Rob Kroes Grant - Report

In June 2026, I traveled to Evanston, Illinois, to consult the collections of Northwestern University's Transportation Library. For my PhD project at Leiden University's Institute of History, I am conducting research on water pollution and activism in the North American Great Lakes between the late 1970s and the late 1990s. Part of my research focuses on the specific environmental problems associated with certain industries on the U.S. side of the lakes, and how governments and local communities addressed these issues. To gain a better understanding of these processes, I consulted the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) collection at the Transportation Library. During my visit to this library, I learned more about the technical and political aspects of environmental policy in places such as Ashtabula, OH; Detroit, MI; Milwaukee, WI; and Niagara Falls, NY. I also spoke with American historians in Evanston who specialize in American environmental history and the history of activism. My research in Evanston, which was part of a longer research trip to various locations around the Great Lakes, was made possible in part by the Rob Kroes Grant of the Netherlands American Studies Association.

The Transportation Library at Northwestern University houses the largest collection of Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) in the United States. During my visit, I was able to carefully study several EIS reports to gain a better understanding of the environmental policies surrounding the polluting industries that activists campaigned against in the 1980s-90s. Since citizen activists sought to prove, through water testing, that current pollution regulations were not stringent enough, I sought to learn about the other methods used to measure water pollution and/or environmental health in relation to these same industries. For example, the report on Fermi II (the nuclear power plant in Michigan) shows that significant attention was paid to potential radiation exposure among local communities. The report concludes that the radiation exposure would not be worse than the existing background radiation already present in the region. The likelihood of an accident at the plant was also considered very low. The technical analyses give me insight into how experts reached this conclusion—for example, how they calculated these risks. During the protests organized by international groups like Greenpeace in the region, in collaboration with local activists from Monroe, attention was drawn to accidents—albeit minor ones—that had nevertheless occurred at Fermi II since the release of this report. The activists argued that the company's risk analyses, and the legislation that permitted them, were not stringent enough.

Because I have been able to gain insight into both the EIS reports and material from (local) media and activist sources, I can now provide a more complete historical account of how decisions regarding environmental pollution were made by government agencies and companies. It is also clearer how activists attempted to influence these decisions—not only by protesting against the pollution but also by contacting the organizations that compiled the EIS reports, thereby establishing themselves as experts in the field of ecotoxicology (and, in the case of Fermi II, radiotoxicology). Through analyses such as these, my research can contribute to our understanding of environmental issues, particularly in the area of water. The history of legislation regarding water pollution is still relatively short. Research is still being conducted into the health effects of certain chemicals found in soil and water bodies (consider, for example, the current debate over PFAS/forever chemicals). It is also quite common nowadays for activist groups like Greenpeace to present themselves as experts; they conduct their own research and draft their own reports on environmental issues. But this wasn't always the case. Over the years, activists—both local and international—have had to fight to be heard in the complex processes that allow pollution to

occur—such as determining the threshold at which risks become too great. My research sheds light on these processes and contributes to our understanding of the history of transboundary environmental politics.

Overall, it was great to spend time doing archival research in the very region that my research is concerned with. The view of Lake Michigan from the campus of Northwestern made this trip all the more fitting!

I would like to thank the Netherlands American Studies Association for making this research trip possible.

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