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Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of "Green" Capitalism.

By Hannah Holleman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. xvii + 231 pp. \$35.00, paper.

In the summer of 1931, strong winds and stagnant dry conditions began lifting up the dryland topsoil, plummeting much of the US southern Great Plains into a series of major dust storms. For the following nine years, a sea of fine-grained sediments engulfed homes and hospitals; nudged schools and businesses shut; blocked roads and isolated towns; blinded and starved people and animals to death; and forced others to leave remnants of possibilities behind. Scholarly accounts and popular perception refer to this disaster as the Dust Bowl, which spread across southwest Kansas, west Texas and Oklahoma, northeast New Mexico, and southeast Colorado. Individual and family stories are commonly used to make sense of the scale of the tragedy, but also to portray a story of human "survival" and "resilience"; these stories also form a powerful learning analog upon which the nation could prepare for future ecological and economic challenges. To sociologist Hannah Holleman, however, these views and narratives are too simplistic and ahistorical. Far worse, they obscure the real lessons that the catastrophe revealed.

Drawing on a rich multidisciplinary schol-

arship and extensive original literature, *Dust Bowls of Empire* resituates the local horror and human tragedy of the 1930s Dust Bowl into a global historical development of the modern world system. At its center are privatization, commodification, and erosion of land, soil, and nature. Holleman takes direct aim at the root causes of an imperial ideology—capitalism—which legislates, institutionalizes, and practices ecological injustices. She explains that the Dust Bowl in the Southern Plains embodies an imperial instance of a global crisis of soil erosion that began in the 1870s and lasted through the first decades of the twentieth century. It was not "an analog, but an antecedent," affirms Holleman (9). Accordingly, unraveling the system that has produced earlier and subsequent dust bowls moves us beyond limited perspectives and helps tie the direct thread of the past to the present.

The book is divided into six chapters. Holleman uses the first three to disentangle the ideological, political, and socioeconomic contexts from which the ecological debacle emanated. This includes a discursive explanation of the "culture of conquest" that displaced and vigorously seized the lands of the Osage, Sac and Fox, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho (71). Furthermore, unlike common narratives, Holleman contends that the Dust Bowl was foreshadowed and preventable, but an ominous system spawned a problematic paradox between the use of existing knowledge and serious actions. Chapter 4 further teases out the complexities of this inconsistency, of which the 1930s Dust Bowl was an example. This was only possible because of an "organized irresponsibility" and "implicatory denial," explains Holleman (76). Chapters 5 and 6 offer a scathing criticism of "politics as usual," or worse, "business as usual," which attempts to move things around terms

like a “Green New Deal” or “Green” Capitalism without properly addressing the core problems (137). To her, this is all part of a “woolen language” (*la langue de coton*) which refers to the veiled doublespeak of capitalism.

Finally, in a time when a capitalist system still pays lip service to environmentalists, agencies, and organizations around the world, Holleman reminds us of existing local and global “dust-bowlification” (163). Calling for a more serious systemic reform, she builds on the three R’s of mainstream environmentalism—reduce, reuse, recycle—by tallying a more fundamental

four: “restitution,” “reparations,” “restoration,” and “revolution” (162).

Some of the readers may respond unfavorably to Holleman’s presentist, activist, and provocative central thesis and purpose; others will find her form of advocacy grounded in a compelling and essential commitment of public intellectuals to engage with timely and impending ecological crisis. Nonetheless, *Dust Bowls of Empire* beautifully exemplifies the feminist commitment to apply scholarly knowledge and theory to serious questions of political practice and public policy.

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