

Contamination Guaranteed: America's Hazardous Waste in Global Perspective, 1960s–1990s

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In 2004, the US military closed its base on Johnston Island, withdrawing its personnel, dismantling all structures and facilities, and marking the runway closed with a giant cross at each end. Withdrawing all human life after roughly 200 years of occupation, a new chapter opened in the exciting, yet secretive history of this small atoll in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean. “Discovered” in the late eighteenth century, the Americans officially claimed the remote atoll in 1852 and made it a part of their newly established empire in the Pacific. In the twentieth century, Johnston Island was initially set up as wildlife refuge, before it was brought under US military control in 1934. The military used it as an airbase, a naval refueling depot, and an atomic weapons testing area. From the 1970s onwards, Johnston Island became a facility for hazardous waste disposal. Following the secret US military endeavors of disposing outdated chemical weapons during Operation CHASE and Operation Red Hat, several thousand tons of M-55 rockets filled with lethal nerve gas were buried underground. In the 1990s, the atoll reclaimed public attention, when in the middle of a law suit of Marshall Islanders against the United States, US Congress had to deal with its own atomic veterans from the atoll. Today, one of the world's most toxic spots, it is administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior as part of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument.

Johnston Island's post-World War II history exemplifies in a nutshell the major thread of my project *Contamination Guaranteed: America's Hazardous Waste in Global Perspective* which is the changing dispositive discourses of “nature” and its “hazards” set within global power relations forged through the political forces of the Cold War and decolonization; the economic forces of capitalism and industrialization; and the sociocultural forces of in- and exclusion, inequality, and racism. Initially constructed within conceptions of environmental conservation, preservation, and wildlife refuge, the atoll soon entered into its “romance” with the industrial production, consumption, and disposal of hazardous material. During the Cold War, it was first used as nuclear testing site and then as nerve gas disposal site. Johnston Atoll's geographic position relates to modern societies' tendency towards environmental ostracism. In the US context, this tendency has been reinforced since the 1980s and strict environmental legislation. The lucrative business of international waste trade has further allowed US society to bring unwanted material “out of sight.” The analysis of the atoll's working staff reveals a dominance of men from minority and low class background. Together with the US' dealings with those atomic veterans on those Pacific islands, the analysis reveals the forces of “environmental” inequality at play.

Studies of hazardous waste have tended to focus on spectacular, one-off disasters rather than on providing a longer-term historical perspective on the creation of the concept of hazardous

waste and its broader impact. By contrast, my project examines “ecological crises,” as represented by hazardous waste within industrialized society, to develop an expanded understanding of this very society that incorporates the insights of globalization theory, post-colonialism, ecological (economic) thinking, and the cultural turn. The project sets out to disentangle the economic, political, and socio-cultural structures that forged or prohibited (dispositive) discourses on the “risks” of modern means of production, consumption, and the extraction of nature in modern America. In contrast to existing literature, this study will not only explore the environmental aspect of hazardous waste as a form of pollution and the exploitation of nature, but will merge the story of ecological crises with an analysis of modern society, its attitudes towards production and consumption, as well as its means of power and control. Set at the junction of environmental history, economic history, and social history, my study offers insights into the United States’ society’s response to these “risks” posed by industrial hazards within the society’s economic, political, and social system.

This project’s main goal is to analyze hazardous waste as an episteme of modernity entangled in dispositive discourses of global capitalism, changing perceptions of environmentalism and post-colonialism, as well as Cold War power constellations. Hereby, I posit that we must understand hazardous waste in its relation to its definition, chronology, and geography. Only when all three aspects are considered can we grasp the dispositive nature of hazardous waste as an object of study which allows us to embed the ecological crisis of industrial hazards into discourses of knowledge and power; changing variants in political, normative, and economic societal structuration; and geographies of inequality. Structurally, this study is based upon explorations of changing constructions of hazardous waste and a rereading of key periods in the history of hazardous waste from the mid-1960s and the ocean-dumping incidents of outdated chemical weapons to the end of the twentieth century and the hazardous waste trade between Global North and Global South. Essential turning points in this history are the atomic age in the mid-twentieth century, the emergence of environmentalism in the 1970s, and the expansion of global waste trade in the late 1980s and 1990s.