



January 2024

## Demon Mineral

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### Recommended Citation

DeSanti, Brady (2024) "Demon Mineral," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 20.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.01.20>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss1/20>

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## Demon Mineral

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Demon Mineral* (2024), directed by Hadley Austin.

### Keywords

Navajo, Uranium, Health disparities, Radioactivity

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### Author Notes

Dr. Brady DeSanti is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Native American Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is the current Director of the Native American Studies Program. He is an alumnus of UNO and received his Ph.D. in American History from the University of Kansas. He is an enrolled citizen of the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Nation in Wisconsin. His research focuses on Native American history and religious traditions.



**Demon Mineral, dir. Hadley Austin (2024)**

The Dine Nation (Navajo) resides on the largest reservation in the United States, their homelands extending throughout parts of New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona.<sup>1</sup> Similar in scope to Sophie Rousmaniere's *Yellow Fever: The Navajo Uranium Legacy* (2013), Hadley Austin's *Demon Mineral* provides an in-depth examination of the nearly eighty-year legacy of death and destruction uranium mining has inflicted on the Navajo people. Hadley (who is non-Native) responsibly centers her documentary on the Navajo people, who continue to suffer from radioactive drinking water, reside in environmentally unsafe housing and school buildings, consume contaminated food, and suffer a high cancer rate that extends from newborns to elders.

Beautifully filmed almost entirely in black and white, *Demon Mineral* focuses on the testimony of individual Navajos engaged in cultural renewal and environmental remediation efforts from decades of uranium contamination throughout Navajo traditional territories and waterways. The strongest aspects of the film rest on the witness of Navajos from multiple generations—from Navajo university students advocating for an end to uranium colonialism, to elders and medicine people who worked or lived by the mines at the height of operation. Prior to the boom in uranium mining after World War II, cancer was nearly nonexistent in Navajo

communities.<sup>2</sup> Today, unfortunately, cancer rates among the Navajo are high. One slide from the documentary states that uranium found in male and female Navajo urine samples “exceeds those found in the highest 5% of the United States’ population.”

Many Americans are familiar with the heroism displayed by Navajo Code Talkers during World War II but remain unaware of the dismal economic realities those same veterans returned to alongside their fellow community members on the Navajo Reservation at the end of the war. Despite post-World War II assimilationist policies aimed at bringing Native Americans into the American melting pot, discriminatory laws, cultural barriers, and lack of educational opportunities prevented the majority of them from achieving social mobility and financial stability amidst the consumer boom of the 1950s. The Navajo’s remote location also isolated them from the hubs of industry in southwestern cities. Working in uranium mines presented the first tangible opportunity for the Navajo to engage in a wage economy with the United States. And while European countries had firmly established the connection between uranium exposure and cancer, the Navajo were never informed of this association until decades later. Furthermore, the federal government maintained a monopoly on the purchase of uranium from 1948-1971. The scramble to keep pace with the Soviets during the nuclear arms race no doubt played a role in this arrangement, resulting in greater numbers of Navajo people working mills and the nearly 700 mines that once peppered the reservation’s landscape.

With this history in mind amidst the ongoing public health crisis in contemporary Navajo communities, the testimony from individuals living on the reservation highlight efforts to not only restore ecological balance but prevent future uranium mining being proposed by industry leaders and some political coalitions. Underpinning these human rights efforts is the Navajo understanding that the plants, animals, waters, clouds, mountains, and other aspects of the natural world are

nonhuman persons. The Navajo view these “other-than-human” persons as relatives with whom they have kinship bonds and to whom they have obligations. The Navajo homeland in general and at specific holy sites where ceremonies are performed ties directly to Navajo understandings of their identity, serving as a frame of reference for who they are and of the web of interconnecting kinship bonds they have with these other relatives who share their homeland.

The Navajo philosophical concept known as *Hozho* emphasizes that everything in existence is related and that actions towards one aspect of reality directly influence the whole at the macro and micro levels. Balance amongst humans, lands, and nature is referred to as *Walking in Beauty*. Imbalance leads to a negative ripple effect, severing relationships between humans and the natural world. The viewer witnesses the imbalance wrought by uranium mining through the powerful but somber interviews of Navajos like producer Emma Robbins, who found time during filming breaks to deliver clean water to Navajo communities. Or Tommy Rock, whose dissertation research resulted in testing and successfully locating unsafe sources of groundwater on the reservation. An elder’s account of the way that infant birth defects were once blamed by non-Native doctors on acts of incest, or drug and alcohol use, is particularly heartbreaking and infuriating. One Navajo’s report of sheep butchered for feasts after ceremonies found with yellow organs, fat, and meat further captures the pervasive imbalance and suffering to the inhabitants of the Navajo homelands.

Accounts by some Navajo regarding the worst instance of nuclear contamination in American history at Church Rock, New Mexico on July 16, 1979 are harrowing, both for the devastation and how little the American public knows about the disaster. Church Rock remains an ongoing apocalypse for the Navajo people. The deluge of radioactive waste carried into the Puerco River resulted in large pockets of ecological “dead zones” on the Navajo reservation. The fact that

Church Rock remains the worst radioactive incident on record but remains almost entirely unknown by the American public is unacceptable. The Three Mile Island nuclear accident occurred only four months prior to Church Rock, but it remains stamped permanently into the consciousness of American public memory. Historical ignorance on this level contributes to a perpetuation of Navajo realities being marginalized and ignored in American environmental discourses.

The legacy of uranium mining poses severe long-term public health complications for the Navajo people, affecting their social infrastructure, quality of life, economy, and their ability to uphold ceremonial obligations at sacred sites. *Demon Mineral* is an important documentary that one hopes will spur not only greater public awareness of this issue, but efforts by the Navajo to have their water rights to the Colorado River upheld. Around 40% of the Navajo people lack access to running water, and the US Supreme Court in *Arizona vs Navajo Nation* in 2023 denied federal treaty obligations to protect the Navajo's rights to the Colorado River. Given the terrible toll on the Navajo people, it would be easy to present them as only hapless victims. However, Hadley and Robbins and all the creatives behind *Demon Mineral* instead highlight the unshakable dignity and agency of the Navajo Nation, who against great odds continue to make strides towards environmental and cultural renewal, as well as the perpetuation of their spiritual obligations that restore balance to the land and maintain their kinship obligations towards their nonhuman relatives.

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<sup>1</sup> The Navajo reservation is 27,000 square miles, making it larger than ten states in the United States. See "Four Corners Region, Navajo Nation Indian Reservation" <http://www.fourcornersgeotourism.com/content/navajo-nation-indian-reservation/fca81f6c25ff21711e54> [Accessed January 15, 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Judy Pasternak, "Blighted Homeland: A Peril That Dwelt Among the Navajos" <http://www.latimes.com/news/la-na-navajo19nov19,0,5351917.story#axzz2jjOHwU1f>, pg. 1 [Accessed January 15, 2024].