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“There It Is, Take It!”

Water Extraction and Imperial Los Angeles

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History 191C: Imperial Cities

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Introduction

“There it is, take it!”¹ William Mulholland’s famous words at the first delivery of the Los Angeles Aqueduct signify a major engineering feat for his city, and a win for the future of its water supply. But for the Owens Valley, the source of this water importation, these words were all too appropriate for the city’s actions to build the aqueduct in the first place. Facing a dry climate, growing population, and limited local sources, the City of Los Angeles turned its attention to the Owens River in Eastern California, and began a transportation project that would permanently change both the city and its ruralities. By engaging in this resource extraction, the Los Angeles metropole ignored and silenced the resistance of Owens Valley farmers and residents, effectively creating an imperial dynamic that worked to further wealthy urban interests to the direct harm of rural livelihoods. In the making of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, the City of Los Angeles began an extractive relationship with the Owens River Valley and formed a new imperial city fundamentally dependent on the exploitation of its hinterland.

Early Los Angeles

The formation of early Los Angeles, in many ways, stemmed from control of the city’s most precious resource: water. As said by Carey McWilliams, “Los Angeles... has developed in spite of its location rather than because of it.”² The Los Angeles region is large, dry, and isolated on all sides via mountains, desert, and ocean. The pueblo of Los Angeles was a product of Spanish colonialism in the 18th century, selected for its access to the water from the adjacent Los Angeles River. Adding to the imperial nature of the city’s growth, this Spanish pueblo heavily

¹ Louis Sahagun, “‘There It Is – Take It’: A Century of Marvel and Controversy,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 2013, <https://graphics.latimes.com/me-aqueduct/>.

² Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1946), 13.

depended on the forced labor of Indigenous Americans in the surrounding territories.³ Following the Spanish American War and the formation of the City of Los Angeles, the right to use and manage the Los Angeles River became highly contested – in the infant city, water was already synonymous with power. The court battle for control of the Los Angeles River was the first contest of water politics in Los Angeles. Sidestepping California’s major water rights frameworks of riparian and appropriative water rights, the Los Angeles River was ultimately awarded to the city by a provision of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which promised that the pueblo’s old agreements (including river rights) continued to be honored under the United States government.⁴ While this was a major victory for Los Angeles’s ability to satisfy a growing population’s thirst, it was not to be the last battle over water.

A key theme of the development of Los Angeles as an imperial city is the competing demands of expansion and limited resources. Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* describes Los Angeles as a city of real estate agents, always looking for a way to sell and expand. And, as he argues, one cannot sell Los Angeles land to migrants without the guarantee of water.⁵ Urban growth in Southern California emerged here as a perpetual cycle of population boom, resource shortage, resource acquisition, and boom again. When evaluating this cycle, historians neglect to highlight the impact of these acquisitions. The resources seized by Los Angeles to further its growth are not ready for the taking of city developers and boosters, contrary to urban perception. The realities of this growth means more and more communities have their precious resources – like water, land, and agricultural potential – forcibly taken, causing environmental and economic devastation in these areas.

³ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 42.

⁴ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 186.

⁵ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso Books, 1990), 25.

Rights to the Water

A city brimming with potential growth and population explosion needs water, and a lot of it. William Mulholland, the superintendent of the Los Angeles Water Department, saw this burgeoning demand. “The city of the Angels had been growing so fast that those responsible for its proper development foresaw that unless a greater water supply could be secured it would have to stop growing, a thing not on the program of the Los Angeles boosters.”⁶ The city was not going to stop growing. Mulholland and the urban water providers needed to find a way to bring more water for the city. To be clear, this water “need” was manufactured by developers and boosters in the growing city – including the ambitions of Mulholland himself.

The Owens Valley in Inyo County presented an opportunity for Mulholland and the city’s expansion of power. To allow for the ambitions of Los Angeles boosters, more water would be needed – a lot more. Looking east to the Owens Valley, Mulholland saw an opportunity to source enough water for millions of people to come.⁷ The Owens Valley, however, was not devoid of its own population. Here, a largely agrarian community of about 5,000 in 1905 depended on the Owens River and its tributaries for their livelihoods, especially cattle ranching and farming on the valley’s then-fertile soil.⁸ The city of Los Angeles, with a population of 160,000 at the same time, nonetheless saw the Owens River water as theirs for the taking.

To secure river rights without alerting the community or speculators to the city’s plans for extraction, former Mayor Fred Eaton “started making secret contracts for the purchase of lands

⁶ Meyer Lissner, “Bill Mulholland,” *The American Magazine*, April 1, 1912, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/bill-mulholland>.

⁷ “Our View of the Owens River Project,” *Evening News*, October 18, 1906, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/our-view-owens-river-project>.

⁸ Don J. Kinsey, “The Owens Valley Dispute; The Story of Owens Valley, Its Dealings with the City of Los Angeles and the Dynamiting Attacks Upon the City’s Aqueduct: Part 2,” *Los Angeles Ledger*, October 7, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-dispute-story-owens-valley-its-dealings-city-los-angeles-and-dynamiting-0>.

controlling water rights and reservoir sites on the Owens river and taking options from riparian owners.”⁹ Eaton’s plan was to buy up all the land connected with riparian Owens River rights – a type of water right that allowed landowners bordering a body of water to take virtually all the water they needed from said source. Acting as a cattle rancher, Eaton “bought up, or at least had options on, all of the land on which there was any right around Owens lake.”¹⁰ The overwhelming volume of water acquired by Eaton was never intended for cattle, but instead to sell to the City of Los Angeles. By operating “separately” from the city, Eaton was able to quietly and effectively secure enough water for future millions in Los Angeles, and intentionally keep the Owens Valley community in the dark the entire time.

Los Angeles’s taking of Owens Valley water can clearly be defined as an imperial acquisition, and an early instance of Los Angeles as a new metropole. Developers and Los Angeles locals barely considered the human or economic impacts of the near-total diversion of the Owens River. A *Hollywood Daily Citizen* article found the potential of shortage in Los Angeles an insufferable risk compared to the “trivial” cost of the lands bought by Eaton.¹¹ Yet, the Los Angeles River had been capable of supplying the city’s then-capacity of 160,000 even in dry years.¹² The water of the Owens Valley was not needed to support the city, it was *wanted* to support the economic expansion goals of developers and boosters (including Mulholland) that could not continue to sell Los Angeles without the promise of water - and lots of it. The “need”

⁹ “City Was Thirsty When Project Was Proposed,” *Los Angeles Record*, March 7, 1931, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/city-was-thirsty-when-project-was-proposed>.

¹⁰ “Former Mayor Has Golden Key; Broad Acres and Herds of Cattle are Fred Eaton's Reward for Solving Water Problem for Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, n.d., <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/former-mayor-has-golden-key-broad-acres-and-herds-cattle-are-fred-eatons-reward-solving>.

¹¹ “For Consideration,” *Hollywood Daily Citizen*, August 31, 1929, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/consideration>.

¹² Kinsey, “The Owens Valley Dispute.”

for this water, which was the justification for Los Angeles imperial intervention, was entirely an economic fabrication to allow for continued growth and profit by a few.

Critics of the project, including those based in Los Angeles, saw the acquisition of Owens River rights as not only unethical but illegal. A 1906 article published in the Los Angeles *Evening News* argues that the water that would be imported to Los Angeles “are just as much ours, to transmit out of the valley, as is the cash of the local savings banks, to distribute.”¹³ The City of Los Angeles, in this perspective, has no rational claim to take the water of the Owens River for its own ends. Further, the article asks fellow Angelenos, “What right have we to appropriate water enough to supply a city of three millions? No court of equity would consider such a plea.”¹⁴ Not only is the moral right to siphon this water under intense scrutiny, the *Evening News* argues that the sheer quantity of water the city planned to appropriate is untenable. The water rights acquired by Fred Eaton are for riparian water use and not sale or exportation, adding another potential legal challenge to the city’s big plans.

The authors are not wrong: by diverting enough water to supply 3 million people, the city would circumvent the appropriative rights seniority doctrine and potentially shortchange legal rights holders by as many as 1.7 million inches of water.¹⁵ Further, while Mulholland publicly claimed the city would only divert flood waters above the usual Owens River flows, the aqueduct had always planned to use its *full* water rights - dramatically decreasing downstream water access.¹⁶ The California Legislative Board of Water and Power Commissioners, per the *Los Angeles Evening Express*, “bitterly condemn[ed] the city for its purchase of lands and water

¹³ “Our View,” *Evening News*.

¹⁴ “Our View,” *Evening News*.

¹⁵ “Our View,” *Evening News*.

¹⁶ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986), 73.

rights in Owens valley.”¹⁷ Even some contemporaries noted the aggressive and vicious tactics employed by the City of Los Angeles to gain exclusive control of a prized resource for the Owens Valley, yet there was little residents could do to act upon this disapproval against the city’s major political power.

The Los Angeles Aqueduct and the watering of the city would not have been possible without the acquisition of significant Owens River riparian rights. These rights were accrued through covert, underhanded dealings between former mayor Fred Eaton and the city government. While supporters may argue that the secrecy was necessary to prevent real estate speculation, the reality of this deception served to essentially steal the Owens River out from under the residents of this valley. This process was not only dirty but illegal, siphoning far more water than the city’s riparian rights allowed, and transporting it in violation of appropriative right seniority rules. What gives a metropole the right to colonize an area and extract its resources? The stealing of the Owens River is vital to understanding the imperial dimensions of this issue, and the growth of Los Angeles into the city it is today.

Resistance

With a water supply secured, Mulholland and the City of Los Angeles were ready to begin building their aqueduct. Mulholland reported the aqueduct’s construction to take five years, and the construction was dependent on bond financing and the sale of power developed through the downhill flow of water in the aqueduct.¹⁸ However, some still viewed the cost of the

¹⁷ “L.A. Defendant in Water Row,” *Los Angeles Evening Express*, April 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/la-defendant-water-row>.

¹⁸ “Owens River Water Project in Danger,” *Los Angeles Express*, January 30, 1907, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-river-water-project-danger>.

project as prohibitive – this imperial effort was projected to cost upward of \$50 million,¹⁹ though ultimately landing at \$23 million dollars for the city. Project opponents felt that it would cost far less to supply water to a smaller population, especially since they “don’t own enough water to warrant that expense” and “with 800,000 inches of storm water appropriated ahead of ours, it is evident that we cannot impound a drop until those claims are satisfied.”²⁰ Construction faced political and economic blasts from many sources, especially Los Angeles residents who did not want to finance the neo-imperial project of the city’s real estate boosters.

Owens Valley residents also met the project with resistance, replicating a common theme of imperial interactions. When Congress was first presented with a bill for approval of the project, it was met with fierce opposition and the threat of defeat. However, following the lobbying efforts of Los Angeles, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ultimately decided against the “opposition of the few settlers in Owens Valley”, causing Congress to promptly pass the bill.²¹ This circumvented a Bureau of Reclamation irrigation project that was in the works for the region, and demonstrated the near total political dominance of urban Los Angeles over the rural territory. When residents tried to legally secure their water rights to tributaries of the Owens River – legal claims far stronger than the riparian rights misuse by Los Angeles – the city used its political power again to block these petitions.²² The local claims included use for farms and the local economy, which were needs that Los Angeles’s Water Commission viewed as less

¹⁹ “He’s a Shrewd Man, Is Eaton,” *The Evening News*, February 22, 1906, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/hes-shrewd-man-eaton>.

²⁰ “He’s a Shrewd Man,” *The Evening News*.

²¹ Don J. Kinsey, “The Owens Valley Dispute; The Story of Owens Valley, Its Dealings with the City of Los Angeles and the Dynamiting Attacks Upon the City’s Aqueduct: Part 3,” *Los Angeles Ledger*, October 14, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-dispute-story-owens-valley-its-dealings-city-los-angeles-and-dynamiting-1>.

²² “Fight Efforts to Steal Owens River,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, September 8, 1906, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/fight-efforts-steal-owens-river>.

important than “the public benefit of several hundreds of thousands of people”.²³ And this number was constantly growing: “to meet this need,” Don Kinsey of the *Los Angeles Ledger* wrote in 1927, “it was necessary constantly to increase the flow of the Aqueduct and make proper provision for the future.”²⁴ The water wars of the Owens Valley was not a zero-sum game: both Los Angeles and the valley could coexist with enough water to fulfill their needs. To do so, however, Los Angeles could not continue its unsustainable population growth without implementing conservation measures. Unfortunately for the Owens Valley, the choice was easy: Los Angeles was ready and willing to sacrifice the livelihoods of the rural community to fortify the metropole. Los Angeles again and again acted upon the central belief that the city’s potential for population and economic growth was more valuable and worth protecting than the real people and economies already alive in the Owens Valley.

With the crushing political power disparity, some Owens Valley residents turned to physical resistance to protect their homes and livelihoods from this resource extraction. After the completion of the aqueduct, the Los Angeles Board of Public Service Commissioners began implementing measures to keep sufficient water flowing in the Owens River and into the aqueduct. These plans were met with armed resistance when, in 1924, the city attempted to create a diversion trough above Big Pine Ditch, a ditch that provided about 5000 inches of water flow and supported 1200 acres of key agriculture for the valley. In response, these ranchers “armed themselves with rifles and mounted guard over the headgate” of their ditch to prevent the

²³ “Fight Efforts,” *Los Angeles Examiner*.

²⁴ Don J. Kinsey, “The Owens Valley Dispute; The Story of Owens Valley, Its Dealings with the City of Los Angeles and the Dynamiting Attacks Upon the City’s Aqueduct: Part 7,” *Los Angeles Ledger*, November 18, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-dispute-story-owens-valley-its-dealings-city-los-angeles-and-dynamiting-5>.

diversion of their crucial resource.²⁵ This group’s resistance was in response to the planned diversion, yes, but more specifically the deceit they felt they had been shown, stating they “want no war with the city and are merely asking for fair play.”²⁶ The Big Pine ranchers exemplify one of the many strategies of resistance for Inyo County residents. However, they also demonstrate the difficulty of resisting the power of imperial Los Angeles: even in demanding fair practices, it was virtually impossible to overcome the power of the city and its perceived “right” to Owens water.

Big Pine Ditch was one of many attempts at physical resistance to Los Angeles’s water imperialism. On July 16, 1917, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Two breaches, believed to have been caused by dynamiters, were made in the Los Angeles aqueduct about



daylight yesterday morning, at places about 100 miles apart.”²⁷ This was not the only dynamiting of the aqueduct. The intentional destruction of this infrastructure continued as one of the most significant forms of resistance throughout the 1920s. The above image, published in the *Los*

²⁵ “Owens Valley Ranchers Arm Against the City,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1924, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-ranchers-arm-against-city>.

²⁶ “Owens Valley Ranchers,” *Los Angeles Times*.

²⁷ “Aqueduct is Breached; Dynamite Suspected: Conduit and Tunnel Miles Apart are Shattered Simultaneously,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1917, <https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/160459110/FA6A4A85E1E24B81PQ/3?accountid=14512>.

Angeles Times in 1927, shows just one of these resistance events.²⁸ While these dynamitings were not all claimed by or legally attributed to members of the Owens Valley, the Angelenos appeared to form a general consensus, blaming aggrieved Inyo County residents for the water's disruption.

An important aspect of imperialism is the way in which the imperial power considered its subject states, especially in resistance. Many Los Angeles records emphatically deny any insinuation of wrongdoing in their dealings with the Owens Valley. Newspapers like the *Los Angeles Ledger* point to the legality of the city government's actions to absolve them of wrongdoing.²⁹ While Angelenos did not view their own diversion and exportation of Owens River water as theft, they certainly viewed attempts by Owens Valley farmers to obstruct the aqueduct as heinous criminal acts. The *Hollywood Daily Citizen* denounced "the taking possession of the aqueduct source of supply of water for the city of Los Angeles by a mob of Inyo county citizens" because of its potential to inhibit Los Angeles water supply.³⁰ This action was especially condemned due to the action's "challenge to the existing principles of government," including the structure that allowed Mulholland and the city to take the water in the first place.³¹ By describing the city as being wronged by the hinterland territory – having "their" water stolen – the author gives away a common imperial sentiment: the resources taken by the metropole are more theirs to own than the locals they took from.

²⁸ *Blast-damaged Los Angeles Aqueduct pipes lie on a hillside in No-Name Canyon, Inyo County vicinity*, May 1927, photograph, University of California, Los Angeles, Library: Department of Special Collections, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/zz002cvwq8>.

²⁹ Don J. Kinsey, "The Owens Valley Dispute; The Story of Owens Valley, Its Dealings with the City of Los Angeles and the Dynamiting Attacks Upon the City's Aqueduct: Part 8," *Los Angeles Ledger*, November 17, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-dispute-story-owens-valley-its-dealings-city-los-angeles-and-dynamiting-6>.

³⁰ "For the Common Good," *Hollywood Daily Citizen*, November 20, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/common-good>.

³¹ "For the Common," *Hollywood*.

Newspapers from the city also began to attack the character and morality of the rural communities, describing resisters as “unscrupulous agents of an enemy”³², their actions as “crimes and offenses against public welfare”.³³ This account entirely discounts the public welfare of the Owens Valley, which was suddenly at risk of severe casualty due to Los Angeles actions. By identifying the community at the source of the aqueduct as an enemy with little regard for public welfare, the city of Los Angeles created a perception of the “other” in the Owens Valley, similar to Edward Saïd’s concepts of other-ism.³⁴ In this, the imperialized territory is painted as inherently less human and less respectable than the metropole. Due to the fundamental flaws of the subjugated people, their actions (even when similar to those of the city) are unjustified and vile. This allows the metropole to justify treating the needs and lives of this unequal group as ultimately less important than those of the empire.

Owens Valley Impact

The framing of the Los Angeles Aqueduct by urban interests also furthered the idea that the Owens Valley had ultimately benefited from the exportation of its water. This claim can be seen in newspaper articles condemning resistance. A 1925 article in the *Hollywood Daily Citizen* reminds readers that “land values are much higher in the valley today than they were before the city of Los Angeles began its alleged destructive practices.”³⁵ This article goes on to condemn farmers as anarchists and criminals, neglecting that the land values do not encompass the devastation of the traditional agrarian economies in this region. Conversely, a 1927 report by the

³² “Aqueduct is Breached” *Los Angeles Times*.

³³ “A Time to Fight,” *n.p.*, May 30, 1927,

<https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/time-fight>.

³⁴ Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978).

³⁵ “Insured Prejudice,” *Hollywood Daily Citizen*, January 20, 1925,
<https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/insured-prejudice>.

California Board of Water and Power Commissioners “stated that the land is devastated”³⁶, shedding light on the true economic situation for farmers. The contrast in these accounts exemplifies the imperial dynamic between Los Angeles and the valley: the imperial power feels as though they are benefitting the territory through their intrusions, but in reality, they create an unsustainable mercantile economy that benefits the metropole above all others. The land values are artificially high at first due to this intrusion, but the steady decline in surface and groundwater will ultimately leave the land barren and unusable for agriculture or grazing, destroying the livelihoods of residents.

The idea that the Owens Valley benefited from the aqueduct was commonly pushed by the Los Angeles press. In 1927, the *Los Angeles Ledger* published a story on Owens Valley resistance, interestingly titled “Telling the Story Honestly”. Here, they allege that the interests of the people of Owens Valley have been “vastly enhanced since the Water and Power Bureau entered the valley.”³⁷ Their evidence to support this argument, however, indicated more the economic success of Los Angeles than the prosperity of valley residents. The *Ledger* article points to the increased amount of money in the banks as a sign of economic prosperity, but this increased financial activity reflected the city’s presence in Owens Valley, rather than any long-term economic charge. Just two months later, the same newspaper reported on the financial disaster happening in the Owens Valley: “it is as it would be in Los Angeles if each and every one of that city’s banks had failed.”³⁸ The Inyo County prosperity praised by Los Angeles

³⁶ “L.A. Defendant,” *Los Angeles Evening*.

³⁷ “Telling the Story Honestly,” *Los Angeles Ledger*, July 29, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/telling-story-honestly>.

³⁸ Don J. Kinsey, “The Owens Valley Dispute; The Story of Owens Valley, Its Dealings with the City of Los Angeles and the Dynamiting Attacks Upon the City's Aqueduct: Part 1,” *Los Angeles Ledger*, September 30, 1927, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/owens-valley-dispute-story-owens-valley-its-dealings-city-los-angeles-and-dynamiting>.

newspapers was short-lived and ultimately left the region with a financial crisis and land drained of both water and economic potential.

Owens Valley did not benefit from the aqueduct in the long run. The financial boom turned into crisis, and the constant strain of water exportations depleted the groundwater reserves that local agriculture depended on.³⁹ While the city did not directly drain the valley aquifer, the damage was equal: exporting huge amounts of surface water took away the main source of groundwater recharge while simultaneously forcing more and more farmers to rely exclusively on this dwindling supply. Additionally, while land values experienced an initial boom during Los Angeles's initial involvement in the area, eventually these plummeted too.⁴⁰ Many farmers, held in uncertainty, planned to leave before their land's production entirely ran out.⁴¹ Los Angeles's growing thirst for development sucked the water and life out of a small but vibrant agricultural economy, to benefit the city's own wants, needs, and desires.

Los Angeles Water into the Future

Mulholland was right. The seizure of Owens River water allowed the city to surpass its natural limits for growth and support an exponentially rising urban population. "There it is, take it!" became a prophetic statement, as the city looked for more and more imperial water acquisitions in California and beyond. Mulholland and the city of Los Angeles were inspired by the success of their imperial project in the Owens Valley. To continue their growth, the city turned its interests to an aqueduct extension to Mono Lake. In 1924, just 11 years after the

³⁹ "Article about the relationship between Owens Valley and Los Angeles," *The Inyo Register*, August 7, 1930, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/article-about-relationship-between-owens-valley-and-los-angeles>.

⁴⁰ "Telling the Story," *Los Angeles Ledger*.

⁴¹ "Article about the relationship," *The Inyo Register*.

completion of the aqueduct, Mulholland was rallying support behind an extension: “We have enough water at the present time. But we are close to the edge right now by reason of the fortuitous accident – if it may be called an accident – of the last two years... we must not supinely sit down and wait for another dry year.”⁴² By 1931, the city had acquired more than 127 options on Mono County properties and water rights, replicating the imperial experiment in Owens Valley.⁴³ The seizure of these was described even by some Angelenos as an invasion of the region.⁴⁴ Still, the Mono Extension was completed in 1940⁴⁵ and greater Southern California water interests already had shifted their eyes to a new source for importation: the Colorado River.⁴⁶ As Los Angeles grew, it sought more and more water to sustain their population.

Time and time again, this water extraction hurt the communities at the source. The Mono Extension and later projects to capture more water from the region diverted key tributaries to Mono Lake, making the lake’s salinity skyrocket and ecologically devastating the rare salt lake ecosystem.⁴⁷ To this day, the allocation of the Colorado River is disputed, having overly diverted the supply for indigenous communities and other local riparian needs in order to provide for Southern California demand. Mulholland’s recipe for growth has not changed: to this day, Los Angeles imports 57% of its water supply.⁴⁸ The water politics of the American West are wholly

⁴² “How Long?,” *Los Angeles Record*, July 23, 1924, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/how-long>.

⁴³ “City Takes 127 Owens Options,” *Daily News*, February 25, 1931, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/aqueduct/archives/city-takes-127-owens-options>.

⁴⁴ “L.A. Defendant,” *Los Angeles Evening*.

⁴⁵ John A. Wiens, Duncan T. Patten, and Daniel B. Botkin, “Assessing Ecological Impact Assessment: Lessons from Mono Lake, California,” *Ecological Applications* 3, no. 4 (November 1993): 597, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1942093>.

⁴⁶ “Battle Begun on Colorado: Engineers Victors in First Flood Skirmish,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1927, <https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/162084304/C7F883E1253F4A41PQ/17?accountid=14512>.

⁴⁷ Wiens, Patten, and Botkin, “Assessing Ecological Impact,” 597.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, *Los Angeles Basin Study: Summary Report*, Jack Simes, Lee Alexanderson, and Daniel Bradbury. Los Angeles: Bureau of

structured around the importation needs of Los Angeles, a city which fuels its economy on its perpetual growth. Los Angeles would not and could not exist without these relationships, and this imperialism is fundamental to the development of the city as it stands.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles of today is built on the early importation of Owens River water, fulfilling the future William Mulholland saw for his city. This exponential growth would not be possible without the strategy pioneered for his aqueduct. With that said, engaging in these practices built Los Angeles into a city entirely dependent on the exploitation of rural territories like the Owens Valley. The portrayal of the Los Angeles aqueduct solely as a feat of engineering and human spirit eliminates the value of understanding this work and its impacts through the lens of imperial history. In their water right acquisition, resource extraction, and response to resistance, the city demonstrated its imperial mindset time and time again.

Beginning with the disguised acquisition of riparian water options along the river corridor, the City of Los Angeles engaged in unethical and often unlawful practices to secure a supply of water. In doing so, Los Angeles disregarded the economy of the Owens Valley, and pointed to their own economic success in the region, rather than that of the impacted community, as evidence of the benefits of the project. Though the agricultural community resisted the extraction of their key resource, Los Angeles met this resistance with condemnation, otherism, and increased efforts at their imperial project. The domination of the legal and political systems through the city's institutional clout also obstructed all administrative attempts by Owens Valley residents to prevent the ecological and economic devastation that ultimately hit their region.

Reclamation, 2016.

<https://www.usbr.gov/watersmart/bsp/docs/fy2017/LABasinStudySummaryReport.pdf>.

(Accessed November 27, 2022).

The California Water Wars, as the battle for the Owens River was titled, came down to one imperial question: Does the water belong to its region, or to those powerful enough to seize it? In securing their own supply at the expense of the Owens population, the city gave its answer. The Los Angeles Aqueduct set a dangerous precedent for the Southern California water needs, and created a model that has categorically defined the West ever since: There it is. Take it.

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