

SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #10 | 2026

July



© Alison Pouliot and Valérie Chételat

THANK GOD FOR THE COAL ROLLERS

Timothy James LeCain

Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

10 • 2026

Timothy James LeCain

Last summer, I was driving the family SUV home after a day of mountain biking here in the Northern Rockies of Montana. Although I was going a bit faster than the speed limit, in the mirror I saw a large black pickup truck approaching quickly from behind. A few seconds later the truck roared past me on the left. But then the driver abruptly pulled back in and slowed sharply. Stomping on the brake, I'd barely had a chance to utter a few choice observations of the driver's suspect parentage and intelligence when the truck roared ahead again, now releasing a huge cloud of dense black smoke from its immense twin tailpipes. For a few white-knuckle seconds, I was engulfed and driving blind. When the smoke thankfully cleared, I saw the truck speeding away. I could almost hear the guffaws of laughter fading in the distance as the driver and his likely passengers disappeared around the next corner.

I had been "coal rolled."



© Toa55 on iStock. All rights reserved.

For those of you lucky enough to live in countries that still enjoy some modicum of rationality, the phrase may not be familiar. Let me elucidate. "Rolling coal," to use the somewhat awkward *terme d'arte*, is a technological modification that has in recent decades become popular among a microculture of diesel-truck drivers. For anywhere from several hundred to several thousand US dollars, owners can install a device that briefly modifies their engine to dump more fuel into the cylinders than can be burnt. At the flip of a switch, the driver can release a dense black cloud of sooty smoke reminiscent of an old-fashioned coal-powered railroad engine—presumably the origins of the term.

For anywhere from several hundred to several thousand US dollars, owners can install a device that briefly modifies their engine to dump more fuel into the cylinders than can be burnt.

Thank God for the Coal Rollers

DOI: [10.5282/rcc-springs-22328](https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-22328)

Coal rollers are rare even in the Wild West of Montana, though you're likely to eventually see one in action if you stay here long enough. In those US states with annual emission inspections and penalties—Montana has none—they are doubtlessly even less common. The practice seems to have first emerged among off-road-vehicle enthusiasts in the United States who were inspired by the Monster Truck shows that gained wide popularity in the 1990s. These spectacles were an outgrowth of traditional County Fair horse-and-tractor pulls—competitions that stemmed from then-still-common and -useful rural skills and technologies. Modern Monster Trucks, however, make no pretense to utility. The trucks run on energy-dense liquid methanol, which generates no visible smoke, though some designers use steam to mimic the fire-breathing dragon effect. A typical truck is 3.5 meters (12 feet) tall, weighs more than 4,500 kilos (about 10,000 US pounds), and can produce an earth-shaking 1,500 horsepower.



Horses pulling concrete blocks at a fair. [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC BY-SA 2.0.

Perhaps this explains why Montana coal rollers gravitate toward the biggest available US pickup trucks, which, judging by their often-spotless appearance and empty truck beds, may also be more about display than utility for some owners. Any diesel engine can, in theory, be modified to roll coal. But I have yet to see a diesel Mercedes or Volkswagen TDI spouting clouds of black smoke—at least not on purpose. No, coal rollers favor iconic US trucks like the colossal Ford F-350 and Chevrolet Silverado 3500. But given that a new Ford F-350 will, depending on options, set you back anywhere from USD 60,000 to USD 100,000, some coal rollers are no doubt forced to settle for the brand's more modest but still massive stablemates.

Regardless, for coal rollers, size clearly matters.



Monster Truck show. Photo by Brian Bustos. [Flickr](#). [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

How to explain such a bizarre practice? At one level, I suspect “rolling coal” simply reflects a widespread human fascination, or perhaps a closely related disgust, with big, powerful, noisy, smoke-spewing machines. My own two kids loved big diggers, graders, and bulldozers when they were young, and both were fans of the *Dinotrux* books and related Netflix series that created an irresistible [fusion of big dinosaurs and big construction equipment](#).

The US-born Monster Truck show has in more recent years gone international, attracting large audiences from Manila to Riyadh. In some ways, the shows trade in the same kind of [overwhelming noisy excess](#) as heavy-metal concerts and World Wrestling smackdowns. The sheer size and power of these behemoth machines can literally take your breath away. As one *New York Times* columnist recently observed after witnessing a “Monster Jam” in Newark, New Jersey, “Two drivers stomping on 1,500-horsepower apiece for 30 seconds sounds like 10 cars backfiring into your eardrum. It is shockingly, ecstatically loud. That’s the point.”¹

At one level, I suspect “rolling coal” simply reflects a widespread human fascination, or perhaps a closely related disgust, with big, powerful, noisy, smoke-spewing machines.

So far as I’ve been able to determine, few if any scholars have made a serious effort to investigate why a tiny percentage of diesel-truck owners enjoy spewing toxic smoke. A generous observer might conclude that they’re engaged in a sort of performance art—taking the Monster Truck show to the street, so to speak. But there is, of course, a less friendly and more politically motivated explanation. Red-hat-wearing coal rollers frequently [show up to disrupt “No Kings” anti-Trump parades and demonstrations](#) here in Bozeman, often flying a “Make America Great Again” banner.

Based on personal observations and a not very rigorous review of YouTube where some coal rollers like to record and post videos of their attacks, a favorite target is the supposedly archetypal ride of the liberal-progressive environmentalist: the hybrid-powered Toyota Prius.

But a Tesla or any other easily identifiable electric vehicle are also popular, and apparently almost any upscale foreign import will do in a pinch. Despite being a foreign brand, though, a full-size Toyota SUV like mine shouldn't have attracted much interest. But some coal rollers also like to harass pedestrians and bikers with their clouds of smoke. Maybe the mountain bike hanging off my rear rack made me suspect that day?

Regardless, most coal rollers seem to be motivated by some confused amalgam of antienvironmentalism, paleomasculine display, and insecurities (most are youngish men), and an aggressive desire to "own the libs," all mixed in with the long-standing US taste for juvenile vandalism—a sort of modern take on the still-popular practice of cruising rural backroads and [slugging defenseless mailboxes with a bat](#).

I thought of exactly none of this while I was being coal rolled. Whatever their inchoate and quite possibly pathological motivations, the coal roller simply made me angry. This was no doubt the intent. The unexpected cloud of smoke momentarily blinded me while driving at high speed on a narrow mountain road. I might have easily swerved and lost control. Nor did I appreciate the noxious diesel fumes that briefly flooded the cabin, laden as they are with carcinogens and other toxic chemicals. Scoring a cheap laugh by chemically assaulting people would be a fairly serious crime in any reasonably well-run state.²

Still, after I had cooled down a bit, I had the first inkling of a strange and somewhat disturbing thought. It continued to gnaw at me over the next few days, partly because it seemed relevant to the new book I've been working on. I began to realize that a decent case could be made that these smoke-spewing coal rollers were doing me—and you, and maybe even themselves—a sort of backhanded favor.

Of course, I'm not trying to excuse the coal roller's conspicuous and dangerous display of profligate consumption and deliberate pollution. But I had to admit that I'd just driven my own full-size, gasoline-powered "light truck" (as it is bizarrely classified by the US government, even though it is neither light nor a truck) some 32 kilometers (20 miles) into the mountains for no more pressing reason than to enjoy an afternoon of mountain biking in the forest. Sure, my Highlander might get a couple kilometers per liter more than the typical coal roller's absurdly overgrown truck. I couldn't be entirely sure given all the smoke, but I think that my particular coal roller actually drove one of those iconic Ford F-350 pickups. If you need to haul a small house somewhere, the F-350 is the truck for you.

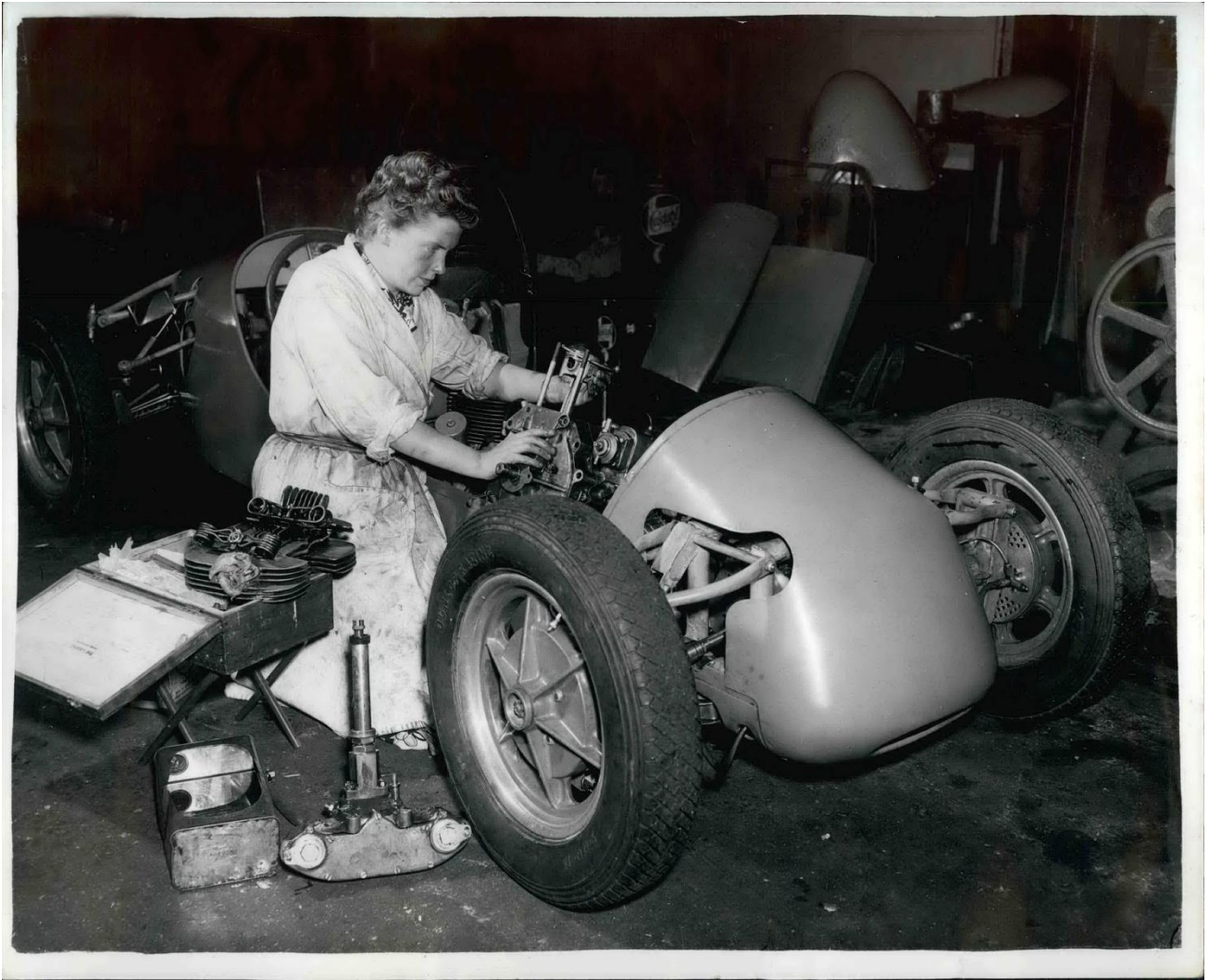
But that my SUV is somewhat less of a gas guzzler than a diesel F-350 hardly qualifies it as an economy car. Like many of my outdoor-sport-loving friends and neighbors here in southwestern Montana, I avoid thinking too much about the obvious hypocrisy of driving an environmentally destructive SUV to get to the very environments I supposedly want to protect. Many of us live in Bozeman precisely because we want to bike, hike, and ski in the nearby mountains. Four-wheel-drive SUVs and trucks are arguably the safest and most effective means of getting there.



The Rusty, Trusty, Steed. Photo by Zach Dischner. [Flickr](#). [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

But before you dismiss this as just another example of liberal environmental guilt and self-flagellation, let me quickly move on to the more interesting reason we might actually want to “Thank God for the coal rollers.”³ Rather than belabor the obvious point that we all could do more to save the environment, I want to focus instead on *why*, despite all that we know about global warming and carbon footprints, we (and I include myself here) often can’t seem to muster the determination to put our passionately held abstract ideals into effective concrete action.

To understand where my thinking is coming from, you’ll need some background from that new book project I mentioned before, working title: “Out of Touch: How a New Age of Immaterialism is Making Us Dumb, Distracted, and Depressed.” The book’s basic point is pretty straightforward. For most of human existence we have formed deep material partnerships with nonhuman things and organisms. Dawn to dusk, day in and day out, people worked closely with an immense world of things: wood and iron, horses and cows, plants and fabrics, clocks and cars, to name just a few that have come and gone over the centuries. Critically for my argument, people encountered all these things with their hands and bodies as much as their minds. As a result, this powerful and creative nonhuman environment, things and organisms, played an immense role in how they thought about the world and their place within it. A farmer, for example, with their daily engagement with wheat, corn, or other crops, would likely have an embodied sense of the fragile nature of plant life, the capriciousness of weather, and the rhythm of the seasons, that influenced how they saw other aspects of the world. Likewise, the farmer would learn different lessons than someone spinning thread or making shoes, though all would share a close connection to the material world.



Daphne Arnott building a car, 7 July 1953. © Keystone Pictures USA on [Alamy](#). All rights reserved.

Until, in really just the blink of the historical eye, they no longer did. Starting first in Europe and soon spreading around the world, millions of people essentially stopped working with most of the things that had once defined their lives. Of course, they still used a lot of things—cars, ovens, computers. But most of these things were increasingly designed to minimize the demands they made on their users. Convenience, ease, and simplicity were key. Think, for example, of the difference between riding a horse and driving a modern car. The first requires that you negotiate with another sentient creature who has a personality and desires of its own. The second increasingly demands only that we push a button and go. So my point is that today most of us have become much more like “car people” than “horse people.” We are literally “out of touch” with the many things that had helped shape how we understood the world.

Today most of us have become much more like “car people” than “horse people.” We are literally “out of touch” with the many things that had helped shape how we understood the world.

As with many big historical changes, precisely when this happened varied from place to place. Yet what I call the Age of Immaterialism had begun to emerge in much of the European world by the late nineteenth century. After World War II, it reached a critical mass. Millions of farmers,

machinists, welders, seamstresses, and mechanics began to either stop working entirely or found the nature of their work so changed as to be unrecognizable. In their place came people who mostly worked with words, symbols, and ideas, or often simply with other people: what we now call knowledge or service workers.

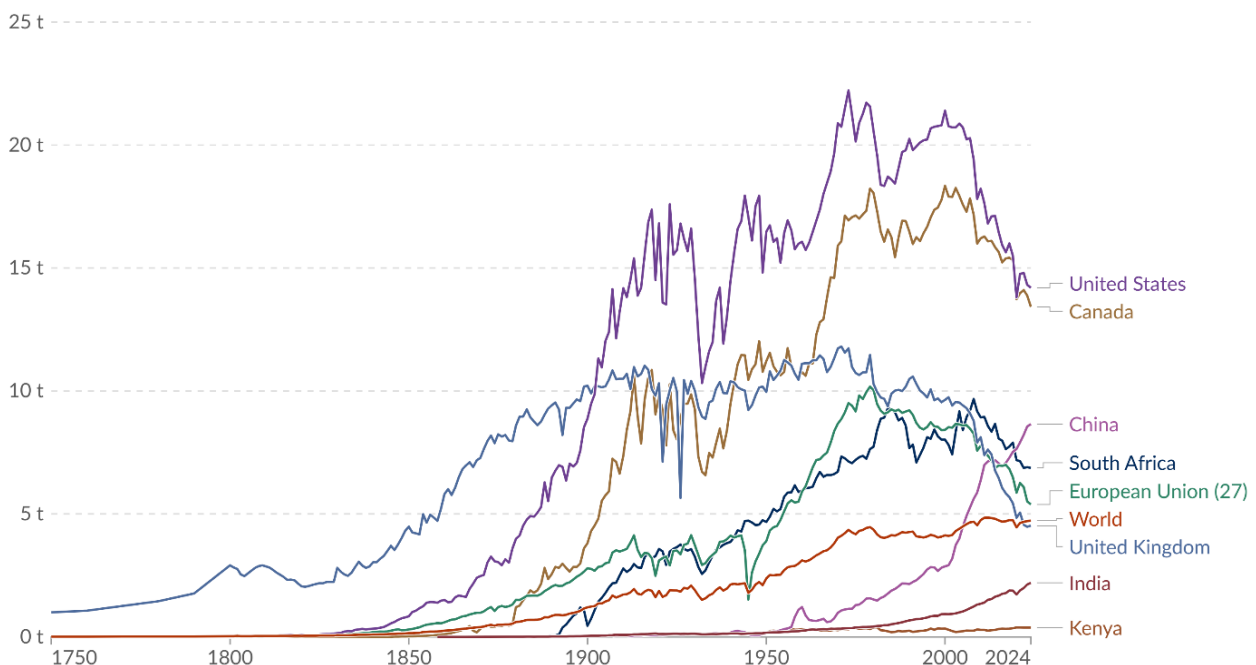
As the name implies, the humanistic disciplines have often been unapologetically anthropocentric—a trend that only deepened with the more recent dominance of the linguistic turn, postmodernism, and sociocultural constructivism. All tended to underestimate or even ignore the influence of nonhuman organisms and things. Environmental historians and humanists offered something of an exception, as many deliberately sought to study the agency of the “more than human.” However, when developing tactics to help solve pressing problems like climate change, even environmental humanists and policymakers still tend to emphasize *rhetorical* persuasion. If more people only knew how big their carbon footprint was, for example, then surely they would make personal, national, and international efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Perhaps not. As the sociologist Peter Wagner observes in his new book, *Carbon Societies: The Social Logic of Fossil Fuels*, despite the many novel and potentially effective ideas and technologies in circulation today to solve climate change, progress has been slow. In the United States, still the largest per capita emitter of carbon dioxide in the world, modest reductions over the past few decades are now threatened by the Trump administration’s renewed push for coal and oil. Globally, the growth in greenhouse-gas emissions has largely plateaued, though most scientists agree that these numbers will need to decline far more rapidly if we are to avoid the more apocalyptic climate scenarios.

CO₂ emissions per capita

Our World
in Data

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from burning fossil fuels and industrial processes¹. This includes emissions from transport, electricity generation, and heating, but not land-use change².



CO₂ emissions per capita by country, excluding emissions from land-use change. [OurWorldinData.org](https://ourworldindata.org). CC BY 4.0.

In sum, it seems that more people than ever recognize the problems of fossil-fuel consumption and climate change, and alternatives from solar to wind are becoming more practical every day. Yet

the impetus to act, either in terms of individual personal efforts or as part of a larger political push for governmental actions, has often stalled or even reversed. Wagner ends on a pessimistic note, concluding that “the prospect of action against resistance has diminished.”⁴

Wagner’s conclusion is convincing. However, his pessimism may not be entirely warranted. As with many humanists and social scientists in our postmodern immaterial age, Wagner emphasizes the centrality of human agency, ideas, and institutions as both the cause of our problems and the solution. He briefly entertains the possibility that the material power of coal and oil themselves may be a central cause, but in the end finds it inadequate. Instead, he critiques such materially grounded explanations as narrowly monocausal and deterministic.

Wagner is, of course, correct that humans do have significant agency in determining their own personal actions and the policies they choose to support. However, he fails to consider how this human agency emerges in significant part from the agencies of other, nonhuman things. In a typically immaterialist fashion, Wagner overlooks more materially grounded strategies for change precisely because he resists giving any genuine agency to coal, oil, and other material things. If, in the name of preserving human agency, we insist that coal and oil were not a significant cause of our problems in the first place, then it is unlikely we will seriously consider how an alliance with different materials might provide the solution.



Coal mining in Borneo. Photo by [Dominik Vanyi](#), 2018. [Unsplash license](#).

As the influential philosopher of cognition Andy Clark puts it, “environmental engineering is also self-engineering” as material changes reconfigure “our minds and our capacities of thought and reason.”⁵ In this sense, human engagement with a rooftop solar panel, a frequently ridden bicycle, or a home garden, might be recognized as more effective forces for social and political change than rhetorical persuasion. Not solely because these alternative things also offer new technological solutions—if I ride a bicycle, obviously I’m not burning gas in my car—but also because our individual

embodied engagement with these nonhuman things can generate new ways of thinking and acting. In sum, making it possible for more people to easily ride bicycles might ultimately change their thinking about other issues as well, including their political views.

Importantly for my argument here, however, unpleasant or negative material engagements might also generate useful new ways of thinking and acting. As environmental humanists have long recognized, many of the most destructive consequences of our contemporary ways of life are often hidden from us. We may know abstractly that the copper wire in our walls and the electricity it carries are created by destructive open-pit mines and coal-fired generators, but few of us will experience these negative consequences directly. But what if we could consciously seek out ways to provide frequent reminders of these realities?

A concrete example can clarify my point. In 2022, Egypt hosted the 27th meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27). As the historian On Barak relates in his excellent 2024 book, *Heat, a History*, the conference met not in the bustling megalopolis of Cairo, but in the remote resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, a location that was difficult to access without using jet planes or cars, and where the delegates were kept cool and sweat free by the prodigious use of energy-hungry air conditioners.⁶ As with earlier such meetings, the policy outcomes of COP27 were mixed. The signal accomplishment was the creation of a fund to compensate developing countries for losses related to climate change. But the delegates once again failed to agree on a concrete path toward achieving significant reductions in global greenhouse-gas emissions.

Barak's account of COP27 left me wondering: Would the results have been any different had the COP27 delegates met instead in some crowded, hot, sweaty, working-class neighborhood of Cairo? Probably not. One meeting, no matter how grittily material, could hardly overcome decades of political, economic, and material inertia. Yet, Barak's point reminds us that the more we erect walls, whether physical or cultural or theoretical, that isolate us from the material realities of the world, the more difficult it becomes to truly grasp the problem and find solutions that the majority might willingly support. To think and act most clearly and creatively, we have to escape the illusions of our increasingly abstract, digital, and immaterial lives, and find novel ways for more of us to experience these problems through our whole bodies, not just our minds.

Which brings me back to those coal rollers and their outlandish fossil-fueled displays. On the one hand, in some highly emotional and atavistic way, the coal rollers are recognizing and celebrating a concrete material reality: the extraordinary power and agency of oil and other hydrocarbon fuels. As Dipesh Chakrabarty famously put it back in 2009, "The mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuel use." True, there may have been other, less energy-intensive and more sociopolitically rooted ways of achieving something like the modern world's expanded affluence and freedom. But that it might have been done differently should not blind us to the reality that the vast energy stored in fossil fuels offered a sort of "Get Out of Malthusian Jail" card. Hydrocarbons helped fuel the tractors and fertilizer production that made it possible to avoid the economist Thomas Malthus' 1798 prediction that rapid population growth would inevitably outstrip the available food supply. If so, it may have been a card that can only be played once. As the Nobel Prize-winning chemist George Olah puts it, "Nature's petroleum oil and natural gas are the greatest gifts we will ever have."⁷

We should recognize the irony that these smoke-spouting dinosaurs might do more to motivate progress in combatting climate change than a hundred rhetorical appeals for action.

I suspect we can safely assume that few coal rollers have read Chakrabarty or even heard of Olah. But however uninformed their thinking or malicious their motivations, the coal rollers are correct in sensing that oil is, in some mysterious, almost occult manner, the architect of an individual freedom

and wealth so abundant they can squander it with extravagant displays of black smoke. Theirs is the modern “barbaric yawp,” a diesel-fueled roar of unfettered individual freedom powered by millions of years of buried sunlight. The future may well go to the soft electric hum of the Tesla and other all-electric cars, machines whose power bears no trace of its origins. There is simply no way to tell whether the electricity that powers them came from a dirty, greenhouse-gas-emitting coal plant, or a green-energy wind or solar farm. By contrast, the source of the coal rollers’ power is on full display for all to see. This doesn’t mean we should abandon electric vehicles, of course. But rather that we should recognize the irony that these smoke-spouting dinosaurs might do more to motivate genuine progress in combatting climate change than a hundred passionate rhetorical appeals for action. That the coal rollers would surely despise the very thought that in trying to be bad they might instead be doing some good, to me, makes the realization all the more satisfying.

As I drove down the canyon that day, the greenhouse gases spewing from my own tailpipe were all but invisible. Like a glutton with impeccable table manners, I conceal my own ravenous appetites and destructive pollution behind a veneer of technical and social responsibility. But for just a few seconds, the coal roller’s smoke gave me a literally stinking and noxious taste of a truth that our bizarre new Age of Immaterialism constantly conspires to make us forget: Hidden beneath the seductive lure of my own freedom, comfort, and affluence lies a black fire-breathing monster that is more lord than servant.

So yes—thank God for the coal rollers . . . the god-damned bastards.

Notes

¹ Paul McAdory, “Rising from the Dead at Monster Jam,” *The New York Times*, 6 February 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/style/monster-jam-trucks.html>.

² California, Oregon, and at least eight other states do explicitly prohibit rolling coal with penalties of varying severity.

³ Many will recognize my debt here to a famously provocative essay: Paul Fussell, “Thank God for the Atom Bomb,” *The New Republic*, August 1981, 28–30.

⁴ Peter Wagner, *Carbon Societies: The Social Logic of Fossil Fuels* (Polity Press, 2024), 241.

⁵ Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (Oxford University Press, 2008), xxviii.

⁶ On Barak, *Heat, a History: Lessons from the Middle East for a Warming Planet* (University of California Press, 2024), 230.

⁷ Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Sacha Loeve, *Carbon: A Biography* (Polity Press, 2024), 132.



Timothy James LeCain is the author of *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (2017), which develops a new historical theory and method emphasizing the central role of nonhuman things in shaping history. His first book, *Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines That Wired America and Scarred the Planet* (2009), won the 2010 George Perkins Marsh Prize for best book in environmental history. He is department chair and professor of history at Montana State University. He was a senior fellow at the RCC from 2011 to 2012, and returned as a visiting scholar in 2018.



CC BY 4.0

2026 Timothy James LeCain

This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights.

Cite this article

LeCain, Timothy James. "Thank God for the Coal Rollers." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 10 (July 2026).
<https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-22328>.

Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review is an open-access online publication for peer-reviewed articles, creative nonfiction, and artistic contributions that showcase the work of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and its community across the world. In the spirit of Rachel Carson, it publishes sharp writing with an impact. Surveying the interrelationship between environmental and social changes from a wealth of disciplines and perspectives, it is a place to share rigorous research, test out fresh ideas, question old ones, and to advance public and scholarly debates in the environmental humanities and beyond.

Springs is available online. To view, please visit

<https://springs-rcc.org>

ISSN 2751-9317

Rachel
Carson
Center