

Project Title:The geographies of becoming waste on the beaches in Bangladesh

Abstract:

The past three decades have witnessed the production of modern “developing” states as spaces for dumping toxic and hazardous waste, a practice known as “toxic imperialism.” Ship breaking is indicative of this “toxic imperialism.” Every year a percentage of the world fleet is sold into the global demolition market, where the steel embedded within the ship’s hull and structure will be extracted and recycled into the national, regional, and local economies. Bangladesh, a country that lacks iron ore mines, has come to depend on the steel recycled from the ship breaking process for infrastructure development and large-scale urbanization projects. In Bangladesh thousands of laborers work in some of the most toxic landscapes in the world, extracting value from the largest sea-faring vessels ever built while they suffer from health related issues and debilitating accidents that sometimes lead to death. These laborers are cast into a global arrangement where their labor power is not enough to inhibit their transformation into waste, or into becoming disposable. This research will fill a crucial gap in scholarly research on ship breaking and waste geographies, by placing two narratives side by side, two types of waste production, the ship as waste, and the body as becoming waste, and it will ask how has Bangladesh come to carry the world’s toxic burden for ship breaking? The question will be investigated through two additional questions that guide the empirical and theoretical research: who are the people that come to labor in this toxic landscape and what are the social relations of production and reproduction that bring them there? What are the maritime and trade related legal geographies that allow for some of the most dangerous forms of toxic and hazardous waste to be ‘dumped’ on some of the poorest people in the world? By approaching this subject through the waste/value dialectic, this research will draw out the connections between the most intimate experiences of the everyday life of the laborers to the most geographically expansive system in the world, that of global trade. Only by drawing out these waste-producing trajectories is it then possible to identify patterns of the production and reproduction of waste that will ultimately inform work on how to change those patterns.