartland’s Pipeline Fight* is an important contribution to the environmental and social historiography of the Great Plains, a cornerstone from which subsequent scholars can build their own research upon and answer in more well-rounded detail many of the Keystone XL pipeline fight’s many unresolved questions. It is recommended for anyone interested in the importance of narrative framing in media, as well as the history of early twenty-first-century rural life in Nebraska and on the Great Plains.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment](https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment)

**Citation:** Drew Folk. Review of Moscato, Derek, *Dirt Persuasion: Civic Environmental Populism and the Heartland’s Pipeline Fight*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2023.