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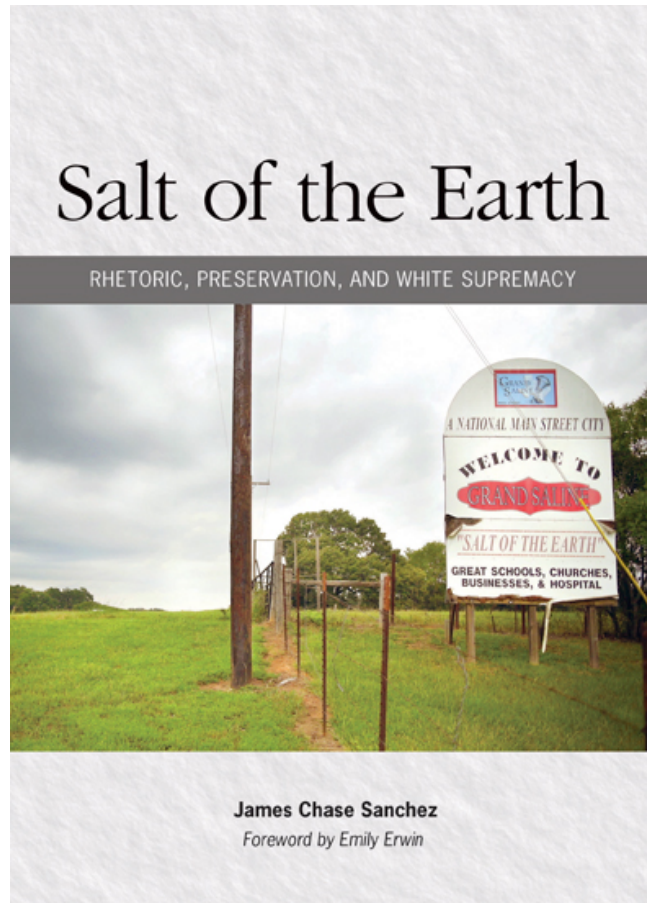
**Issue:** 5

**Publication Date:** February 2022

**Stable URL:** <https://constell8cr.com/book-reviews/review-salt-of-the-earth/>

# "You Know, Anger Can Be Righteous": A Review of James Chase Sanchez's *Salt of the Earth* and Joel Fendelman's *Man on Fire*

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Sanchez, James Chase. *Salt of the Earth: Rhetoric, Preservation, and White Supremacy*. Champaign, National Council of Teachers of English, 2021.

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*Man on Fire*. Directed by Joel Fendelman, produced by James Chase Sanchez, New Day Films, 2018. \$4.99 (*Vimeo, Prime Video*), \$7.99 (*Prime Video*); \$12.99 (*Vimeo*).

On June 23, 2014, Methodist minister Charles Moore self-immolated in a Dollar General parking lot protesting Grand Saline, Texas's legacy of racism. For James Chase Sanchez, who was at the time a doctoral student of race and the rhetorics of protest, Moore's death connected to his research interests, but it was also personally relevant. Growing up in Grand Saline, Sanchez understood the atmosphere to which Moore's death responded.

In *Salt of the Earth*, Sanchez unpacks how Grand Saline's storytelling tradition sustains and preserves white supremacy by constellating his most salient memories of Grand Saline (Sanchez, personal interview) and scholarship on the rhetorics of race and racism, protest, silence, cultural rhetorics, and storytelling as methodology. While working toward his dissertation, Sanchez reached out to Joel Fendelman to produce their 2018 documentary *Man on Fire*, which investigates the cultural atmosphere that Moore's suicide responded to and the town's reactions to claims of racism. Even though Sanchez initially expressed bitterness and resentment toward Grand Saline for the town's collective refusal to confront its racism (Sanchez, personal interview), he describes *Man on Fire* and *Salt of the Earth* as labors of love. These two works are essential for scholars interested in communities' meaning-making practices, especially communities that institutionally degrade people of color and are hesitant to listen to those claims. They are also incredibly important for people looking to unpack the covert rhetorical moves that sustain white supremacy in their or others' communities, as Sanchez demonstrates that individual practices enculturate communities without necessarily being woven together to create a tightly-knit culture of white supremacy. These works show how criticism can be leveraged to ask communities to be better—these texts do not intend to damage Grand Saline, but rather help it listen to claims of racism and move to redress those wounds.

Sanchez's monograph outlines three broad rhetorical moves that reinforce racism in Grand Saline. Middle- and high-school students assimilate into white supremacist norms as stories and jokes are passed through generations; hegemonic storytelling keeps racist stories alive; and silencing attempts to bury accusations of racism. Chapters one and two follow Sanchez, who identifies as Chicana, as he explains the ways in which he was "tangentially white" (12). He was objectified as a non-white outsider, including being asked if his Mexican family immigrated legally, but his Latinx identity did not subject him to anti-Black racism and let him participate in the football team's racist culture. In chapters three and four, Sanchez analyzes hegemonic storytelling by deconstructing stories associated with three sites:

Poletown, Clark's Ferry and the Klu Klux Klan, and sundown signs. Even though racist stories may not be substantiated by institutional archives, the fact that they are passed through generations suggests that the stories are told to sustain white supremacy and make Grand Saline a hostile town for Black communities. Grand Saline's efforts to conceal the rhetorical underpinnings of stories by describing them as "just stories" (Sanchez 56) and upholding capital-H History as truth obscure the fact that racist stories and whitewashed History work in tandem to uphold white supremacy. Chapters five and six explain silencing as a method to quell in-group dissent and depose those who speak out against racism in Grand Saline. Examples of silencing include the *Grand Saline Sun's* editor's reluctance to cover Moore's death in the paper and the removal of a memorial to Moore at the site of his death. In chapter seven, Sanchez outlines six practices that Grand Saline can adopt to un-learn white supremacy and promises the town that in 2024, the ten-year anniversary of Moore's death, he will write to have a permanent memorial erected in Moore's honor.

Blending autoethnography and cultural rhetorics allows Sanchez to emotionally connect to the reader in ways that a traditional rhetorical analysis does not. Sanchez's narrative is personal; he describes the complexity of his complicity with white supremacy, knowing that it was wrong but wary of the social repercussions for speaking out. He recounts participating in a mock-KKK senior prank and feeling ashamed that Grand Saline High School spread racist stories, but regardless of how he felt, he stayed silent. Sanchez's vulnerability is one of this work's strongest assets. His words help the reader see the ways that actions and stories perpetuate white supremacy, but more importantly, that acknowledging complicity is the first step toward undoing harm.

Sanchez's monograph shows the interconnectedness of story and place. He weaves through places that are central to Grand Saline's community and Moore's memory. The reader is introduced to the Old City Pharmacy, a coffee shop and unofficial museum; Poletown, infamous for stories of white residents decapitating and mounting Black people's heads on poles; and the Dollar General parking lot where Moore self-immolated. White residents debate whether or not "Poletown" is named after racist stories or houses built with poles, but historical accuracy is secondary to the reality that racist stories permeate these places with meaning. Sanchez poignantly underscores the relationships among place, story, and public memory and highlights an important contradiction in how white residents engage with stories that tie Grand Saline and racism. White residents fervently deny stories of racism, especially when those stories are tied to specific locations, like the Dollar

General parking lot and Poletown. The fact that white residents of Grand Saline recognize that stories have connections to specific places and work to silence evidence of those stories suggests that even if these residents don't believe stories of racism, they understand that their mere existence makes these places sustain anti-Blackness.

*Salt of the Earth* is a robust piece of cultural rhetorics scholarship that challenges white supremacy as an always-overt ideology. Sanchez privileges the ways that Grand Saline's everyday meaning-making practices contribute to community identity. These covert rhetorical moves are some of the most valuable practices to examine due to how seamlessly Grand Saline uses them to transmit and perpetuate white supremacy.

Fendelman and Sanchez's documentary *Man on Fire* is a necessary audio-visual and contextual supplement to *Salt of the Earth*. Each work functions well individually. As a pair, though, the documentary and the monograph allow audiences to more completely digest the socio-cultural contexts around Moore's self-immolation and the exigence for rhetorical analysis and attention to silence—including the townspeople's reactions to Sanchez's research on Moore and the fact that stories reproduce white supremacy. The documentary also alternates between interviews and a slow-motion reenactment of Moore writing letters, driving to the Dollar General parking lot, kneeling on his blue pillow, dousing himself in gasoline, and setting himself on fire. The documentary does not include these clips for shock value, but rather to allow (or force) viewers to confront the emotional weight of Moore's death.

*Man on Fire* interviews people in Grand Saline and beyond, some of whom are committed, on different levels, to preserving white supremacy. Viewers hear from almost-exclusively white townspeople who knew or knew of Moore: childhood friends, colleagues, family members, city administrators, witnesses to his suicide, and church congregants. The documentary moves outside of Grand Saline to interview Black residents from the nearby towns of Mineola, Tyler, and Ben Wheeler, Texas, all of whom confirm that Grand Saline has a notoriously racist past and hostile present. Seeing people's faces and bodies as they tell stories, move around in space, interact with peers, and respond to the topic of racism makes Sanchez's scholarship tangible. *Salt of the Earth* outlines storytelling, assimilation, and silencing in-depth, but watching people engage with those rhetorical moves, and do so seemingly unaware, reminds the viewer that racism is a deeply embodied ideology.

The documentary highlights the extent of the town's denial of racism in Grand Saline. Even though Moore left a page-length letter explaining that he self-immolated as a protest against racism, townspeople claimed not to understand his death. Moore wanted attention and was "'sick.'" The town did not need to uplift that "'self-martyrism [*sic*] crap'" because it was "'bad history for [their] town.'" Townspeople looked to dissociate themselves from Moore's death, explaining his suicide through mental illness, self-isolation, failing health, and being "'deceived into thinking (of) something as a problem'" (emphasis mine).

Anti-Blackness is one part of the story of white supremacy in Grand Saline. Because white supremacy isn't relegated to anti-Blackness, acknowledging and listening to the experiences of other communities of color in Grand Saline is necessary to understand the ways in which the town upholds white supremacy.

There is still much listening to be done to white supremacist stories in Grand Saline, specifically around anti-Indigenous and anti-Latine/x discourses. Thus, a question that both works raise but cannot answer is how rhetorics of oppression constellate into complex and far-reaching networks of racial dynamics, especially if Grand Saline's actions are not overtly motivated by hatred for communities of color.

If communities are to practice the rhetorical listening that Sanchez models in his accounts of his own stories, that process cannot end with the deconstruction of those rhetorical moves that perpetuate white supremacy. Communities may use story and scholarship to develop a critical anti-racist consciousness, but those journeys are inherently messy and flexible, depending on the community's orientation to white supremacy and the steps that it must take to practice anti-racism. While stories can help communities forget or misconstrue their pasts—like Grand Saline's understanding of stories as folklore—stories can also help people remember. They are not always unearthed and examined to ostracize, lambast, or ridicule the communities who spread or bury them, and Sanchez agrees. In his words: "I wanted—I needed—people to remember" (Sanchez and Fendelman).

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