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Pesticides, A Love Story.

Soon after World War II the revolutionary new pesticide DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) was introduced in the United States, reshaping American agriculture, domestic land use, food production, military strategy, foreign relations, political organizations, and public health. DDT and its chemical cousins were embraced at all levels of American society—from ordinary individuals to major corporations to the government and military—eliciting a strong faith in their efficacy over more than half a century. Chemical pesticides symbolized much about American modernity, superiority in the Cold War, and the ability to control nature.

There were many tests to American faith in pesticides, the most famous of which was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. The debate which swirled around this book led to significant political, technological, and cultural changes, not the least of which was the birth of modern environmentalism. Yet, in this test, as in many others, pesticides were triumphant. Overall reliance on pesticides did not lessen, but increased after *Silent Spring.* Most Americans acquiesced in this trend, only occasionally questioning the ubiquity of chemicals in the modern agricultural system and in the way that people "managed" the environment.

Why did Americans continue to embrace the use of toxic chemicals in the environment even after the worldwide publicity about *Silent Spring* and the birth of a new environmental sensibility? Why did Americans not change their views about pesticides even in the face of human and environmental disasters? Perhaps more importantly, why did Americans not change their use of pesticides even though their effectiveness declined over time? What started the American love affair with chemical pesticides in the first place?

To be sure, there are economic and political explanations for this trend. Christopher Bosso, for example, argues that political and economic imperatives encouraged the reliance on pesticides. Beyond these imperatives, widespread chemical use also reflected the industrial, corporate model which dominated the postwar American economy.

Material motivations and constraints are essential for understanding pesticide use in the post-World War II United States. But they don't provide a complete explanation unless they are understood within a broader cultural discourse. For this, we need to examine how people viewed pesticides, when they debated their use, and when they did not. Did the discussions and images found in the press and in public opinion polls mirror or contrast with the views of scientists, businessmen, and government officials? Did opinions about pesticides reinforce contemporary cultural trends and discourses, or go in a new direction?

Pesticides, A Love Story seeks to answer these questions by looking at the intersection of popular and political attitudes toward a broad cross section of American life, including the environment, technology, consumption, and foreign policy.