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Review: Toxic Injustice: A Transnational History of Exposure and Struggle

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Bohme, Susanna Rankin. *Toxic Injustice: A Transnational History of Exposure and Struggle*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. xi, 343 pp. ISBN: 978052027898, cloth. US \$65.00. ISBN: 978052027899, paper. US \$29.95. Also available as an eBook. Printed on Natures Natural, a paper containing 30% post-consumer waste.

In the 1950s, the science of synthetic pesticides foresaw the promise of the eradication of global hunger and disease. *Toxic Injustice* shows a different outcome, however, focusing on a soil fumigant nematicide called dibromochloropropane (DBCP). DBCP was developed to prevent root damage from tiny, worm-like creatures called nematodes and was marketed globally by companies, such as Dow, Shell and others. Toxicological testing remained incomplete and exposure to DBCP was unsafe to use for many years. By the 1970s, DBCP was being used to treat scores of crops, but the focus in this book is on the banana plantations of Central America. By the 2000s, tens of thousands of banana workers had reported health problems from DBCP exposure, particularly sterility and cancer. No protection had been provided to those exposed, and “DBCP remains a classic example of the phenomenon that has come to be known as toxic trade” (p. 4).

DBCP was widely used until the 1980s when those affected by exposure to it began to demand justice for their suffering. Lawyers had varying degrees of success in securing either a monetary compensation or a legal recognition of suffering. Emphasis is placed on the role of the national state in the use and accountability of DBCP. National state laws partially aided affected workers, though litigation became entangled in issues including the use of DBCP by both farm and production workers, difficulties in language translation, and a trial’s geographic location. Litigation also became entangled in a “nettle” of contradictory laws, within and between countries. The trials in Texas courts, where most U. S. litigation took place, are examined in some detail. After years of legal resolution and negotiation, victories came down to partial solutions and limited rewards, discouraging many. The book concludes by suggesting that U. S. citizen action could push the government to regulate pesticide exports, ensure court access for non-U.S. plaintiffs, and other measures. However, these actions “will require controlling corporate influence over policy making at multiple levels” (p. 230).

Bohme, Lecturer in History and Literature at Harvard University, has skillfully brought together an extensive amount of detail from multiple sources. A story of corporate

malfeasance, the author also states that this book is “the first monograph to focus on banana worker occupational health history” (p. 9). Another recent book that focuses on the health aspects of Central American agricultural workers is *Food Systems in an Unequal World: Pesticides, Vegetables, and Agrarian Capitalism in Costa Rica* (2014). *Toxic Injustice* should be of interest to practitioners in the areas of occupational health, agricultural workers, and social or environmental justice. Recommended for large public and academic libraries, and specialized environmental collections.

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