



# Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country

*Traci Brynne Voyles*

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*Wastelanding* tells the history of the uranium industry on Navajo land in the U.S. Southwest, asking why certain landscapes and the peoples who inhabit them come to be targeted for disproportionate exposure to environmental harm. Uranium mines and mills on the Navajo Nation land have long supplied U.S. nuclear weapons and energy programs. By 1942, mines on the reservation were the main source of uranium for the top-secret Manhattan Project. Today, the Navajo Nation is home to more than a thousand abandoned uranium sites. Radiation-related diseases are endemic, claiming the health and lives of former miners and nonminers alike.

Traci Brynne Voyles argues that the presence of uranium mining on Diné (Navajo) land constitutes a clear case of environmental racism. Looking at discursive constructions of landscapes, she explores how environmental racism develops over time. For Voyles, the “wasteland,” where toxic materials are excavated, exploited, and dumped, is both a racial and a spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable. Because environmental inequality is inherent in the way industrialism operates, the wasteland is the “other” through which modern industrialism is established.

In examining the history of wastelanding in Navajo country, Voyles provides “an environmental justice history” of uranium mining, revealing how just as “civilization” has been defined on and through “savagery,” environmental privilege is produced by portraying other landscapes as marginal, worthless, and pollutable.

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