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Book Review

Arid Empire: The Entangled Fates of Arizona and Arabia, by Natalie Koch
London: Verso Press, 2023
208pp., $26.95 USD. Hardcover.
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Taking up a long-standing but understudied relationship between the desert environments of the southwestern US state of Arizona and the nations of the Arabian Peninsula, *Arid Empire* offers a series of case studies that consider the intertwined roles of environmental control and cultivation in these mutually parched regions. The *desert*—as often used in an overgeneralizing manner to holistically describe any and all arid and semi-arid lands—has a rich history as the ground of cultural fantasy. From their etymological rootedness as land defined by its condition of abandonment and desertion, deserts have been perpetually treated as spaces for radical experimentation and speculation alike. That such places have complex social histories and sensitive ecosystems is likewise a perpetual blind spot of colonial projects that typically see a contradictory combination of *terra nullius* and material resources to extract.

In the introduction to *Arid Empire*, Natalie Koch compellingly situates her project and her positionality as author in relation to desert imperialism by sharing memories of her childhood growing up in Arizona. Rather than a childhood that brought to light the stories of disruption and displacement that characterize the centuries of colonization in Arizona that followed from the European invasion of North America, Koch's was one which instead celebrated the mythos of the Wild West and its romanticization of American settlement as a narrative of triumphant conquest. Now a specialist in Middle Eastern Studies, Koch approaches the notion of what she terms "arid empire" from the perspective of both critical geography and also personal acknowledgement of her own changed relationship to Arizona deserts. Koch frames arid empire as an analytical approach that "opens up new perspectives on US settler colonialism, overseas empire, and our colonial present." She goes on to argue:

> To see arid empire, to bring it into focus, we need to examine what I see as the *political lives of deserts*. In the US Southwest, arid empire is partly about the dispossession, expulsion, and extermination of Indigenous communities from these desert lands. But it is also about how American settlers have told—

> and continue to tell—stories about the "desert" as a place of strength and opportunity, and how these stories are put to work in the name of science, the state, and many other agendas. (3)

This striking concept effectively frames Koch's overview of westward settlement and environmental philosophies in nineteenth-century America. While the author might have further pried open the conceptual implications of thinking empires as themselves "arid," in addition to the specificities of colonizing arid lands, the phrase is memorable and aptly binds together the series of desert sagas presented in the book.

The four case studies that follow arise out of specific exchanges involving different individuals and institutions, moving in overlapping steps from the late nineteenth-century to the present day. These include a chapter on the development of date-growing expertise at the University of Arizona since the time of its founding. Initially part of a federal push by the US government to extend farming operations all the way to the West Coast, that expertise has recently attracted heavy investment by Oman in the form of the Million Date Palm initiative to set up date laboratories in Oman's own deserts. Examining agricultural investments within present-day Arizona, the next case study considers exchanges between Arizona and Saudi Arabia dating from the 1940s that focus on the extraction of underground water supplies to support water-intensive crops like alfalfa. In one of the book's most compelling chapters, Koch next follows the activities, cajoling characters, and twists and turns associated with the water desalination research of the University of Arizona's Environmental Research Laboratory as they forged advising relationships with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the Cold War period. Like the preceding two chapters, the account of the Environmental Research Laboratory provides a poignant take on how the hubris of new technological projects to profit from desert environs tends to produce only short-term outcomes and to enrich a small number of individuals rather than the environments themselves. The final substantive chapter considers Biosphere 2, a self-enclosed, fully functioning ecosystem constructed from 1987–1991 in Oracle, Arizona. Koch situates the Biosphere project in relation to the mixture of impending apocalypse and technophilic futurity associated with experimental communes and to the return-to-the-land ethics of the first generation of the environmental movement in the United States, in addition to more recent exhibitions at Biosphere on water systems in the Arabian desert and tech-driven futurist projects in Arabia such as Masdar City in the UAE. While compelling, this particular case study on Biosphere 2 intersects with a more developed recent literature on figures and topics including Buckminster Fuller, Paolo Soleri, and systems theory that would have added to the texture of the analysis.

Among the most valuable contributions of *Arid Empire* is the transnational lens it brings to desert studies. While scholars including Catrin Gersdorf, Joseph Masco, and Eyal Weizman have published important desert studies of the United States and of

West Asian nations surrounding the Persian Gulf individually,[1] *Arid Empire* is distinguished by its sustained attention to comparative analysis, which builds on previous comparative studies by Diana Davis and Richard Francaviglia.[2] Though the mainstay of Koch's focus tends more towards Arizona than Arabia, the contribution of her study to a more global and transcultural understanding of desert environments is significant. The study models a comparative approach to Science and Technology Studies with that of the environmental humanities that extends beyond Koch's particular case studies. Accordingly, the notion of "arid empire" is itself a productive concept for thinking beyond the two contexts addressed by Koch. While resisting the false sense that desert ecosystems are all the same or simply fungible with one another, Koch importantly establishes a cultural awareness of the similar challenges faced by arid environs and the tendency of the residents of such places to seek expertise from across related regions. Given that the Sonora Desert in Arizona extends across the border of the United States and Mexico, I was left wondering whether similar exchanges took place between Arabic countries and the state of Sonora. But desert ecosystems, per se, are not the focus of *Arid Empire* so much as the nations that have claimed its land, and in that respect Koch's tight focus on Arizona is effective. Written in a lively and concise prose, *Arid Empire* is grounded in original and well-selected vignettes with an accessibility that will bridge specialist and nonspecialist readers alike.

Notes

1 Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (Brill, 2009); Joseph Masco, "Desert Modernism: From the Nevada Test Site to Liberace's Sequined Suits," *Cabinet Magazine* 13 (Spring 2004), https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/13/masco.php; Joseph Masco, *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* (Duke, 2021); and Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Steidl, 2015).

2 See Richard Francaviglia, *Imagining the Atacama Desert: A Five-Hundred-Year Journey of Discovery* (University of Utah, 2018); and Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (MIT, 2016).

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