

Waste Worlds: The Multiple Lives of Tailings in Contemporary Chile

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One of the most pressing questions of our times is how to deal with the waste produced by human activity, especially industrial waste. From a proliferation of ever-growing landfills to the massive accumulation of plastic in the sea, our public and private lives seem to be increasingly immersed in the paths of waste, the main byproduct of our unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Such waste not only represents a critical environmental liability but also a social one, as the problems caused by waste seem to be intimately related with patterns of social exclusion and discrimination. All these aspects have transformed waste into a mayor area of research and intervention on the part of authorities, academics, and corporate actors. However, as dozens of examples from around the world reveal, current policies have been unable to deal effectively with the issue, meaning that accidents and pollution episodes continue to occur on a regular basis.

Based on science and technology studies and environmental studies, this research project will challenge such state of affairs by studying waste as complex assemblages. Such assemblages continually emerge from the interlocking of a great number of elements, including organic and inorganic entities, regulations, judgments, climates, infrastructures. For this reason, in order to deal with waste in a more comprehensive fashion we need to start by taking into consideration the multiple agencies of these entities, who might enact waste in quite contrasting ways. Besides the elements usually included in traditional approaches, such understanding implies considering waste as a space of sociomaterial interchange, as a matter of concern and care, as a particular aesthetic, and even in some cases as a source of attachment and pride. Waste is many different things at the same time, and the only way we can advance towards dealing with it in a more sustainable way is through developing governing practices that take into consideration the politics embedded into these multiple ontologies. In order to explore such issues the book will study one particular case: the waste produced by the copper mining industry in Chile, technically known as *tailings*.

Based on a three-year, multi-sited ethnography, this research project will problematize current ways of governing industrial waste in Chile through the analysis of the life cycle of tailings, dividing it into two key moments. First, it deals with the production and handling of tailings as a part of the daily operation of a large copper mine located in southern Chile. By analyzing the practices and techniques set to transport and accumulate tailings and the controversies continually emerging around it, I will show how tailings are embedded in tensions between multiple non-coherent ontologies, from which only precarious orderings can be enacted. Secondly, tailings are toxic ruins, as seen in the example of a long-abandoned tailings depository located in northern Chile. By looking at the different practices set in place by the Chilean government's environmental agency to know and control the tailings' toxicity to the surrounding population, I will understand tailings as the toxic afterlife of former projects of national development and resource exploitation.

Finally, I will propose alternative ways of governing waste. Such governing will start from the humble recognition that waste will continually overflow the frames set to deal with it. Such overflowing implies that our governing practices might be always experimental and open-ended, giving space to multiple enactments of waste, from engineering to politics and ethics. Such approach will look, ultimately, to understand waste as an entity with its own dignity, something we have to take continually into consideration and care, rather than always dreaming of escaping from it through technical fixes.