Abstract
Boulder Dam, constructed in the 1930s to impound the Colorado River between Nevada and Arizona, was widely considered the most ambitious engineering project of its time. Built during the Great Depression, it used state-of-the-art technology to provide flood control, drinking and irrigation water, hydroelectricity, and recreational facilities on a scale unprecedented for any other water control project in the world. Now called Hoover Dam, this structure was heralded by the American government as a monument to American ingenuity and as a model for solving resource challenges through mammoth technological solutions. The dam also ushered in a three-decade frenzy of building large multi-purpose dams that have had profound and lasting effects on the urban, economic, and political geography of the modern American West.

Although Boulder Dam was not supported unanimously during its authorization and construction phases, national media sources overwhelmingly championed its benefits. This paper examines the remarkably coherent narrative that emerged in coverage of Boulder Dam’s authorization, construction, dedication, and completion (1928-1936), identifying a rhetoric of national progress that emerged through media attention to landscape change. In mainstream serials with national circulation, writers subtly linked the technological transformations of the Colorado River, Black Canyon, and the wider desert Southwest to the transformation and emergence of the American nation. This narrative effect was so influential that even opponents of the dam felt compelled to endorse its rhetorical undercurrents. In fact, the narrative of rational technological progress through landscape change was so powerfully ingrained in mainstream media representations of Boulder Dam that virtually no opposition to the dam has been possible.
Introduction

The Colorado River has long been a focus of attention in the arid American West. First seen in the mid-nineteenth century by Anglo explorers as little more than a canyon-producing obstacle to westward migration, it came to be viewed by the turn of the twentieth century as a potential water resource for irrigated agricultural settlements (Worster 1985; Reisner 1986). Despite drastic variations in seasonal water flow, relentless erosive abilities, awe-inspiring levels of silt discharge, and a politically inconvenient channel that crosses state and international boundaries, the lower Colorado was aggressively developed to support agricultural and municipal development in the first decades of the 1900s. Now providing water to three million acres of irrigated farmland and to twenty-seven million users across two countries and seven American states, this storied river is again in the spotlight. Recent realizations that the Colorado's flow is vastly over-allocated and precariously subject to the vagaries of climate change have spurred political grandstanding, municipal deal-making, academic head-shaking, and pessimistic finger-wagging over the last several years (Jenkins 2005; Association of American Geographers 2008; Powell 2008; Barnett and Pierce 2009). Conventional wisdom now holds that the West's iconic and sprawling southern metropolises—Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Phoenix—exist only in a state of fragile dependence on contentious water- and energy-sharing agreements and aging technological infrastructures that divide and convey Colorado River water and power across a vast and arid region.

As regional and national attention turn once again to the Colorado River, it is clear that attitudes have changed since the early-twentieth century heyday of Western water development. The construction of flood control and irrigation infrastructure up and down the Colorado was championed then not only by local boosters and national government agencies but also by mainstream media sources and everyday Americans. This broad base of support enabled a suite of projects that laid the foundations for today's urban, economic and political geographies of the American West. As this region's future prospects are called into question, however, some of those early attitudes have come under scrutiny as well. The discourses of high modernism that marked the era of Western dam-building have now largely been replaced by environmentalist narratives that support fundamentally different configurations of the human-environment relationship (Wehr 2004). From the successful calls for removal of major dams along the Klamath River (Boxall 2009) to the integration of adaptive management principles into government decision-making (Benson 2008), modern discourses in the West have shifted dramatically away from the domination-of-nature themes that originally guided the Colorado River's development. Dams, in particular, have borne much of the brunt of the environmentalist backlash.

One dam, however, stands peculiarly against this trend. Despite the recent wave of negative publicity regarding the apparent follies of overly aggressive early development
on the Colorado, Hoover Dam seems largely immune. Constructed in the 1930s to impound the Colorado River between Nevada and Arizona, Boulder Dam (its original name) was widely considered the most ambitious engineering project of its time. Built during the Great Depression, it used state-of-the-art technology to provide flood control, drinking and irrigation water, hydroelectricity, and recreational facilities on a scale unprecedented for any other water control project in the world. Later renamed Hoover Dam, this structure was heralded by the American government as a monument to American ingenuity and as a model for solving resource challenges through mammoth technological solutions. The dam also ushered in the Bureau of Reclamation’s three-decade frenzy of building large multi-purpose dams that have had profound and lasting effects on the modern American West.

Even as most of those other dams have come under fire for the environmental impacts, social inequalities and political inconsistencies they spawned, Boulder Dam still stands as a cherished American icon. It is a common stop along the tourist circuit of the American Southwest, with more than one million paid visitors to the Hoover Dam Visitor Center per year and millions more exposed to it via automobile on U.S. 93 (Bureau of Reclamation 2009), which until 2010 traversed the arc of the dam’s crest (Hoover Dam Bypass Project 2010). A new bridge over the Colorado on U.S. 93—ostensibly designed to improve traffic efficiency and reduce potential terrorist threats to the dam structure—was constructed, not coincidentally, in a manner and location that provides even more dramatic views of the dam’s iconic face to passing motorists. Even the staunchest critics of development in the American West have consistently been inspired by Hoover Dam. Renowned Western writer Wallace Stegner, for instance, reported being overawed in 1946 by the dam’s “smooth efficient beauty that seems peculiarly American” (quoted in Steinberg 1993, 401).

Part of the reason Hoover Dam continues to inspire positive appreciation while its neighbors, such as Glen Canyon Dam, are more routinely characterized as candidates for removal (Farmer 1999) has to do with official representations at the dam site. Artfully and seductively presented to on-site visitors partly through iconic southwestern symbols and “the use of a ‘Native American’ voice to justify the dam as another stage in a transcultural narrative of human progress,” the dam’s official representations co-opt the very same environmentalist attitudes now undermining support for other dams (Rogers and Schutten 2004, 279). Indeed, Native Americans have long been cast as admirers of the dam’s advanced technology in materials intended for potential tourists and dam visitors. (See Figure 1.) The number of actual visitors to the dam, however, is small compared to the American population as a whole, and the framing of Visitor Center representations cannot solely explain the ways this one dam has stood impervious to the environmentalist discontent affecting other dams.

In this paper, I examine the enduring and almost universally positive acceptance of Boulder Dam by going back to its first introduction to broad American audiences:
through print media. A variety of major American periodicals covered Boulder Dam between its authorization and completion, bringing news of the dam-building project to a wide spectrum of literate Americans. Focusing on major national periodicals (those indexed at the time in *The Reader’s Guide to Periodicals*), I identified 75 articles that dealt explicitly with the Boulder Dam project between 1928 and 1936. By applying frame analysis to this set of articles, I identified several key tendencies in media coverage of Boulder Dam’s authorization, construction, and dedication. Most dominantly, the dam was framed as an agent of landscape transformation, with secondary frames painting it as a business opportunity or as a site of labor unrest. Given the overall dominance of the landscape frame in this coverage, I selected thirty articles for further rhetorical analysis, focusing on those that most explicitly addressed the landscapes of the dam and its southwestern surroundings. This study does not explicitly address contemporaneous newspaper articles, government reports, or academic and scientific articles (in journals

*Figure 1.* This cover art for a popular history booklet published by the Hoover Dam Scenic Corporation (Gates 1932, cover) depicts an iconic Native American observing the dam, presumably beholding the accomplishment of a vastly more advanced culture.
such as *The Geographical Journal* or *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*), although all of these media also reported on the activities surrounding Boulder Dam. Informal comparative examination shows that the landscape transformation frame was present in all of these kinds of sources, but this study is limited to print magazines that were widely circulated and highly accessible to mainstream national audiences.

In the analysis that follows, I show that the national media produced powerful and positive narratives that have yet to be breached in the popular imagination. Although the dam was not supported unanimously during its early phases, mainstream serials with national circulation overwhelmingly championed the economic and social benefits that accrue through landscape impacts. This paper thus traces the textual and visual narratives that emerged in these media, identifying a pervasive rhetoric of authoritative technoscience that emerged through attention to landscape change. As writers subtly linked the technological transformations of the Colorado River, Black Canyon, and the wider desert Southwest to the transformation and emergence of the American nation, they created a remarkably coherent discourse of landscape transformation as national progress. Since news media can be highly influential in shaping metropolitan views of peripheral areas (Avraham and First 2006; Eriksson 2008), the “story” of Boulder Dam was largely dominated by this media-driven view rather than by any local perspectives. Its narrative effect was so influential that even opponents of the dam felt compelled to endorse its rhetorical undercurrents. In fact, the narrative of rational technological progress through landscape change was so powerfully ingrained in mainstream media representations of Boulder Dam that virtually no opposition to the dam has been possible.

### Reclamation and the Boulder Canyon Project

Boulder Dam was originally conceived as a flood-control project with primarily local benefits. Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, growing numbers of pioneer farmers in California’s Imperial Valley had tried unsuccessfully to control the Colorado’s spring floods. Although they had established an extensive levee system to contain the river’s water within its own channel and a network of irrigation canals, the Colorado’s annual load of snowmelt from the Rocky Mountains frequently tested or overpowered the levees. Each year, silt deposition raised the river’s bed higher, constantly increasing the threat that the river would overspill its banks and flood the low-lying Imperial Valley. In 1905, an irrigation canal was breached severely, causing massive flooding as the Colorado escaped its channel and poured into the low-elevation Salton basin, just north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Only after two years was the river turned back to its bed, at great cost and with a permanent loss of 290,000 acres to the newly formed 76-foot deep Salton Sea (Means 1924). The likely occurrence of another such major flood was widely recognized, prompting repeated local requests for some form of flood control on the lower Colorado. The prospect of saving a few hundred thousand acres of remote if
richly fertile farmland from flooding, however, was not enough alone to motivate the building of a major dam.

Local boosters found additional political support in Washington by arguing that instability in Mexico threatened the delivery of their irrigation water (Wehr 2004). Since most of the Imperial Valley was served by a canal that ran through Mexican lands for 50-60 miles, a nationalistic case could be made for construction of a delivery system that was situated fully on American soil. In the event of Mexican revolution or simple political whim, the argument went, the thriving farms of the Imperial Valley could be left to wither with no water supply. The ambitious American pioneers so dutifully coaxing an agricultural bounty from an otherwise arid wasteland should never face the potential injustice and humiliation of such treatment by Mexico, boosters pressed. Adding irrigation concerns to the chorus of requests for flood control raised the profile of dam boosters in Washington but still did not achieve the desired result.

In 1927, the introduction of the Swing-Johnson bill in Congress finally initiated real political momentum for damming the lower Colorado. Providing not only for flood control and irrigation delivery but also for hydroelectric power production, the bill proposed building a dam and canal that would stimulate the continued growth of the Southwest and of the United States as a whole. As the original concerns of Imperial Valley settlers were recast as concerns of the nation, Congress embraced the vision of an engineering marvel that could transform the American West (Wehr 2004). By providing revenue through the production and sale of hydroelectric power, the project would even pay for itself and thus spare the blushes of a Bureau of Reclamation that had recently built a string of expensive dams that failed to generate predicted water sales. Elite landowners in the Imperial Valley or in Los Angeles who would actually be adversely affected by a wide distribution of irrigation water opposed the Swing-Johnson bill. They did not, however, argue that the dam idea should be abandoned. Instead, they argued insistently that it would be a mistake for the government itself to control the dam’s hydroelectric power and irrigation waters. In advocating for private control of these soon-to-be created resources, the elite detractors of Boulder Dam presumably expected to benefit from the private sale and distribution of water and electricity (Kleinsorge 1941). Despite concerns with the planned form, location, or management of the dam, then, virtually all of these opponents agreed that a dam should be built on the Colorado (Wehr 2004). After two decades of acrimonious debate, the Boulder Canyon Project Act was authorized in both houses of Congress in 1928.

The Boulder Canyon Project, named after the canyon originally considered for the dam site, started almost immediately after its authorization. A railroad spur was built from Las Vegas, Nevada to a plateau just six miles from the eventual site selected in nearby Black Canyon. A planned town—Boulder City—was then constructed around the railroad terminus to provide both worker housing and a transfer point for equipment and supplies. Once Boulder City was connected with Black Canyon
Figure 2.
This map shows Boulder Dam’s location within the context of the Colorado River basin (Mead 1929, 57).
via roadway, work began in earnest along the Colorado River, with as many as 5,000 American men employed by the construction company at a time. Four enormous diversion tunnels were drilled through the canyon walls to re-route the river, cofferdams were constructed to force the river into its new channel, and the dam site itself was pumped dry and excavated to bedrock. Workers then prepared the canyon walls and began pouring concrete for the massive structure. A complex web of overhead cables was installed to allow for the rapid manipulation of 16-ton buckets of wet concrete, which were discharged into interlocking forms at the rate of 1,100 per day, or one every 78 seconds (Stevens 1988).

While these activities progressed, an increasing stream of tourists, media writers, photographers and government officials began to visit the area. From Las Vegas, visitors would take the train to Boulder City, then drive or catch a worker-convoy to the dam site, where they observed the project from the canyon rim or even descended into the canyon itself. Many visitors reported their impressions of the project, writing for the popular press and displaying their photographs in exhibits throughout the 1930s. By the time the dam had begun to hold water and was officially dedicated in 1935, the American public had already been exposed to the project extensively via magazines and newspapers.

Many of the articles and stories written about Boulder Dam during this time focused on the transformation of landscape. Government officials, project engineers, traveling tourists, professional writers and even the Bureau of Reclamation's in-house photographer submitted material to mainstream media outlets (Vilander 1999). From Boulder City and the dam construction site itself, to the nearby Imperial Valley and the wider desert Southwest, these chroniclers used detailed landscape imagery to tell the story of a dam which dwarfed every water-control project that had ever come before. In the following sections, I trace the narrative threads that emerged in media coverage of dam-related landscapes.

Landscapes of “Immense Waste”
Many media reports on the Boulder Canyon Project presented various southwestern landscape elements in a harshly negative light, casting them as prime candidates for transformation through technology. Although there were also many positive landscape characteristics discussed in the national media (see next section), negative descriptions dominated the early reports of both government officials and generalist writers.

The Colorado River, for instance, was often portrayed as a destructive and fickle force. With its waters at flood stage, the Colorado was called “America’s most dangerous river” (Bureau of Reclamation 1941, 1), destroying property while its waters went “to waste” (du Puy 1929, 338), flowing unused into the Gulf of California. In the summer and fall, however, the river reportedly shrunk “to a shadow of what it was a few months before” (Mead 1929, 54), offering precious little water for irrigation. Repeatedly using
adjectives like “turbulent,” “treacherous,” “unpredictable,” “destructive,” “menacing,” and “surly,” writers conveyed the river’s flood cycle as a “tyranny” over the pioneers living in its lower basin. It was said to have defeated man repeatedly in the Imperial Valley, showing that “whenever [man] tampered with the river he brought disaster upon himself” (Bureau of Reclamation 1941, 1). The Boulder Dam project, however, was cast as man’s best effort to reverse his fortune in the epic man-against-nature struggle. Numerous commentators described the project in imperative terms, saying, for example, “The Colorado River must not be allowed to do what it likes” (Priestley 1937, 365). The Bureau of Reclamation’s project was a determined effort to “tam[e] a wild river” (“Beginning the largest artificial lake” 1935, 15) and “harness a destructive force of nature for constructive purpose” (“The great Colorado dam wins” 1928, 8).

The lower Colorado basin itself and specifically the Imperial Valley were likewise represented negatively, as landscapes suffering constant threats from the Colorado River. Historically, authors claimed, the Imperial Valley had been underwater in the northernmost part of the Gulf of California, but the Colorado’s massive silt discharges had eventually built a silt dam across the shallow gulf and left the northern part “an arid waste” (Murphy 1929, 281). From this first offense, the Colorado River was repeatedly blamed for a relentless assault on the fertile region, eventually endangering 65,000 settlers. The river ran along the southern edge of the valley, in a bed built continually higher with its own silt loads. If silt deposits became a barrier to the river’s course, the chroniclers warned, water could be diverted into the lower-lying valley area, quickly creating a huge inland lake with no natural drainage. As the Bureau of Reclamation’s Commissioner Elwood Mead put it, “This tragic situation, this sword of Damocles hanging over a whole community, is due to the unique geography of the region” (Mead 1929, 55). The 1905 flooding disaster had provided a perfect example of the feared scenario, and the Salton Sea created during that time served as a visible landscape reminder that the Imperial Valley was geographically vulnerable.

Although many settlers were focused on the Colorado’s potential for destroying life and property in the lower basin, the national media clearly considered the river’s inefficiency an equally troubling offense. As a Commonweal writer put it, “The Colorado River, uncontrolled, is a menace to life and property and its possibilities for useful service are wasted” (Murphy 1929, 280). This type of disapproving representation, common in Progressive-era representations of natural resources throughout the American West, cast natural landscapes as fundamentally inefficient and therefore in need of technological control. Articles by both government and popular writers thus helped justify the Boulder Canyon Project as an effort to transform landscapes and re-make them in a new technological image. This became one of the most convincing and oft-repeated elements of the discourse, extending to the landscape of the Southwest as a whole.

Often portrayed as both harsh and remote, the Southwest was a favorite topic in national periodicals. Regarding its harshness, commentators used adjectives like “barren,”
“blistering,” rugged,” and “infernal” to describe a “broken, chaotic waste, forever useless” (du Puy 1929, 338). Its remoteness was also commented at length, as in one observation that “a road there seems to lead endlessly from nothing to nothing” (Priestley 1937, 365). This “immense waste” (Lilly 1930, 449) was portrayed as “the least developed, the most sparcely [sic] inhabited portion of the country” (du Puy 1929, 338). Secretary of the Interior Ray Wilbur argued, however, that the negative landscape could be transformed into a positive landscape by virtue of American engineering: “The Boulder Dam will signalize our national conquest over the Great American Desert. With dollars, men and engineering brains we will build a great national resource. We will make new geography, and start a new era in the southwestern part of the United States” (quoted in “Beginning the biggest dam” 1930, 77, emphasis added.) The negative portrayal of the Southwest thus made room for a potentially positive transformed future.

The landscapes characterized above were most commonly described in articles published before work actually got underway at the dam site. Once the Las Vegas-to-Boulder City rail line was completed and the roadway from Boulder City to the dam site was improved, however, the specific natural landscape of Black Canyon clearly began to dominate the commentary of those writers and artists who visited the dam construction site. Like its surrounding landscape, Black Canyon was described in a variety of contrasting ways. Its remoteness certainly preoccupied some writers, who presumably had to struggle to visit it. Once they’d made the difficult trip, though, commentators were alternately inspired or repulsed by Black Canyon itself. Describing the canyon as “a jagged scar in the earth’s hard crust” (Boone 1934, 39) or a “deep notch cut between ugly, tumbled, black hills” (Bliven 1935, 125-6), two travel writers revealed their antipathy for the landscape. Commissioner Mead also reportedly remarked on the canyon’s harsh climate: “The summer wind which sweeps over the gorge from the desert feels like a blast from a furnace. At the rim of the gorge, where much of the work must be done, there is neither soil, grass nor trees. The sun beats down on a broken surface of lava rocks. At midday they cannot be touched with the naked hand” (quoted in King 1931, 147).

Despite these negative responses, Black Canyon was occasionally represented in a positive light, as expressed by a Travel magazine writer who found Black Canyon “scarcely less magnificent than the Grand Canyon of Colorado not many miles away” (“A new rival to the Grand Canyon” 1937, 19). The canyon’s sheer walls and narrow pass provided a dizzying spectacle, especially for water engineers who quickly noticed “the tremendous resources of a great river confined by nature to a mile-deep canyon” (“Remaking the world” 1935, 66). As one said of “walls of rock rising perpendicularly toward the sky” in the narrow canyon: “Nothing could be better. It is as though nature has known, always, that man would need water” (Brisbane 1932, 191). Visitors who may have been alarmed by the canyon’s remoteness or harsh climate thus acknowledged its breathtaking proportions and the possibilities it represented as a source of irrigation water and cheap electricity.
The negative reactions writers reported from the landscapes of the Southwest stemmed primarily from the “waste” they saw. A dangerous river wasted its opportunity to contribute to agricultural development, causing destruction instead. The fertility of the Imperial Valley was wasted as communities found themselves unable to neutralize the threats of the river. An entire region of the United States—the Southwest—constituted a waste of geographical and human potential, an inability to contribute to the forward progress of the nation. And a geologically perfect canyon would perpetuate all of this waste unless its true destiny was achieved: technological transformation.

**Landscapes of “Potential Riches”**

The landscapes discussed in the previous section were also represented positively in many media sources, mainly on the basis of their potential transformation. Sometimes even in the same paragraphs as the negative portrayals described above, writers focused on the advantageous characteristics of various landscape elements or envisioned the ways these landscapes would be improved after the dam was operational.

The Colorado River itself was shown to have impressive, even awe-inspiring, impacts on the arid landscape of the Southwest. Referred to as “one of the great rivers of the world” (Johnson 1929, 786) by the senator who sponsored the legislation to impound it, the Colorado’s power to carve canyons like the Grand Canyon earned it respect from many writers. Before the dam project started, Commissioner Mead pointed out in poetic language that the Colorado River had already been helpful in transforming the Imperial Valley: “[It] brings the melted snows of the loftiest summits of the main range of the Rockies. It carries the clear, cold water of the Green River morainal lakes into a region of lonesome brown deserts and to homes which under irrigation are made beautiful by a tropical opulence of fruit and foliage” (Mead 1929, 54). If only the Colorado could be “leashed” or “harnessed,” both government and popular writers regularly claimed, the river’s “potential riches” (Gates 1932, 30) would be realized. The river was thus cast in a positive light because of its potential to be turned to productive economic use by man’s technology (Nye 1999). The *Review of Reviews* went so far as to declare that the Colorado’s waters constituted an important “proving ground for [American] exploitation of water power” (“What Boulder Dam will do” 1929, 87), indicating that the river’s might rendered it a worthy rival for man’s engineering capabilities.

Nowhere was the landscape’s potential more apparent than in California’s Imperial Valley. Featured prominently in articles describing the Colorado basin, the Imperial Valley landscape was usually described in detail because it so effectively indicated the importance of the dam project. Despite the fact that the valley was constantly under threat from the Colorado, writers emphasized its fertility and productivity, even under vulnerable irrigation systems. Fertile desert soils had been transformed by irrigation into “veritable Gardens of Eden” (Bureau of Reclamation 1941, 39) with a high productivity of tropical crops that could not be grown anywhere else in the United States, according
to the Bureau of Reclamation. Having once been as “useless as the Mojave Desert,” one writer claimed, “the Imperial Valley is [today] the most prolific farm land in the world” (Lilly 1930, 449). Senator Johnson even claimed it was “more fertile than the valley of the Nile” (Johnson 1929, 786). Such boosterism ignored rival claims then touting south Florida as the nation’s most promising agricultural region, given its subtropical climate and suitability for large-scale sugarcane production (Ogden 2008, Hollander 2008).

Writers who discussed the dam project invariably lauded the Imperial Valley as the supplier of the nation—the “vegetable and fruit basket of the United States” (Bureau of Reclamation 1941, 39)—yet indicated that the fertile landscape had yet more potential, if only its “treasury” (Lilly 1930, 449) could be protected from destruction by flood. With an adequate supply of water for irrigation, writers pointed out, “thousands of acres of potentially productive agricultural land” (du Puy 1929, 339) could be brought under cultivation throughout the valley. Touting the Imperial Valley’s potential productivity, however, could be a sensitive endeavor during a decade of economic hardship that was complicated by agricultural surplus production. Writers took care to emphasize that Imperial Valley’s “specialty” crops would not compete with other mainland crops (Bennitt 1933, 243) and generally phrased their support for the dam in terms of its ability to protect the fertile valley as a national resource.

In addition to the agricultural potential of the Southwest, national media sources also touted the urban potential of areas near Boulder Dam. Boulder City, a requisite stopping point on the way to Black Canyon, received attention from a number of visitors. Originally constructed to house the dam’s workers and their families, Boulder City was described as a modern, planned city—“much more than a mere construction camp” (“Beginning the biggest dam” 1930, 77). Visitors noted that it had wide streets and beautiful parks, appropriate for a “pleasant community of curving boulevards” (Bliven 1935, 125). The facilities—dormitories for single men, detached homes for men with families, a cafeteria to feed the workers, a community center, and more—were usually described in glowing terms. More than one author noted that the workers were lucky to have such nice accommodations in the middle of a desert. The Bureau of Reclamation’s own photographer, Ben Glaha, took a number of photographs that showed Boulder City as a tidy, well-landscaped town. These images were controlled by the Bureau and circulated to media outlets to offset concerns about worker conditions that had been enflamed by news of a 1931 workers’ strike (Vilander 1999).

The most common representation of Boulder City in the media, however, was the idea that its existence represented the first transformation wrought by the Boulder Canyon Project. As remarked in The New Republic, “a few years ago this was bare desert, without a tree or a teaspoonful of water” (Bliven 1935, 125). The ensuing “transformation of the sage-brush desert” (Gates 1932, 51), however, had converted the plateau from a barren landscape into a thriving urban center. Commissioner Mead wrote that he expected the once-modified landscape to transform yet again, after the completion of
the dam, into a tourist mecca and resort city at the edge of a 115-mile-long freshwater lake: “When the works are completed, this worker’s town will be on a great lake above the dam and on the highway of tourist travel which will reach from the Atlantic to the Pacific” (Mead 1929, 60). Mead’s comment illustrated a sentiment that grew increasingly common as the dam neared completion. By the mid-1930s, trees planted in Boulder City had begun to fill out, making the town look more attractive and more permanent. Visitors to the dam easily envisioned the second transformation Mead predicted, and foresaw that the wave of tourists visiting the construction site would only intensify once the reservoir began to fill. In terms of providing access to the new lake, Boulder City was shown to have an obvious location advantage over any other nearby towns.

Although Las Vegas eventually underwent a far more significant transformation after the dam’s completion, it actually figured much less prominently in media accounts of the dam-building project. Like Boulder City, Las Vegas was represented positively, as a progressive city and an “oasis” (Priestley 1937, 365) in the desert. Some of the commentators seem to have been surprised by the town’s liberal policies, but none leveled a characterization more critical than “sleepy” (White 1935, 118). With the coming of 5,000 workers to this remote part of the country, of course, Las Vegas didn’t remain sleepy for long, quickly transforming into a booming city. The entertainment available in Las Vegas was generally preferred to that existing in prohibition-ruled Boulder City, reportedly drawing hundreds of dam workers every two weeks on payday. One writer discussed the social importance of the Las Vegas entertainment landscape to the isolated dam workers (White 1935), but was the only one to address the town in detail, although several others mentioned it briefly. Government writers ignored the town completely, despite its obvious strategic importance as a rail transfer point.

The media focus was largely on the transformation of natural landscapes – from the Colorado River and the Imperial Valley to the unpopulated plateau that became Boulder City. Through technology, writers showed, these landscapes had the potential to radically alter the American Southwest and provide a massive new contribution to the nation.

Landscapes of “Considerable Ingenuity”

One of the landscapes that proved most interesting to both government and popular writers was the dam construction site itself. Everything important was taking place in the temporary, manmade, shifting landscape of the dam construction site, and every visitor had something to say about the unique scene. In many ways, the construction site was literally filled with obstacles, and government and civilian writers alike focused on how the site challenged the workers, as in this passage from Literary Digest: “They were faced with difficulties due to the isolation of the site, extremes of weather, the towering cliffs on either side of the rivers, and the treacherous stream, one of the most unpredictable on the North American Continent” (“Beginning the largest artificial
lake 1935, 15). Reports indicated that the climate was harsh. With temperatures often reaching 120 degrees or higher in the summer, tools and canyon walls became too hot to touch. Frequent dynamite blasts, steep canyon walls, narrow foot bridges, and possible equipment failure were also cited as contributors to the site's danger. The "highscalers," men who were lowered in bosun's chairs over the canyon walls to remove loose rock with drills, were repeatedly recognized as the bravest, most death-defying men in the country. As project engineer Walker Young commented in *Scientific American*, the landscape of the construction site required "considerable ingenuity" (Young 1932, 138) from both engineers and workmen.

The overall impression most writers conveyed of the dam construction worksite, however, was less preoccupied by its challenges, and more fascinated with its transformative activities. With men working three shifts around the clock, the canyon scene was constantly active, always bordering on a chaos of sights, sounds and tremors. Photographer Glaha's images perfectly captured many writers' sentiments, showing a
landscape of commotion and machinery, where landscape elements, machine elements and built elements all dwarfed the individual construction workers. In his widely circulated and published photographs, men appeared physically strong but usually faceless, with their heads turned to their tasks. Dynamite smoke billowed, sections of steel pipe swayed, and wooden platforms dangled their transport cargoes of men and equipment. It looked chaotic, but seemed at the same time strangely under control. (See Figure 3.)

Writers and artists generally reported viewing the dam construction scene in one of two ways: from above or from within. From the canyon floor or from a tunnel mouth, the dam construction site was a fantastic example of man’s strength. The men were dwarfed by the scale of the canyon landscape, but their cooperative actions clearly controlled it. The view from above, however, was entirely different, and government writers were the first to emphasize the superior aerial view. Writing in 1929, Commissioner Mead wrote, “If one must explore this region in midsummer, the way to do it is in the ten-passenger
tri-motor plane Rio Grande,” which afforded striking views of the “glorious panorama” below (Mead 1929, 59). In fact, Mead was one of the few early writers to describe the Colorado River basin in positive terms, and his ability to see it from above, from a position of superiority, probably influenced his positive description. Travel writers also described the view as “magnificent” for “the aerial traveler” (“A new rival to the Grand Canyon” 1937, 18). From above, Americans could view Black Canyon as a minor part of a vast landscape. As Lake Mead’s waters began to rise, the aerial view showed the reach of man extending across that vast landscape, proving his superiority over the Colorado River.

Whether from a plane, the canyon rim, or the floor of the riverbed, writers (and their audiences) frequently viewed the dam construction site as evidence of American ingenuity. The organization and activity of the dam construction site were characterized as vibrant displays of American strength. The changes in the Colorado River, likewise, were represented not only as landscape alterations but important developments in the growth of the nation. Bureau photographer Glaha’s photographs of the dam’s progress were in constant demand, as media outlets strove to present the rising of Boulder Dam as an example of the nation’s growing might (Vilander 1999).

Landscapes of “Enormous Weight”

Once the dam was complete, writers addressed the new landscapes of the dam with expressions of awe at the spectacle of man’s victory over nature. In contrast to the temporary character of the construction landscape, the dam and its finished infrastructure took on new permanent and symbolic qualities. Not only did writers praise the dam’s massiveness and superiority compared with other dams, but they also commented on the significance of its sheer monumentality. Once the dam was structurally complete in 1935, the predicted superlatives became reality: “twice as high as any other on earth” (Brisbane 1932, 191), “greater in massiveness than a dozen Chrysler Buildings, as strong and durable as the Rock of Gibraltar” (Lilly 1930, 447), “one of the wonders of the modern world” (Lilly 1930, 447), “the greatest engineering achievement of all time” (Bureau of Reclamation 1941, cover). The dam was said to be bigger, taller, and more massive than any other single structure in the world. The reservoir was reportedly longer, deeper and more voluminous than any other impounded water body. The dam’s turbines would generate more power than any other hydroelectric power plant in operation.

Impressive as the dam structure was, the vastness of its impact was only hinted at by the enormity of the concrete monolith. In February 1935, Lake Mead slowly began to rise behind Boulder Dam’s concrete face, obscuring the four intake towers and 115 miles of the Colorado River’s channel. Like the dam itself, the long and winding man-made reservoir landscape was represented largely in superlative terms by media reports, such as one boasting in 1932 that “Uncle Sam’s reservoir will be more than ten times as
big as the biggest” (Brisbane 1932, 191). Although writers disagreed as to whether Lake Mead would be ten or eleven or twelve times bigger than the Nile’s reservoir behind Aswan Dam, they often described its size in relation to better-known quantities: “The lake it will form will be the largest artificial body of water on the globe, a reservoir in which both New York and Chicago could be lumped and buried” (Lilly 1930, 448). Several writers opted to explain the reservoir’s volume in comparison to the area of the eastern states, explaining that it would hold enough water to cover the State of Kentucky to a depth of one foot, or the State of Connecticut to a depth of ten feet. These creative explanations helped metropolitan readers understand the magnitude of the undertaking, and conveyed an almost unreal sense of the nation’s technological achievement. Comparisons that relied on contrasts with eastern landscapes in the United States also reinforced the idea that the dam had created a fundamentally new landscape in the American Southwest.

Many commentators for the politically-oriented magazines (such as The Nation or The New Republic) focused on the international implications of the Boulder Dam project. Comparisons to the Aswan dam in Egypt and the Dnieperstroy in Russia specifically asserted American supremacy over other nations. General references, however, implicitly declared that the American effort had achieved outright global superiority. Literary Digest (“Man-made dimple” 1935) and Science (“Bending of earth’s crust” 1935) even ran short pieces on the dam’s theoretical ability to bend the earth’s crust with the weight of the impounded water soon to rise behind it, noting that “[n]ever before has such an enormous weight been placed in one spot by man’s labors” (“Man-made dimple 1935, 17). Media reports that Boulder Dam would create a weight heavy enough to compress the earth’s crust across a twelve-square-mile area obviously conveyed the Americans’ preoccupation with their impact on the globe. (See also Figure 4.)

Figure 4.
This illustration in Collier’s magazine (“Remaking the world” 1935, 66) shows a typical dam workers’ platform dangling against the face of the globe. This image cleverly played off familiar images showing workers lowered into place along the face of Boulder Dam.
Citing historical projects as points of comparison, several writers articulated the idea that America’s big dam was actually foreordained by mankind’s long history of progress in irrigation and engineering. Mead compared the project to British regulation of the Indus River, claiming that “nowhere in the history of irrigation development in any part of the world has there been such a rapid growth in the need for water” (Mead 1929, 58). A writer for Reclamation Era called Boulder Dam and four other projects “the majestic culmination of millenniums [sic] of irrigation practiced by mankind since the beginning of civilization” (Slavik 1940, 43). The thought that Boulder Dam’s foundation was laid at the dawn of civilization served to inspire readers, indicating the dam’s success as a foregone conclusion.

The magnitude of the dam’s success and its ability to transform nature also induced a narrative of social progress. One writer cited “the natural irrigation resulting from the annual floods of the Nile and other rivers in Babylonia, India, and China” as the basis for mankind’s “great communities … high social organization and splendid cultures” (Slavik 1940, 42). In rhapsodic comments about Boulder Dam’s importance, he drew his analogy between advanced irrigation technology and advanced society to its logical extreme: “It might not be considered unreasonable to draw the conclusion that our present-day American social organization is therefore the highest and furthest advanced of all cultures, the crown of all the ages” (Slavik 1940, 43). Not every writer went to such lengths to link irrigation, engineering, progress and social transformation, but many cited the dam as evidence of the country’s new potential to control nature, economy, and society.

**Landscapes of “Magnificent Spectacle”**

The completed dam was thus represented as a significant, inspiring engineering triumph achieved by a rising nation. Numerous writers felt the need to convey their awe, as in this description from Travel magazine: “For the aerial traveler, the Dam provides a magnificent spectacle, a stirring panorama that transforms into visual terms the astronomical figures which must be used in describing the building of the Dam and its operation” (“A new rival to the Grand Canyon” 1937, 19). Published alongside several spectacular aerial photographs (see Figure 5), these words conveyed a sense of grandeur and reverence. In addition to the reverence many writers expressed for man’s triumph over the Colorado River, the dam’s aesthetic beauty emerged as an important focus of commentary. With Glaha’s photographs circulating widely (although often anonymously) in the popular press, readers could share writers’ enthusiasm for the modern structure. In Glaha’s images, the finished dam appeared monolithic, beautiful, simple, and strong. Writers commented on the dam’s graceful appearance and its “vast wall of new, gray-white concrete, curved in a beautiful bow” (Bliven 1935, 126).

Visitors were obviously smitten with the new aesthetic landscape, and they often struggled to convey the powerful emotions the landscape produced. Travel writers sent
Figure 5.
This photo spread in Travel magazine ("A new rival to the Grand Canyon" 1937, 18-19) contains barely any text, using aerial photographs to convey a sense of grandeur and spectacle to readers.
by the highbrow magazines such as *Harper’s* and *Collier’s* commented on the dam’s aesthetic beauty at length, as in this example: “It is a beautiful, tantalizing thing. It is complex. It has a meaning, not to be grasped in weeks, or perhaps years. It is subtle, sometimes cruelly obvious...unreal, imaginative, supernatural” (White 1935, 120-121). As this description indicates, such commentators quickly identified the dam as a symbolic structure, but couldn’t always pinpoint exactly what it symbolized. For several, it symbolized the power of man over his landscape environment. For others, Boulder Dam signified nothing less than the transformation of man himself, as captured in phrasing that identified the dam as “the symbol of the new man, a new world, a new way of life” (Priestley 1937, 366). A *Collier’s* writer followed this line of thought, declaring, “The mind and hand of man have never dared undertake a vaster enterprise” (“Remaking the world” 1935, 66). These passages illustrate commonly expressed feelings about the new project landscape and its impress upon American culture. Just as American engineering had transformed Black Canyon, the project itself was thought to have transformed America itself.

Once Black Canyon was transformed and the Colorado was controlled, the completed dam also spurred wider imaginations of a transformed future landscape in the American Southwest. With waters rising in Lake Mead, writers imagined a new landscape of factories, plants, homes, and communities in the “continued development of our southwestern empire” (Young 1935, 75). Commissioner Mead himself had forecast the “marvelous growth of the Southwest” in 1929, envisioning a continued trajectory of landscape development (Mead 1929, 57). Later writers addressed an even wider transformation – a new way of living. A British writer for *Harper’s* saw in Boulder Dam the transformation of the world at the hand of a new global power: “Here in this Western American wilderness, the new man, the man of the future has done something, and what he has done takes your breath away,” he wrote. “Compared with this piece of building, the recent skyscrapers seem like toys. The shining towers of New York merely express the new man in his initial playful mood. With Boulder Dam he has really set to work. This is what he can do when given a real job” (Priestley 1937, 365).

American writers expressed the same sentiments, albeit somewhat less eloquently. Representations of the completed dam gave it a symbolic importance that stretched far beyond its immediate landscape. *Collier’s* termed Boulder Dam “an outstanding exemplification of the ability of modern man to control his environment and to turn to human use the power of untamed nature. [The] Colorado River project is just a sample, magnificent though it be, of what science is enabling men to do in many parts of the world” (“Remaking the world” 1935, 66). The *North American Review* had called Boulder Dam in 1930 “the latest of man’s grandiose thrusts at nature” (Lilly 1930, 447). As the 1935 *Collier’s* piece conveyed, however, the discourse about the dam had changed by the time it was completed. No longer was the dam limited to conquering a natural landscape. It had come to symbolize a social transformation as well.
Conclusions
National media portrayals of the Boulder Canyon Project focused very consistently on the transformation of landscape. The legitimacy of technocratic approaches to natural resource management was reinforced in a consistent narrative that merged government officials’ perspectives with those offered by professional and generalist writers. Other scholars have noted that a pervasive discourse of high modernism championed man’s domination of nature, and particularly water resources, in the American West during this era (Wehr 2004). In this paper, however, I have shown that the superiority of man over nature was only one element of a complex discourse that was more interested in landscape transformation than domination.

American magazines framed the progress at Boulder Dam most consistently in terms of landscape change. In the media discourse surrounding the dam, landscapes were constantly undergoing some kind of critical alteration. The Colorado River transformed from a raging river to a channelized waterway that eventually became a calm lake and then, finally, a tourist destination. Black Canyon transformed from a remote, unvisited gorge to a bustling construction site and then a monolithic impediment that symbolized a nation’s progress. Even Boulder City and Las Vegas underwent fundamental transformations: Boulder City moved rapidly through its phases as an arid desert and a modern city to reach its final status as a tourist destination; Las Vegas transformed almost overnight from a sleepy western hideout to a boomtown. The Imperial Valley, described as having been transformed once by the Colorado from a sea floor to a parched valley, had been transformed again by irrigation into productive farmland. As Lake Mead rose ever higher, the valley landscape prepared for a third transformation in which it would truly become one of the leading fruit and vegetable producing areas of the world. The imagined transformations of Imperial Valley, the larger Colorado Basin and indeed the entire Desert Southwest – from unpeopled, un-irrigated lands to lush, productive landscapes of a new empire – clearly suggested the transformation of the United States.

In the national magazines, there was no contestation of this narrative. Although a wilderness preservation movement had developed and gained momentum at the turn of the century, Boulder Dam’s boosters met with no significant objections that the river should be left to run free and wild. Opposition to Boulder Dam was limited to how it would be built and who would control the new landscapes. Opponents fully endorsed and advocated for the transformation of the Colorado River, Imperial Valley, and the American West; although they wanted to control the new landscapes. Thus even the opposition voices revealed a deep acceptance of the national importance of technological landscape transformation.

If the establishment of administrative bureaucracies to manage natural resources in the American West constituted a critical development in the evolution of the American state (Schulman 2005), the media coverage of those bureaucracies’ work provides a
This cartoon from Review of Reviews ("Beginning the biggest dam" 1930, 77) intentionally casts the Boulder Dam project as a test of American power.
critical window into American self-conception. From intrepid pioneer nation to global technological leader, the United States transformed its self-image while building Boulder Dam. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech at the dam’s dedication directly addressed the magnitude of the changes wrought by American engineering in a hostile, unforgiving landscape:

Ten years ago the place where we are gathered was an unpeopled, forbidding desert. In the bottom of a gloomy canyon, whose precipitous walls rose to a height of more than a thousand feet, flowed a turbulent, dangerous river. The mountains on either side of the canyon were difficult of access with neither road nor trail, and their rocks were protected by neither trees nor grass from the blazing heat of the sun. The site of Boulder City was a cactus-covered waste. The transformation wrought here in these years is a twentieth-century marvel. (Roosevelt 1935)

The president’s words echoed Secretary Wilbur’s earlier promise that the United States would “make new geography” with its monumental undertaking. The discourse surrounding the Boulder Canyon Project clearly conveyed this narrative, identifying the dam both as a symbol of the successful American conquest of nature and as a signifier of American superiority. Fundamental alteration of the American landscape was thus shown to reflect a deep-seated transformation of the American society as it secured its place among the modern world’s great nations.

The power and patriotic appeal of this discourse perhaps explain the longevity of Boulder Dam’s status as an American icon. Where other big dams like Hetch Hetchy (earlier) or Glen Canyon Dam (later) were framed largely by preservationist or environmentalist discourses that opposed the idea of taming or controlling nature for whatever transformative purpose, by whatever technological means, Boulder Dam was always associated discursively with the idea of advancing the American nation. Mainstream media outlets were instrumental in communicating and augmenting the government’s Progressive narrative of technological resource management. More importantly, however, the media equated technologically transformed landscapes with American economic development, social progress, and geopolitical power.

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